The technical manager's BLINDSPOT
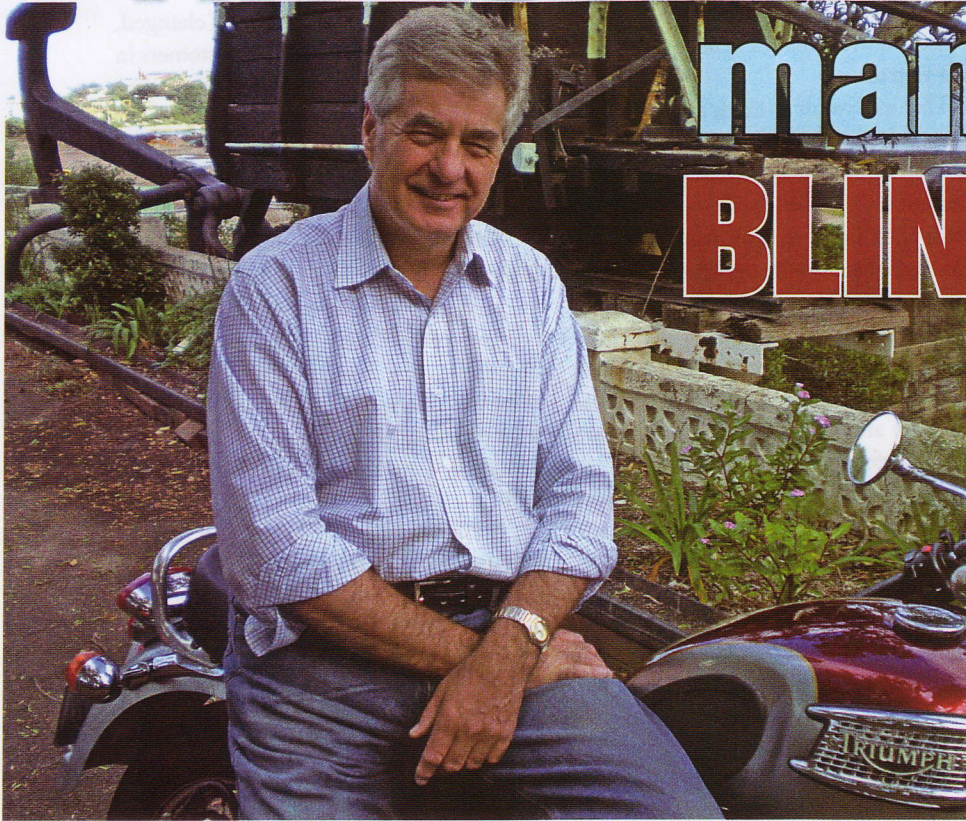
Managing people is as important as managing technology, but few want to learn how

By John Walker

IN MOST TECHNICAL ORGANISATIONS, talented technical leaders are promoted to management positions. They then enter the zone of the "blindspot" and are confronted with behavioural situations that are outside their expertise.

These include conflicts between technical "stars", plummeting morale due to a lack of motivation, poor and marginal performers, dealing with complex stakeholder and customer situations and active resistance to change.

Through research conducted on key management issues directly affecting people in the scientific and technical industry, our firm has identified the critical technical manager's blindspots and we have developed programs to coach and skill technical managers also to be effective people managers.

Our research shows that many technical managers lack the confidence and skills to effectively lead and manage teams. This is usually the result of a continuously changing and dynamic work environment where flexibility, intuition and quick reactions to a changing environment are crucial.

The IT industry is driven by new, emerging technologies due to customer demand. High-scale and cost projects are the norm, and the small mistake can have large ramifications.

Research also highlights that technical managers tend to have work preferences that include being results-oriented, decisive, effective at organising, uncomfortable with change, solving problems, planning, making schedules work — and avoid dealing with people's feelings.

All of the above are very task completion oriented and not particularly "people management" oriented. The technical manager's blindspot is not in task management, but in people management, often called the "soft stuff", but in fact it is the "hard stuff" for them.

Without adequate coaching, training and selection for management positions problems soon arise and they can be easily disheartened by their roles as managers. We will discuss four key problem areas that make up the blindspot. These are:
1. Leading technical teams
2. Managing change resistance
3. Managing conflicts
4. Motivating staff and specifically managing poor performers

1. Leading technical teams
The first key problematic area of the technical manager's blindspot is knowing how to effectively and efficiently lead technical teams. In the past a technical manager would have worked within a team where they displayed and excelled in their technical abilities, thus the promotion.

