

THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER FOUR

Giving the Work Back

Every answer a manager gives teaches the next question, and returning a question is design, not withdrawal.

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Chapter Four of The Manager's Week. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-managers-week (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989102).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Every answer a manager gives teaches the next question, and returning a question is design, not withdrawal. It is ten to ten on a Monday, and the manager of a customer support team at a software company has just answered the fourth question of the morning. It arrived, like the other three, as a message in the corner of her screen: a customer wants a refund outside the policy window, and can the team give it. She has answered this question, in nearly these words, perhaps a dozen times since the summer. The answer is usually yes, with a note on the account. She types it again. The message disappears, and another arrives, about a different customer, and it is the same question. Beside her keyboard is a notebook with the week's priorities written on the first page, under Friday's date. The first of them is the proposal to her own manager for how the team should be organised next year. It is half a page long. Across the open-plan floor, her twelve people are working steadily and well, and every forty minutes or so one of them waits for her before doing the next thing.

CHAPTER FOUR

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Ten to ten, Monday

It is ten to ten on a Monday, and the manager of a customer support team at a software company has just answered the fourth question of the morning. It arrived, like the other three, as a message in the corner of her screen: a customer wants a refund outside the policy window, and can the team give it. She has answered this question, in nearly these words, perhaps a dozen times since the summer. The answer is usually yes, with a note on the account. She types it again. The message disappears, and another arrives, about a different customer, and it is the same question.

Beside her keyboard is a notebook with the week's priorities written on the first page, under Friday's date. The first of them is the proposal to her own manager for how the team should be organised next year. It is half a page long. Across the open-plan floor, her twelve people are working steadily and well, and every forty minutes or so one of them waits for her before doing the next thing.

She feels it in her stomach, a small clench each time the corner of the screen lights, and something like relief each time she answers, because answering is quick and she is good at it. She is a composite, drawn from the way these mornings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Most managers who were promoted for being good at the work have had her Monday.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon describes what each of her answers does, and it does not blame her for giving it. Writing of the manager who steps in from genuine anxiety, it says:

> *And every one of these moves, repeated over time, creates the very dependency it fears. The team that's always rescued never learns to rescue itself.*

This chapter makes one claim. A good share of a manager's week is spent on questions that belong to her team, and each answer, however kind, teaches the next question. Giving the work back is not stepping away from the team. It is the most useful piece of design a manager does, and it returns hours to her week and judgement to her people at the same time.

Two kinds of problem

The most useful distinction for her Monday was drawn by Ronald Heifetz, a psychiatrist who came to the study of leadership through medicine and taught it at Harvard's Kennedy School. In *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994) he separated two kinds of problem.[24] A technical problem is one for which the knowledge to solve it already exists: someone, somewhere, knows the answer, and the task is to apply it. An adaptive problem is one that cannot be solved by expertise alone, because solving it requires the people who have the problem to learn something, change something in how they work, or give something up.

Santa Anna's canon, which builds on Heifetz in its account of leadership, puts the consequence in a sentence:

> *Heifetz argued that the most common failure of leadership is treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical ones — searching for an expert, a plan, a fix — when what is actually needed is the slower, more uncomfortable work of collective learning and transformation.*

The refund question looks technical. It has an answer, and she knows it. But the reason it arrives a dozen times is not technical at all. The team knows the answer as well as she does. What it lacks is the authority to give it and the confidence that giving it will be backed. That is an adaptive problem: it can only be solved by the team taking on a judgement it currently hands upward, and by the manager letting it. Every time she answers, she solves the technical problem and preserves the adaptive one.

The Luminous 100, the house's reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, states Heifetz's prescription in a line that is easy to agree with and hard to practise: "The leader's job is to create the conditions for others to do adaptive work — not to provide the answer." In 1997 Heifetz and Donald Laurie set out the same idea for a business audience in the *Harvard Business Review* under the title *The Work of Leadership*, and one of the principles they named has stayed in use ever since: give the work back to the people.[25] The phrase is theirs. What it asks of a manager is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

It helps to look at the refund question from the other side of the floor, because the team's reasons for asking are better than they look. The person who sends the message knows the answer is probably yes. She also knows that if she gives the refund herself and it turns out to be wrong, she will be the one explaining it, and that if she asks, the manager will be. Asking is not a lack of confidence in her own judgement. It is an accurate reading of where the risk currently sits. Heifetz's point is that the leader who wants the team to carry the judgement has to move the risk with it, openly, or the team will go on doing the sensible thing, which is to hand both upward.



