Major course requirement for Technical Business Management.

BA315 Developing Management Skills (3 credits)

Course Description: This course introduces effective management skills and their impact on organization, team, and individual performance. Students become familiar with the skills of management such as delegating, coaching, conflict resolution, stress management, problem solving, and building effective teams.

Introduction

After working in the field of information technology in various technical roles for thirteen stimulating years, I was offered the esteemed role of Information Technology (IT) manager in 1995. Ambitiously, I accepted the position, fascinated with the opportunity, but not fully knowing the incredible personal growth and professional challenges I would face in the years ahead. Except for the management of my family and home, my formal leadership skills were virtually non-existent. I was offered the position after I had successfully led a team of volunteer staff to prepare and present an alternate organizational structure to the vice president of the newly merged IT organization. Nevertheless, as increasingly difficult the challenges were dealt me, I rose to the occasion and continued to work hard for twelve consecutive years at becoming a fair and honest manager. I truly believe my leadership skills have been firmly and soundly cultivated as this narrative hopes to convey.

In an effort to appropriately align my own life learning experiences with the “Developing Management Skills” course outcomes, I have organized this narrative in sections as follows:

- **The Critical Role of Management**: This section provides my perspective of the critical role of management as I have experienced in my professional career as formal IT manager by
reflecting on a time when talent was difficult to acquire and retain while demand for our services increased.

- **Managing Self**: Managing self is, perhaps, the most important lesson learned, both professionally and personally. In this section I reflect on a particular situation that led to more self-awareness through self-examination. I also share the tools I have cultivated over the years in managing the demands on my time and attention in the work place and in my personal life.

- **Problem Management**: In this section, I describe a specific problem effectively solved with hiring and retaining staff during the IT boom in the late 1990s. I had to analyze the problem, develop a business case, and seek the support of my peers and superiors to work the problem. The solution required the effective use of my influence as a manager.

- **Staff Development and Motivation** – In my career as a technical manager, I learned the importance of staff development as part of recruiting and retaining a talented staff. This section discusses one of many instances in which I promoted training and development of my employees.

- **Team Building and Management** – As I grew into the role of a more seasoned manager that became more balanced and self-confident, I learned the significance of team building. Here I discuss how I influenced my growing staff to embrace the notion of splitting into smaller and more empowered teams.

- **Leadership** – The most fulfilling experience I have had in my lifetime as a leader has been in mentoring future leaders. I feel that passing along one’s wisdom is the essence of true leadership. This section discusses a wonderful and inspiring experience I have had as a
board advisor of a non-profit organization in coaching and mentoring young disabled women in their respective leadership roles.

**The Critical Role of Management**

As my IT organization doubled in size during the late 1990’s, work coordination and prioritization became my focus as I tenaciously worked to recruit and retain talented staff. It was during this time that the local economy was experiencing a shortage of technical talent. My role as a manager became most critical to the company as my organization’s responsibility was to keep the engineering tools functional and accessible to the engineering teams that built and sold the company’s product line. During that time, I realized the importance of my role as a manager to maintain staffing levels that were sufficient to deliver the critical technical support needed by the company. Although I continued to lose staff during this difficult hiring time, this frustrating and painful experience led me to being the catalyst behind improving compensation, training, and career development plans for entire IT organization. During this time and onward, some of the most valuable lessons I learned were the importance of managing self, creating successful teams by understanding and valuing the differences in my staff, and, also, by delegating and empowering them to perform their intended roles.

Through the years, the unpredictable nature of government subcontracting work created an unpredictable budget. With my genuine intention to be a good manager, I recognized the need to create both a vision and a sense of unity within the department. With the help of my staff in 2003, we defined a value system as is exhibited in the 2003 Performance Planning and Review Objectives in Attachment A. We felt that this value-system should reflect how and what we contributed to the company. Later that year, a company-wide value system was
distributed that coincidentally mapped very well to our department’s value system, so we dismissed our own in favor of the company-wide version.