However, the technical manager's years of experience, workplace preferences and technical training never properly prepared them to lead a team which they used to be a part of. They may in fact now fail at the moment of success as their skills regress.

This can result in them allowing their teams to wither and become dysfunctional, leading to two major downfalls for an organisation as a whole. First, the investment of resources in team work is wasted as teams become dysfunctional and leaderless. Second, due to the high levels of confusion both team and individual productivity decreases dramatically, members become discouraged and the manager loses credibility and "ticker" to drive the team to high performance.

Many teams fail completely. Consider these factors:
• They don't know what management wants — lack of direction and vision
• Interpersonal conflict, confusion about team leaders' roles — hidden agendas
• Team problem solutions or ideas for improvement get ignored by management or there is insufficient feedback
• Conflicts are not understood to be part of the team development process and are not handled creatively
• Little effort is spent in training for conflict resolution or other interpersonal skills for that matter.

2. Managing change resistance
It is human nature for people to resist change. Employees, in general, allow themselves to have a comfort zone and

safety net to fall back on. Many enjoy their work because it gives them social contact and few challenges. Their lives are outside their jobs.

When a process or project is changed, or employees have to relate to customers in a more "customer service" capacity rather than purely "technical advisory" they get very anxious and will actively resist. They often indulge in particularly difficult resistance factor called "the kiss of yes" .

This is public acceptance but private rejection.

In the high-speed world of IT this can be very costly. Major programs go wrong because no one stood up and pointed out what was wrong. They said nothing, it all went pear-shaped, company credibility was damaged, contracts terminated, costs are high.

It takes a skilled, intuitive and behaviour-oriented technical manager to spot it. He or she must be skilled in change management. It's a core requirement for a manager's job.

Consider these reasons for resisting change. How many managers could spot them and pro actively deal with them?
• Implied criticism that the status quo is inadequate
• Fear that work skills, pride and time will be devalued
• Lack of skills may be discovered in new position
• Beliefs and values clash
• Resentment at having to give up hard won relationships
• Dislikes the top down outside interference

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- Dislikes who is managing the change or deciding upon it
- Resents the lack of participation and involvement

3. Managing Conflicts

Managing conflicts and recognising them before they become "dragons" is an absolutely crucial management skill and a core factor in emotional intelligence. Conflicts can come in many shapes and sizes. Consider the passive aggressive behaviours found in introverted personalities, common in the IT industry.

In MBTI (Myers Briggs) terms they would be ISTJ's or in Team Management Systems terms Concluder Producers/ Controller Inspectors. If they are working, for example, with creative, outgoing extroverts there are often personality conflicts.

A skilled manager would initiate team learning principles to provide insight about the differences and turn them into being complimentary.

The Team Management Systems concepts of high-energy teams is an ideal instrument for resolving conflicts of personality. How many technical managers would think about applying these principles? Experience tells us that some actively discourage it due to a sense of threat in trying something new (soft stuff) and non-technical.

Technical managers can construct different codes for different programs, deal with difficult algorithms and be highly intelligent, but many enter the zone of the blindspot when it comes to conflict between team members. They will often just ignore it and hope it goes away. Instead it festers.

4. Motivating staff and dealing with poor performers

Recognising and managing human factor needs is potentially the greatest blindspot of a technical manager. The main role of a manager is derived from the title. Managers are to manage people as well as tasks and outcomes. Their inability to properly identify the motivational needs of employees and address them accordingly creates several problems for organisations.

Most technical managers have little or a poor understanding of the human fac-

tors of need and motivation. If they do it is likely to be more at an intellectual level. The actual application of the principles is another matter.