The heat, and the holding

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The heat, and the holding

Giving work back is uncomfortable for both parties, and Heifetz did not pretend otherwise. Adaptive work produces distress, because it asks people to do something they are not yet sure they can. His prescription was to manage that distress rather than remove it: enough to keep people working on the problem, not so much that they stop. The Luminous 100's summary is exact about this: Heifetz "Deliberately raises the heat (productive disequilibrium) while keeping it within a tolerable range."

He borrowed a term from developmental psychology for the conditions that make this possible, the holding environment, and the canon explains why it is not optional:

> *Without a sufficiently strong holding environment (one that provides both challenge and support), people will default to their existing patterns rather than risk the vulnerability of genuine change.*

For the support team, the existing pattern is the message in the corner of the screen. If the manager simply stops answering, the heat rises far past the tolerable: twelve people suddenly responsible for refunds they have never been allowed to give, with no idea where the limit is or whether they will be blamed for crossing it. Some will freeze, and some will give everything away. The holding is what makes the returned question bearable. It is a stated limit, a known person to ask when the limit is unclear, and, above all, the certainty that a reasonable decision made inside the limit will be backed even if it turns out to be wrong.

The canon describes the shape of that holding in its account of autonomy, in a sentence that corrects the most common misreading of empowerment: "Autonomy is not the absence of guidance; it is the presence of *choice* within meaningful constraints." The constraint is not the opposite of giving work back. It is what makes it possible.

Design before coaching

If giving work back were only a matter of a manager's restraint, it would be a question of character. The research on teams suggests it is more a matter of design, and that design matters more than anything a manager does in the moment.

In 2001 Ruth Wageman, a student and colleague of the Harvard psychologist Richard Hackman, published a field study of self-managing teams that compared two kinds of thing a leader does.[26] The first was design: how the team was set up, what it was responsible for, what its boundaries and resources were. The second was hands-on coaching: what the leader did day to day to help the team work. Both mattered for how well the team managed itself, how good its members' relationships were and how satisfied they were. But, the abstract reports, "only leaders' design activities affect team task performance." And the two interacted: "well-designed teams are helped more by effective coaching—and undermined less by ineffective coaching—than are poorly designed teams."

It is one study, of teams in one kind of service work, and its strength is the comparison it makes possible rather than any figure. But the finding reorders a manager's week. The answers in the corner of the screen are coaching of a sort, help given in the moment. Wageman's teams suggest that no quantity of good answers would move the team's performance as much as one change in its design: deciding, once, that refunds within a stated limit are the team's to give.

For the support team, design is a short list of decisions that no message in the corner of the screen can make. Which kinds of case are the team's to decide, and up to what limit. Who on the team holds the hard cases when the limit is unclear. When the team looks back at its decisions together, and how. Each of these is a choice the manager makes once, and revisits every few months, rather than a thing she does forty times a week. Wageman's finding is that choices of this kind, made well, do more for the work than any amount of skilful answering, and that they make the answering, when it is still needed, work better too.

Hackman spent much of his career on what such design consists of. In *Leading Teams* (2002) he set out a short list of conditions under which teams tend to do well: a real team with stable membership and a shared task, a compelling direction, a structure that enables the work, a supportive organisational context, and coaching that is available when it is needed.[27] The list is given here in outline, from the book's argument. In 2005 Hackman and Wageman added a theory of team coaching that is unusually practical about timing.[28] It identifies, in the abstract's words, "the specific times in the task performance process when coaching interventions are most likely to have their intended effects," and the conditions under which coaching is and is not likely to help. The general point is that help is most useful at the beginning of a piece of work, at its natural midpoint and at its end, and least useful as a constant stream in the middle, which is exactly the stream in the corner of her screen.