As I reflect on the outcome of this experience, I came to understand why people resisted following a company’s set of values especially since they were written for a wide audience. On the other hand, when I asked my staff to participate in the definition of our own values, our definitions were more closely aligned with our work which meant that we understood them much better, and we were able to apply them to our every day work.

In my future roles as a leader, when an organization has a general set of values already defined, I have learned that it is of benefit to collaborate with the people in an organization to translate the broader definition into something more specific to their line of work. Although I have not attempted this, I would expect the unity it cultivates through collaboration during definition would also reduce, if not eliminate, any resistance.

A more important role of management I experienced is the responsibility of developing and mentoring future leaders. In my latest years as a manager, I continually sought to groom and develop others, especially my leads. I thought about the importance of mentoring and developing leadership as being analogous to the pulling a wagon. It was much easier to pull a wagon of people with the help of several rather than pull it all by myself. In 2003, I served on an advisory board at the Community College of Denver which led to my passion in mentoring young women in the field of technology. From 2006 through 2007, I actively mentored three young women under the age of 30 as they progressed through their early adult lives. Their supportive letters of recommendations can be found in Appendix B.

**Managing Self**
Three years into my role as a manager, I was approached by a young man whom I had brought into the organization a few years earlier. I recall the day he started. He had mentioned to my secretary how ecstatic he was having a well-paying, full-time job in addition to having his own office at such a young age. Three years later, he approached me privately and asked me for a raise and a promotion. I hoped that my reaction wasn’t written all over my face, because my thoughts were not good. I was disappointed that he would ask for an additional raise since I had provided him one recently and annually since I hired him. My thoughts were “How could he ask for such a thing? Don’t I do enough for him?” I told him I would think about what he said and get back with him.

I left for a scheduled weekly appointment with my professional life coach whom I had hired to counsel and coach me every other week. I discussed the situation with him. He asked me why I was bothered by this employee’s request, stopping me when I couldn’t produce a clear answer. He asked some thought-provoking questions I never forgot. He asked me “Are you taking his request personally? Are you holding him back because you never did such a thing yourself?” As I reflected on the issue, it became clear that my reaction to this young man’s request could be a reflection of how I felt personally rather than professionally. It was, then, that I realized how critical self-examination and maturity was to my role as a good manager. I might have resisted the counsel I was given had I been in my twenties or thirties. But at the age of forty-something, I was much more open to admitting to being wrong and growing from within. I learned that maturity comes only with life experiences. I learned that my ability to discern more objectively, removing the personal feelings hidden in a decision, were key to deciding professionally the right thing to do.
The next day, I met with the young man and told him that after thinking about the situation further, I thought very highly of him, reminding him of how valuable he was to the company. I told him, with his help, I would prepare and present a business case that justified an out-of-cycle raise and promotion.

Our efforts were successful and resulted in defining a process that I used in years following to field two other similar requests. The approach I used improved with the second and third occurrence leading to the development of key operating principles. The first principle I defined was that my reaction had to be one of openness and valuing the employee. The second operating principle I defined was to ask the requestor to participate by preparing a written justification that contained specific examples. The third operating principle I defined was for me to prepare a complete analysis of where the employee ranked amongst his/her peers in four areas. They were in the areas of education and experience, performance, salary, and title. Fourth, I prepared a justification for a suggested raise amount.

Since 1999, in addition to seeking the advice of a professional life coach and counselor, I thought about the importance of making exercise and a healthy diet a priority. I made exercise a daily regimen visiting the gym daily before work for one hour. I also spent thirty minutes daily journaling about current issues. Both the daily exercise and journaling helped me manage the intense stress I was experiencing as my responsibilities grew, yet the support I received from my management became more and more diluted. In reflecting on the extent and array of stress from 1999 through 2007, learning to make my health and emotional well-being a priority led to a healthier and more balanced lifestyle that I live today. I still journal regularly, occasionally seek the support of coaches and counselors when needed and exercise and healthy eating are part of my daily routine. The effort I expended on self-management was recognized by my management
which was reflected in the 1999-2001 performance review which is attached and titled “99-01 Performance Review.”