Technical managers are not comfortable with rewarding staff. Many of them are also perfectionists who are notoriously hard to please and will demand the same standards from their staff as they put on themselves.
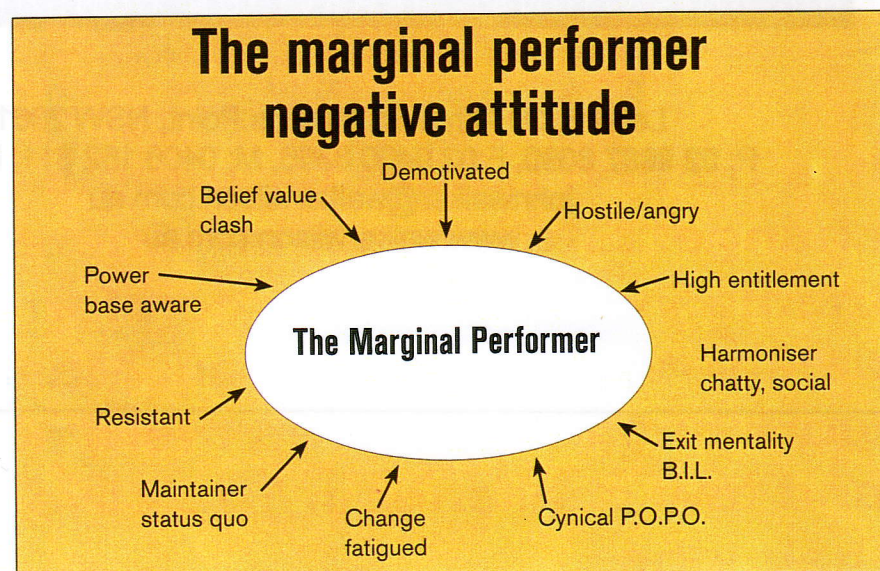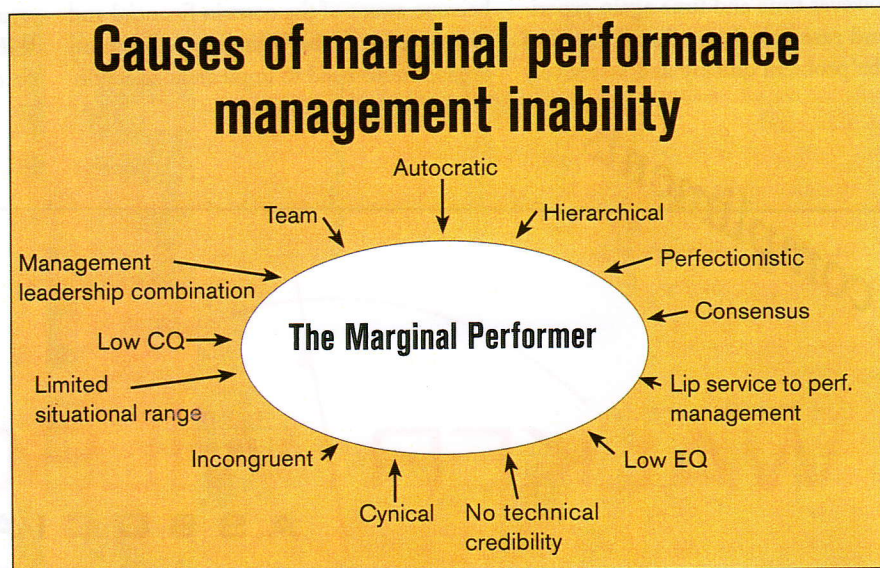
They don't delegate, are harshly critical of minor mistakes and are so caught up in the detail they lose the bigger picture.

This results in plummeting morale. They may be oblivious to the worst of these motivational killers:
- autocratic leadership
- meaningless work

- no recognition
- being treated like a child
- no support
- role conflict/ambiguity
- no action on marginal performers
- manipulation
- ineffective change management
- undue/unfair criticism
- perfectionism
- inability to learn from mistakes

Technical managers do not effectively manage marginal or poor performers. This eventually demotivates the high performers, who ultimately will leave at great cost to the organisation. It also damages the managers' credibility. They get so disheartened with failure as managers they leave — again at considerable cost.

Causes of marginal performance management inability

The Marginal Performer

- Autocratic
- Team
- Hierarchical
- Management leadership combination
- Perfectionistic
- Consensus
- Low CQ
- Limited situational range
- Lip service to perf. management
- Incongruent
- Low EQ
- Cynical
- No technical credibility

The marginal performer negative attitude

The Marginal Performer

- Demotivated
- Belief value clash
- Hostile/angry
- Power base aware
- High entitlement
- Harmoniser chatty, social
- Resistant
- Exit mentality B.I.L.
- Maintainer status quo
- Change fatigued
- Cynical P.O.P.O.

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Consider the fact that the loss of technical staff can cost from one to seven times their salary, depending on seniority and expert knowledge. You could coach a lot of technical managers in management capability for that amount.

Managing marginal or poor performers is hard enough for skilled people managers.

However time and time again experience and research shows that if you deal with the problem quickly and assertively giving objective feedback the problem can be resolved. Employees want feedback.

But leave it to fester and it can take months to resolve usually with anger and bitterness if handled badly. To envisage the complexity of it see the following mind maps of causes: negative attitude and management inability.

It is important for organisations to become aware of the costs in financial and human terms of the "Blindspot". Technical organisations need to implement selection, coaching and training programs to equip the newly promoted technical manager with both the managerial skills necessary to do their leadership roles and motivate them with a strong sense of success. Motivation after all equals desirability of the reward multiplied by an expectation of success.

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