

## **ARMed for Success**

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Imagine yourself as the coach of an NFL team. You've taken the reigns after three seasons of lackluster performance. You're paid handsomely to get the team going in the right direction. Assessing the team during your first week, you note players who lack the ability to perform in their position. The running back is slow. The wide receiver is clumsy. The line backer is timid. The quarterback can't throw, but tackles well. Considering the fact that he throws so many interceptions, tackling comes in handy.

You're encouraged to see players who perform at or above your expectation. An offensive lineman is able to outrun every other player on the team. The strong safety can throw the football accurately the length of the field. The right defensive guard hates getting his clothes dirty, but can kick sixty-yard field goals accurately.

The team has low morale and players are frustrated. The players point at each other and the coaches as the problem. The owner is criticized for not attracting new talent. Blaming is out of control. Anger simmers below the surface. Effort in practice is low. Every day at least one player is in your office asking to be traded. Scouts from other NFL teams lurk in the parking lot and whisper in low tones to your best and brightest.

Proper staffing is critical. Getting the players with the right skills and the right attitude in the right positions means the difference between twelve wins and twelve losses during the season. Proper staffing applies to all teams: basketball, baseball, rugby, hockey, and product launch teams. Wait a minute! Product launch teams are not a professional sports team! You're correct, but all teams must be properly staffed with the right people possessing the right skills and placed in the right job. Before I go further, let's get back to the coaches' dilemma.

Being a nice person and not really wanting to rock the boat, you decide to let things stay as they are and try to work with the people you have in their current positions. Being well liked is important to you. Besides, the running back has played in that position for years and is close to retirement. The quarterback has always been a quarterback and no one else seemed to mind his bad throwing arm. Your timid linebacker

is a very nice man and cooks for the orphanage on Saturday. Your strong safety has voiced his wish to stay with the team as the quarterback, but you already have a quarterback.

As the season progresses, you suffer loss after loss. You spend your nights wondering why all of your training and coaching hasn't turned the team around. You gave them raises. You sent them for a week of expensive motivational speaking. Still, nothing seems to help. Finally, at the end of the season, the owner of the team comes into your office and announces to you that he has been reviewing his staff. He has decided that he has one person in the wrong position. That person is you.

Of course, the example above sounds ridiculous. It's exaggerated somewhat. Yet, I've observed business teams with many of the same basic problems. A receptionist with poor people skills is answering the phone. A machine operator is promoted to production manager because he knows the machines with no thought as to how he manages people. A salesman is promoted to sales manager because he has the longest tenure, although his record in his current job is less than stellar. Staffing of business teams is just as important as staffing of sports teams. Without proper people with the proper skills in the proper positions, your business **will** perform below potential.

The definitions of the terms "coach" and "manage" are remarkably similar. The definition of the word coach according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (<http://www.m-w.com>) is *"to instruct, direct, or prompt a response from a pupil; to train intensively"*. The same dictionary defines the word manage as *"to handle or direct with a degree of skill: as to exercise executive, administrative, and supervisory direction; to work upon or try to alter for a purpose."* It's fascinating to note the commonality between the two concepts. Each is trying to alter human behavior to achieve a purpose. The desired end result is victory whether in the arena of athletics or business. How well the team performs is the job of the coach/manager of that team. As the manager, you are the coach.

Four common results occur when people are poorly placed. First, the person in the wrong position experiences frustration and low morale. It's foolish to think that he doesn't realize that the position is beyond the skill set he possesses. Poor fit in a job can be more uncomfortable than poor fit in clothes or shoes. Not every person is suited for

every job. Many factors affect job performance. Personality type, emotional make-up, past experiences, and training are only a few of these factors. Placing the wrong person in a job is similar to using the wrong tool to perform a function. Though the tool may work marginally, it is not serving its ultimate purpose. Efficiency and effectiveness are diminished.

Second, the team knows that the person is poorly suited and a drain on the productivity of the unit. Frustration results from having to “*pick up the slack.*” No matter how popular a co-worker, resentment results when a member of the team is paid for performance that he is not delivering. Morale falls. Discontent leaks out as unhappiness, criticism, tardiness, or irritability within the team. Morale is further diminished because qualified team members are denied opportunity, while the poor performer occupies the position. Failure to address areas that are holding the team down causes team members to question your ability to lead. The questions not only concern your leadership in relation to the specific employee, but new assignments, new hires, and a myriad of other areas.

Third, those in positions of authority above you expect results. When the results are lackluster, your ability is questioned. You are the coach of your team. The team owner, i.e. your boss, expects changes to be made. When a coach can’t achieve the results, the owner must take action. He is the coach for his own team of which you are a member. His owner expects results and will take action to see his own results are achieved.