**Problem Management**

As I sought talent during the tight labor market during the late 1990s, no matter what I did, my offers were turned down when other area companies competing for the same talent were offering aggressive compensation packages. After I had two presented offers declined by two different candidates for the same position, I sought approval for a compensation package for a third candidate that required senior management approval. As is mentioned in the attachment titled “97-98 Performance Review”, the need to seek senior-management approval for all offers that were clearly above the normal range for each position, led to justification for the company to review the compensation for the entire IT staff. As directed by my management, I worked with my peers and Human Resources management to review the compensation levels of similar IT positions both nationally and locally. As some of my staff held top-secret clearances to support our Department of Defense (DOD) client, I sought approval for a premium for those who maintained their DOD clearances. As a result of our efforts and to keep IT salaries current with the market, the company began reviewing compensation packages every six months rather than just one time per year to remain competitive. As I reflect on this learning experience, I recognize that the reason I was able to resolve the issue was because I kept my management informed of my failed attempts. As they witnessed my failed efforts to hire new staff, they were supportive in helping me address the problem directly with Human Resources’ Compensation management. By tasking me to work with Human Resources, I also learned how to convert my own problem resolution to the greater good of the entire IT organization by working the problem
with my peer IT managers. I learned the importance of grandfathering existing staff into the solution rather than just addressing isolated cases in an effort to keep compensation fair across the IT organization.

**Staff Development and Motivation**

As we worked with Human Resource management on compensation, we were also tasked to create new job descriptions and titles for each role in the IT organization that included career maps and training plans. In reading trade journals and articles on retention techniques, I learned that compensation, alone, wasn’t always the motivator in keeping staff. Through my research, I realized that I needed to spend more time understanding my staff’s individual needs. I began spending more concentrated time with each person in my organization getting to know them better. Through my discovery efforts over several weeks, I found that other more important needs included being assigned stimulating work, feeling valued, and having flexible work hours. Many staff members mentioned that training and current tools also were seriously lacking. As a result, I was able to justify more training budget for my staff and an upgrade in our desktop tools. Until then, we had been provided little budget for either of these items. In later years, I used this research to guide me in ways to reward my staff. For example, I had approved a speaker phone to a member of my staff in reward for her efforts in successfully leading a project. I provided other perks that addressed balancing work and family lives with the staff such as company-provided broadband connections and the purchase of Blackberries in place of pagers. In the process of addressing individual needs, I learned the significance of fostering a feeling of being valued while not promoting favoritism. All these learning experiences combined have
influenced my management style today. I continue to seek ways to understand and address the individual needs of staff fairly and equitably.

**Team Building and Management**

As the size of the organization grew from six to nearly twenty-five, I struggled with keeping current with the individual needs of the staff. Additionally, I found myself stretched in distributing and overseeing the work of a growing staff. The staff was accustomed to directly reporting to me, which, as the number of direct reports grew, I knew I could no longer keep up. I had to split the group into teams in order to remain an effective organization. I approached my staff with the idea of splitting into groups. They didn’t like the idea of having another layer of supervision, a team leader, between us. In place of assigning a team leader, the group agreed to divide into smaller “groups”. The team lead role, however, would rotate, giving everyone in each group the chance to “lead” the group. Although this helped us divide the organization into smaller groups as a first step, the rotating “lead” role was not as successful. It did, however, allow me to assess who in each group might be a more fitting lead. After six months, I assigned team leads to each group and worked to develop the team lead’s skill set. In reflecting back on the situation, I realized the importance and relevance of smaller groups and/or teams in a growing organization. I realized that, in order to continue to effectively lead and provide the attention the staff needed, I needed to not only logically divide the group, but to also identify and mentor team leads that could more immediately address the needs of the staff. I also learned that having a consistent lead for a team was not only important for the staff, but also important for me in my leadership role. The consistent team lead allowed me to mentor and develop the skills of my team leads, but also allowed me to develop a level of trust and dependence on the
team leads that allowed me to delegate responsibilities progressively. It is worth mentioning that this created a career opportunity within the organization for some that desired moving into a leadership role. As a result of my efforts to develop team leads, I worked with the Human Resources department to create the company’s first formal mentor/protégé training program for team leadership. I worked with a selected consultant to create a training program lasting one full week that trained team leads. This training involved the team lead’s supervisor as part of the week-long program. As is reflected in the attached document titled “00-01 Performance Review”, it is evident that I took team building and the development of my staff to heart as early as 2000. I still do today building off of the successes and failures of my earlier trials.

