

# Becoming more efficient

*Robyn Pearce*

## Can efficiency be taught?

I was having a conversation with my 80-year old aunt about managing staff – she'd had many years of running teams and offices.

She said: "Efficiency is a life-long discipline, and not everyone has it or can learn it. Some people are naturally efficient and disciplined. Others are not – they need constant supervision by someone who has it. If you've got a staff member who needs that extra level of supervision, you have to always know what they've got on, keep an eye on their work, make sure that they do what's required, and be prepared to help if they can't or haven't finished. Some have a natural aptitude; others will always slip back."

Between those two extremes I believe there's a larger middle layer – people who learn it, once shown the techniques. However, they may need a long time to anchor the skills, depending on their learning styles and what ability they start with. It doesn't come to them naturally but they pull themselves up by the bootstraps over time. I know this because I've come out of this group as regards time management and efficiency, as do many of the people I work with. This group is teachable and will over time absorb the relevant principles and learn to apply them.

However, the turnaround isn't necessarily quick.

## Square pegs in round holes

Not long after the conversation with Aunt Peg, I was asked to work with a young team leader in a tertiary educational organisation. We'll call her Sally. She had major efficiency challenges. These showed up in an incredibly messy environment, an overload of work she struggled to keep on top of and unrealistic optimism about her ability to manage everything.

There were complaints about lack of communication from other departments; a very efficient and supportive but seriously frustrated head of department; poor delegation skills by Sally; and a team who felt sometimes over- and other times under-managed. Sally, poor young woman, felt as though no matter what she did, nor how many hours she worked and no matter what she sacrificed of her personal life, it was never good enough. The joy had gone out of life and work for her.

Sally sat somewhat right of middle on the continuum below. I believe she'll conquer her challenges over time, but the further to the right a person is, the longer they need to make change – if they want to (some people don't care – they just wander their way through life).



## Natural achievement level

You may have heard the phrase 'promoted to, or beyond, their level of incompetence'. It happens in all industries. Someone is a brilliant teacher, but a terrible principal; an amazing salesperson but a very inadequate sales manager; a great builder but a poor manager of a building company. The reasons are legion and vary from situation to situation.

### *Be prepared to coach and supervise*

We have a range of natural achievement levels in everything we engage in. For instance I've developed a reasonable achievement level in writing non-fiction. However, my achievement (or skill) level with fiction is much lower, simply because I haven't practiced it much. To move beyond and not allow it to become a limitation requires lots of work as well as new knowledge.

In Sally's case, her day-to-day work was excellent, but at the time of her promotion to team leader she didn't have the right mix of skills. With a very warm and caring personality she worked very well when she was part of a team, but this strength needed to be modified for her to become a good leader and delegator. Instead, she frequently spent time helping others with their work, leaving her own key tasks unfinished. Whenever anyone asked for help, her generous spirit and eternal willingness to help made her want to stop whatever she was doing, no matter how important and no matter for whom, and extend the helping hand. To prioritise her own work as more important than other people's, didn't come naturally. She wasn't good at saying no appropriately.

With time and practice, Sally will improve

the necessary skills, if she applies herself. However, in this particular situation there were commercial implications that couldn't wait. She was asked to resign.

She now has a choice. One is to regroup, lick her wounds, and build up those required skills in a less responsible and less stressful situation. The other is to say, "Well, that was a learning opportunity and what I've learned is that I never want to be a team leader or manager again." Neither is right or wrong – it just depends what our goals are in life.

## Matching task and person

If you're experiencing a situation like this, from Sally's perspective remember that there's no shame in changing your mind and stepping back. Life is too short to burn yourself out in an environment that doesn't suit your natural style. If you want to move into new arenas, look for non-critical opportunities to practice the required new skills before you put yourself on the line (voluntary organisations are a great way to learn and practice all manner of skills).

And if you're in the shoes of the head of department (who did her absolute best to help Sally), try to avoid putting people into a critical position of responsibility, or passing over full responsibility, until they've proven themselves in smaller ways as equal to the task.

Be prepared to coach and supervise until you're confident the staff member has a grip on their task and you've got a grip on their skill level. Some managers hesitate to check the work of their staff whilst it's in progress, for fear of appearing to lack trust. How you set up review meetings is one key: if sufficient review guidelines to catch potential problems are established at the outset it becomes 'the way we do things round here' rather than inappropriate checking.

And if things just aren't working out, bite the bullet, have a frank heart-to-heart with the person concerned, and encourage them to look for different and less stressful opportunities. In almost all cases they'll thank you for it later.



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