Finally, you know you have an issue that isn’t being addressed. Management is not about titles, bonuses, or better pay. Management is about implementing the vision of the company within your team. Great managers understand the vision of the company and translate this vision for application to the team. Great managers recognize the role being played. Your morale suffers and stress and frustration levels rise when you haven’t addressed issues within your team. Guilt and fear increase your stress level. Guilt results from knowing you’re not maximizing each employee’s value within the team. Fear results when goals and objectives are being missed.

Poor performance arises from some combination of the following three broad categories. First, inadequate training is a common reason for poor performance. A

thorough understanding of the job being performed is crucial for management to direct training effectively. A skills assessment of the employee and an assessment of the skills required for the job ensure that training dollars, time, and effort are maximized. But, training is not always the answer. Too often, additional training is given to avoid addressing the next two common categories for poor performance. Managers are paid to manage both the pleasant and the unpleasant. Guard against falling into the “training/avoidance” trap.

The second category involves an employee who lacks the mental, physical, or emotional skills to perform the job. In this case, no amount of training or counseling will help. If a machine has a maximum capacity of five hundred units, counseling the machine operator will not help. Five hundred units is the capacity. Overloaded employees fall within this category. Careful examination of the requirements of the job will help to determine if the employee is overloaded or over his capacity. Expecting a person to perform a job he lacks the capacity to perform is unfair.

Lack of interest or unwillingness to perform the job is the third common category for poor performance. Frustration, low morale, a feeling of being cheated by the company, or a sense that accountability is lacking can lead an employee to perform below expectation. Left unaddressed, poor performance becomes a habit. Efforts to reassert accountability and raise the expectations of job performance will meet stiff resistance.

So how do managers successfully address staffing issues? Is there a roadmap to follow that works the vast majority of the time? Yes! Having managed many teams and encountered a large array of situations across nineteen years in management, there is a system I’ve used successfully. Each situation is different so a consistent approach to solving the staffing issue is crucial. Inconsistency in approach leads to incorrect decisions. **ARM** yourself for successful staff management.

***ARM is my acronym for “Assessment,” “Review,” and “Make a Decision”.***  
**Assessment** is necessary in two areas: job assessment and employee assessment. Assessment of the job is crucial. Start with the job description. Poorly written job descriptions are the first clue to poor performance. No employee will perform well if expectations are ill defined. Vaguely written descriptions lead to differences in interpretation. Unclear authority and vague lines of reporting will stymie performance.

An employee who doesn't know what to do will often do nothing for fear of doing the wrong thing. Beyond the job description, talking with the person performing the job gives additional information. The individual doing the job knows things it would take a long time to discover. Ask the employee to tell you what he knows. "Sit" with the employee doing the job and see the demands firsthand. You don't need a detailed knowledge of the job, but you do need a basic understanding to appreciate the demands of the job. Note the basic skills that are necessary for successful performance of the job.

Move now to employee assessment. Documentation plays a crucial role. Personnel files, past employee appraisals, training documentation, the employment application, résumés, and awards provide a written record of history and performance. If the company has engaged in personality assessment or other employee testing, these results give insight and may prove invaluable. Assessing the employee using a face-to-face interview gives further information. During this interview, gather the employee's input about the job. In a comfortable atmosphere during an uninterrupted time period, have the employee speak about the things liked and disliked about the job, strengths and weaknesses he recognizes in himself, and future goals and expectations. Finally, use an open ended question like *"Is there anything more you'd like to talk with me about?"* to end the session. Take notes on the same page you wrote the job assessment notes on if possible. Write down the things you heard and didn't hear. For example, if the strength of "working with people" isn't mentioned and is a major requirement of the job, you may understand part of the problem.

After the session, organize your notes. List the job skills and requirements in a column on the left side of the page and the employee's skills and qualifications in a column on the right. Assess how they match up. If they don't match up, what is the reason? Which of the three categories above apply? Is the employee trained? If so, is he capable? If so, has he become unwilling or disinterested? Write down your assessment and a few notes to serve as reminders why you assessed the situation as you did.

While assessing each employee may be desirable, it may not be very practical. Concentrate assessments first on problem areas. If the company is losing customers and the reason cited is the rude treatment received from the customer service personnel,

starting your assessment in the shipping department doesn't make a lot of sense.

Generally, managers have very limited time. Use it effectively.