What the rescue costs

There is a reason the manager keeps answering, and it is not that she does not know any of this. Answering feels good, and not answering feels dangerous. Santa Anna's canon is unusually direct about where that comes from, and it places it in the manager's body rather than her judgement:

> *You cannot empower others if control is your nervous system's default. You cannot build autonomy in your team if ambiguity makes your stomach clench. You cannot foster voice if disagreement feels like threat.*

The clench in her stomach when the screen lights is not a weakness to be overcome by resolve. It is a forecast, of the kind managers are paid to make: if this goes wrong, it will be hers. The difficulty is that the forecast is about the one refund, and the cost is in the dozen. Each answer protects her from a small and visible risk, a refund given wrongly, by preserving a large and invisible one, a team that cannot act without her and a manager whose week is full of questions she has already answered.

The cost is also borne by the team, and it is not only time. The canon is careful here, because it does not want the opposite error either: "Empowerment has shadows. It can become abandonment when the manager steps back too far." A team handed authority without a limit, a person to ask or the promise of backing has not been empowered. It has been left. But a team never handed authority at all learns something worse than dependence. It learns that its own judgement is not trusted, and in time it stops forming one. The Luminous 100's summary of situational leadership puts the balance plainly: "No single best leadership style — the best style depends on the maturity of the person for the specific task." Some of the twelve are ready for the refund decision tomorrow. One or two are not, yet, and need the limit drawn more tightly.

Situational leadership's old insight is that the same manager should not treat everyone on a team the same way, and it applies here with some force. The newest person on the support team, three weeks in, is not ready to hold a refund outside the window, and handing it to her on the same terms as the others would be

the abandonment the canon warns of. For her, giving the work back means something smaller: being asked what she would do, before being told, and having her answer taken seriously when it is right. The decision she holds this month is narrower than the one her colleagues hold. The direction is the same.

The cost lands in her own week too, and this is where giving work back connects to everything else a manager is asked to do. Every message answered is a minute taken from the half-page proposal that only she can write, the kind of work Chapter 1 found missing from a director's week, and from the note upward of Chapter 3, which only she can send. The questions in the corner of the screen are not separate from her capacity to lead. They are where it goes.



The question returned

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The question returned

Picture the same manager a fortnight later, having decided to do one thing differently. For one week, she kept a list. Every time someone brought her a question or a decision, she wrote one line: what it was, who

brought it, and one of two marks. A *T* if it was genuinely technical, something only she knew and the team could not be expected to: a policy change from legal, an account she had personal history with. An *A* if the team had the knowledge and lacked the authority or the confidence: the refunds, the tone of a reply to an angry customer, whether to escalate a bug.

On Friday she read the list back. The *A*s outnumbered the *T*s by a long way, and most of them fell into three kinds. She took the three kinds to her Monday team meeting, one at a time, and for each one she did the same four things. She said that the decision was now the team's. She stated the limit, as a number or a rule, and what lay outside it. She named who to ask when a case was unclear, which was usually not her. And she said, out loud, that a reasonable decision made inside the limit would be backed by her, including when it turned out to be wrong, and that they would look at the hard cases together at the end of each week, not in the moment.

The first returned decision was worse than hers would have been. A refund was refused that she would have given, to a customer with a long history. She did not reverse it. She brought it to the Friday review, where the team looked at the case together and moved the rule slightly, and the person who had refused it was the one who proposed the change. The second week there were fewer questions in the corner of the screen. The fourth week there were almost none about refunds, and two new ones about something she had not thought of, which the team now saw because it was no longer spending its attention waiting.

The *T*s she dealt with differently, and the difference matters. A technical question that arrives repeatedly is a sign that an answer exists in one head and not on a page. She wrote the answers to the five commonest on a single shared page, in plain words, with the date, and told the team that the page was theirs to correct. Within a month two of the answers had been improved by people on the team, who knew the edge cases better than she did. A technical problem, Heifetz's distinction implies, still has to be solved once; what it does not need is to be solved by the same person every time.

She also found, reading the list, that a few of the *A*s were questions she had been keeping for herself without meaning to, because she liked answering them. The tone of replies to angry customers was one. She was very good at it, and answering it was the best part of her morning. It went back to the team too, with a page of her best replies attached, and the Friday review took over the teaching.

The order of what she did matters more than the list. She returned the work in kinds, not one question at a time, because a decision returned once is a refusal and a decision returned as a class is a design. She stated the limit before anyone needed it. She moved her help from the stream in the middle to the review at the end, which is where Hackman and Wageman's theory says help lands. And she let the first wrong decision stand where it could be undone, because a manager who reverses the first returned decision has returned nothing.