**Leadership**

Although my past role as a technical manager has had an abundance of leadership examples to cite, I have elected to use my role as a board advisor for a non-profit to illustrate my experience in leadership.

In 2006, I helped a young woman start up a non-profit organization whose charter was to educate and inspire young adults living with the chronic illness, multiple sclerosis (MS). Plagued with the disease for twelve years, she was uncompromising on the need for the board to be composed of members who also had MS. She felt that an organization with a president and board of directors that had the chronic condition could better serve the needs of the MS community, which was a unique quality of her organization. My agreed-to role as a board advisor and leadership mentor included formally establishing the business, developing the business plan while also assisting in the creation and mentoring of a working board of directors. Each elected member of the board of directors would help this young, educated woman, the
president of the group, execute the business plan and market the non-profit services. All board members were under the age of thirty-five. All had careers, and some had families. All had various symptoms of the disease. The excitement of the group was invigorating as we established the roles and responsibilities of each board member. The momentum was strong as the active board could readily see the progression of the organization as we worked together to define the vision and mission first, then, the year’s objectives. From there, I created a budget with the chief financial officer. I worked with the chief marketing officer to identify ways to increase the organization’s visibility. That led to me to coordinate and create a glossy marketing portfolio and website that could be used by the president and her board to market the non-profit. With the involvement of the chief marketing officer, we enlisted the support of a grant writer who sought funding through various grant sources. The financial and emotional support we received from family and friends as well as business associates and firms grew. The faster we grew as an organization, the more taxing it became for the young president to quickly develop into the leader the organization needed to keep things going while managing her health. It was then, that I recognized what I didn’t account for in the beginning. The organization, if it were to be run by people with a disability, would need to be run differently taking into consideration their unique abilities and limitations. The president became overwhelmed by the growing responsibility she assumed. Her desire to lead her unique way led to her request that I limit my direct involvement. At first, I was disappointed by all the work and time I had put into creating the organization. But, I later recognized that my role as a board advisor and mentor didn’t always mean I must be actively leading. What I determined was that my work as a leadership mentor was complete and it was time for the president to take on the role her way. I’ve done so and the president continues to move the organization forward at her pace. She remains
passionate and tenacious about her mission. Since I have not been involved, she has held two fund raising events and two workshops. As I reflected on the situation, I discovered that being a leader includes a complex mix of performing the mechanics of building an organization such as defining a vision, building a team, and establishing order and process while also developing influential relationships outside the organization. However, it also includes fully embracing when my effort is completed and when it is time to let go. In my continued role as a manager and leader in other situations and as I develop new teams, I continue to use my developed managerial skills in creating, coordinating and maintaining an organization. I also continue to apply my learning experience in honing my leadership skills in several ways including knowing when to directly versus indirectly lead.

Cultivating and improving managerial skills over the years has been a never-ending learning experience of which I continue to grow daily. As different as the people are that I have managed so have been the challenges in managing and leading them. Although there is always room to grow and improve, I have been in numerous professional situations that have helped me develop the basic skills of a manager which include managing oneself as well as managing groups of people, using the power and influence of my position as a manager both effectively and appropriately, managing conflict and culminating productive teams, and lastly empowering and mentoring others into roles of leadership.