**Review** based on your completed assessment is the next step. Every employee deserves an honest review of his or her performance. Managers who soften assessments to save feelings may avoid immediate conflict, but the stage is set for future conflict. Performance doesn't improve when the employee believes everything is OK. By the same token, an employee is demoralized when a review only highlights the negative aspects of job performance. Documenting the review with a clear assessment of current performance and a clear expectation for future performance in writing is a starting point. Then, an uninterrupted, face-to-face presentation of the review is non-negotiable. This step can be uncomfortable, but it must happen for the review to hold any credibility. After you have presented the review, a period for the employee to discuss the review and express feelings of agreement or disagreement is necessary. Ideas for improvement are discussed during this time. Additional training *that is truly needed* can be discussed. A plan of action to improve performance will be completed by the employee based on the review with target completion dates. The plan of action is presented within one week in a follow-up review session with you. Both of you must agree on the plan. (Based on the policy of the company and union status, more people may be required in the review process.) The thrust of this step is to stress the importance of honest review with the employee. The follow-up session should also include a listing of future actions that may be taken if improvement doesn't result. Again, honesty is important. Each side must have a clear view of the current situation, why it is unacceptable, what will make it acceptable, and what the results will be if performance continues at an unacceptable level. Be very careful in this step to follow the company policy.

Additionally, exercise care that the consequences outlined for failing to improve are consequences you are willing to follow through on. Measure your words. Discuss the behavior and the proposed consequence with the human resources officer or your supervisor for input prior to presenting it to the employee. Consequences may range from dismissal for unwillingness to do the job to reassignment if it is found training doesn't help or the capacity doesn't exist. Credibility and integrity are at stake. If dismissal is the consequence that fits the poor performance, transferring the employee undermines your

credibility. While it may seem easier at the time to transfer a problem, remember that all eyes are upon you. Though reviews are done behind closed doors, gossip is a fact of the workplace. The employee will tell a friend who will tell a friend and so on. When the consequence promised is not the consequence given, your credibility is damaged.

Finally, **Make a Decision**. This is a step that is often neglected. After the plan of action has been completed or target dates have been missed, a decision must be made. Remember, what is most appropriate is often not easiest. If expectations were met and performance improved, you have nothing further to do except to follow up with the employee and review the completion of the plan of action followed by a “thank you” for a job well done. The decision is that the employee stays in the current position with periodic follow up to be sure the improvement is permanent.

If expectations were not met, identified consequences must be applied. The worst decision that can be made is no decision. No decision is a stamp of approval for the performance. The employee involved receives that message and every employee who has knowledge of the plan of action receives it also. One of the most common remarks I’ve heard when assuming leadership responsibilities for a new team has been “Nothing ever happens to (insert name of poorly performing employee here)”. I knew that my credibility depended on handling poor performance in an appropriate manner.

Going back to the four results from poorly placed people, each group is addressed through the ARM method. The employee who is performing poorly is given a fair assessment of his performance, a clear view of the expectation of the job, an opportunity to address “his side” of the situation, help in making a plan for improvement, and ultimate responsibility for his own success in the job. This is empowering to the employee. Self-esteem increases.

The team becomes aware that poor performance will not be tolerated. All members will pull their part of the load. No one will be allowed to under perform. Further, when poor performers are reassigned or dismissed, opportunity to advance is presented and frustration fades. Morale improves when expectations are clear, accountability is monitored, and action is taken on those performing poorly.

Management becomes aware that you are an action manager. The documentation shows a process approach. Upper management sees a proactive approach aimed at

improving the team rather than a reactive approach aimed at repairing damage and replacing good people who got frustrated and left.

Finally, you see yourself adding value to the company. More efficient and effective use of resources is an important contribution. A more important contribution is creating possibilities for your employees to contribute value as well. As a manager, using a proactive approach to placing the best people in the right positions, you feel a sense of accomplishment. All unpleasantness aside, an employee who is performing poorly wants someone to help. For the employee who is over capacity mentally, physically, or emotionally, the decision and the burden are taken out of his hands. You may do him the biggest favor anyone could. For the employee who needs training or a clear job description, your involvement and clarification gives new direction and allows him to move forward with confidence and certainty of doing the right thing in the right way. Finally, for the employee who is unwilling or uninterested in doing the job, the challenge to improve or move on will motivate change. This change may be a job change, an attitude change, or a decision to move to something holding greater interest. In any instance, you have motivated change in a person living below his potential. You are in a position to offer that help before the problem becomes too great.

Having the right people doing an effective job everyday lowers your workload and increases your effectiveness. This lowers your stress levels and creates time for more assessments and review. So why do so many managers suffer needlessly? Fear. Managers' fear hiring someone worse, being sued, being disliked, or causing someone to lose a job. Rest assured, the ARM method works for hiring as well, but that is another article. The documentation and assessment in the ARM method helps to avoid legal problems. As for being disliked, that shouldn't be your top concern. Creating value and maximizing resources is what you earn your money doing. Finally, the employee's poor performance caused his or her job loss. You were the messenger. Poor performance penned the message.

#### **About the Author**

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