Chapter 7 carries the escalation sort as a working page, with the two marks, the four things said when a decision is returned and the weekly review, and the section below takes up the signs that a team has been

handed too much. The gain it produces can be counted in records a firm already keeps: in the time a customer waits for a decision, in how often decisions are escalated, in the hours the manager spends on the work only she can do. Whether those hours and that waiting are worth something an organisation would sign for, and how such a measure is agreed before anyone knows what it will say, is the question of Chapter 5; this book does not describe how a measured gain is divided.

Returning work, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended with a one-word reply. The book can go further, into the finer points a manager meets when she gives work back to her own team, and the first of them is the list.

The list is kept for one ordinary week, and every question or decision brought to the manager gets one line: what it was, who brought it, how it arrived, and one of two marks. *T* means technical in Heifetz's sense: the knowledge to answer it exists, and it is genuinely the manager's, either because only she holds it or because the decision belongs to her role. *A* means the team has the knowledge and lacks the authority, the limit or the confidence. Most managers find the *A*s outnumber the *T*s, and that the *A*s fall into a small number of kinds. The kinds are what matter, because a decision returned once is a refusal, and a decision returned as a class is a design.

The second point is what to say when a class of decision is returned, and it is the same four things every time. The decision is now the team's. The limit, stated as a number or a rule, and what lies outside it. The person to ask when a case is unclear, which should usually not be the manager. And the promise, said aloud, that a reasonable decision made inside the limit will be backed, including when it turns out to be wrong. The fourth sentence is the one managers leave out, and it is the one that moves the risk. Without it the team will go on asking, sensibly, because asking is safer.

The third is the review. Hackman and Wageman's account of coaching places help at the beginning of a piece of work, at its midpoint and at its end, and least usefully as a constant stream in the middle. Returning work moves the manager's help from the stream to a review: a short, regular look at the hard cases, held with the team, in which the question is never *who got this wrong* but *what does this case tell us about the limit*. The first review is where the practice either becomes part of the team's work or quietly fails, and what decides it is how the manager treats the first decision she would have made differently. If she reverses it, she has returned nothing. If she lets it stand where it can stand, and asks the team what it teaches, she has returned the work and the learning with it.

The fourth is the technical questions. A *T* that arrives repeatedly is not a sign that the team needs the manager. It is a sign that an answer exists in one head and not on a page. The manager writes the commonest answers down, in plain words and with a date, and gives the page to the team to correct. Within a few weeks the page is usually better than her answers were, because the people using it know the edge cases.

The fifth is the people who are not ready. Giving work back is not the same for everyone on a team, and the canon's warning that empowerment can become abandonment applies most to the newest. For a person three weeks into the job, giving the work back means being asked what she would do before being told, and having her answer taken seriously when it is right. The class of decision she holds is narrower, and widens as she shows she can hold it. A manager who returns the same decision to everyone on the same terms has not designed anything; she has stepped away.

There are mistakes worth naming. Returning a decision without a limit, which raises the heat past what anyone can bear. Returning it without the promise of backing, which leaves the risk where it was. Reversing the first decision. Returning the questions she dislikes and keeping the ones she enjoys, which most managers find, reading the list honestly, they have been doing. And returning work without telling her own manager, who may go on bringing every question in that class to her and undo the design from above.

And the decision that changes the result most is the limit. Set too tight, it returns nothing; set too loose, it returns too much. The practical rule is to set it close to what the manager would have approved anyway, and to widen it at each review while it holds. Chapter 6 places the returned work in the second half of a ninety-day plan, after the manager has read her own week, and Chapter 7 gives the list, the four sentences and the review as working pages.

Ten to ten, a quarter later

It is ten to ten on a Monday, and the corner of the support manager's screen lights. It is a message from one of the twelve, and it is not a question. It says that the team gave three refunds outside the window over the weekend, all within the limit, and that one of them was for a customer who had written to the chief executive, and here is what they said to him.

She reads it twice. The notebook beside the keyboard is open at the proposal for next year, which is four pages long now, and has a section in it on which decisions the team should own.

She replies with one word, thanks, and goes back to page four.

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