

THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER FIVE

What the Team Does Without You

A manager's capacity shows in what her team can do without her, and it can be counted honestly.

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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Chapter Five 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

A manager's capacity shows in what her team can do without her, and it can be counted honestly. It is half past five on a Friday, and the manager of a structural engineering team in a firm of consulting engineers is writing a handover note. On Monday she begins a fortnight of leave, the first she has taken in three years that is longer than a long weekend. Her team is nine engineers and a technician. There are four live projects. The note is meant to say who decides what while she is away. She has written the projects at the top of the page and stopped. Beside two of them she can write a name without thinking. Beside the third she has written a name and crossed it out and written her own mobile number. The fourth is the one with the difficult client, and she has written nothing, because the honest answer is that every decision on it for a year has gone through her, and she is not sure anyone else knows what she knows about it.

CHAPTER FIVE

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What the Team Does Without You

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER FIVE

Half past five, the last Friday

It is half past five on a Friday, and the manager of a structural engineering team in a firm of consulting engineers is writing a handover note. On Monday she begins a fortnight of leave, the first she has taken in three years that is longer than a long weekend. Her team is nine engineers and a technician. There are four live projects. The note is meant to say who decides what while she is away.

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A pot plant on the windowsill has been watered by somebody else all week, which she noticed this afternoon for the first time. Her chest is tight in a way she associates with packing. She is a composite, drawn from the way these Fridays are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Most managers who have tried to take a real holiday have written her note.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, in a book about management as the work of growing people, describes a manager who would have found the note easy, and puts the difference between them in two sentences: "My job is not to produce results through people. My job is to produce people who produce results." And it ends its introduction with the question that her blank fourth line is asking:

> *What would it mean for you to measure your success as a manager not by what your team produces while you're present, but by what they become after you're gone?*

This chapter makes one claim, and it closes the argument the four before it have made. A manager's capacity is best measured by what her team can do without her, and that is not a sentiment. It shows in records an organisation already keeps: in who stays, who grows into a larger role, how decisions are made when the manager is absent, and what the work looks like a year after she has moved on. Measured honestly, agreed before anyone knows the answer, it is a gain an organisation can see and share in.

A firm that tested whether managers matter

The best-known modern attempt to answer whether managers matter at all began, at Google, with a hypothesis that many engineers there held in the early 2000s, and that the company's own account states without embarrassment: "Managers don't actually matter."[30] The company, which had briefly experimented with removing engineering managers altogether, set out to test it in a multi-year study it called Project Oxygen.

The study's own summary, published on Google's re:Work site, describes the data: "We analyzed over 10,000 data points about our managers, taken from performance reviews and feedback surveys," together with interviews. The hypothesis did not survive. "Teams with highly effective managers were more likely to achieve better results, be happier, and experience lower turnover." The study then named the behaviours that distinguished the managers rated most effective, first eight and later ten, and the first on the list, in Google's wording, is "Be a good coach." Others follow it: "Empower the team without micromanaging," "Support career development and discuss performance," "Make strong decisions." David Garvin wrote the project up for the *Harvard Business Review* in 2013 under a title that is the story in one line, *How Google Sold Its Engineers on Management*.[31]

Read the list beside the handover note and it becomes less abstract. *Be a good coach* and *Support career development* are not about the projects the team delivers this month. They are about what the team will be able to deliver when the manager is not there to help: whether the engineer who might hold the difficult client has been given a piece of it before, whether anyone has talked to her about wanting more, whether the manager has ever let her take a decision on it and lived with the result. The blank line on the note is a year's worth of those conversations not had, written in one place.

The Luminous 100, the house's reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, makes the same observation about the best-researched theory of leadership, that its practitioners grow people who can lead in their turn, "which is why transformational leaders produce more transformational leaders rather than creating dependency." Google's list is that sentence broken into behaviours a team can rate.

A word on the strength of this evidence. Project Oxygen is one company's internal analysis of its own managers, published in summary by the company itself. Its measures are largely ratings by the people managed, and its findings are associations within one unusual firm. It is not a controlled study and it was not designed to be published as one. Its value is in what it was trying to disprove, and in the fact that a firm of engineers, sceptical of management on principle, measured its way to the opposite view.



The value of a boss

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The value of a boss

Two studies from economics put numbers to the same question, from the records firms keep about their own work.

In 2015 Edward Lazear, Kathryn Shaw and Christopher Stanton used a company's data on the measured productivity of service workers, and on which supervisor each worked under, to estimate how much the supervisor mattered.[32] They found the effect "to be large." In their abstract's terms: "Replacing a boss who is in the lower 10% of boss quality with one who is in the upper 10% of boss quality increases a team's total output by more than adding one worker to a nine-member team would." And, in a finding that bears directly on the handover note, "Workers assigned to better bosses are less likely to leave the firm."

In 2021 Mitchell Hoffman and Steven Tadelis looked at what they called people management skills, measured through employees' survey ratings of their managers, at a large high-technology firm.[33] Such skills,

they found, "have a strong negative relation to employee turnover," and several research designs, including following workers who joined the firm or changed managers, supported a causal reading. The same abstract is careful about what they did not find: these skills "do not consistently improve most observed nonattrition outcomes." The better people managers kept their people. They did not, on the measures the firm recorded, always lift everything else.

It is worth translating the first finding into the terms of the engineering office, because the abstract's arithmetic is unusually concrete. A team of nine with a much better boss produces more than a team of ten with a much worse one. Nobody in the firm would hesitate to hire a tenth engineer if the work justified it. Very few firms think of the development of their managers as a decision of the same size, because the extra output does not arrive as a person with a desk. It arrives as fewer mistakes, faster decisions, and people who stay.

That honest limit is worth more than a large claim, and it points to where the measurement of a manager's work should begin. Turnover is recorded, dated and counted by every organisation with a payroll. Its cost is real and is usually known roughly by finance. And both studies agree that it moves with the quality of the person managing.

Gallup, the polling firm, has made a much larger claim, and it is often repeated. In 2015 Randall Beck and Jim Harter wrote that "managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores across business units," citing Gallup's report *State of the American Manager*.[34] The figure is Gallup's estimate from its own engagement surveys, and the article does not describe how it was calculated. It may well be roughly right. But it is a claim about the variance in a survey score rather than about work done, made by a firm that sells the survey, and it is best held as an estimate from an interested party until its method can be read.

Two managers, promoted

Santa Anna's canon tells the story of two managers, and it is worth reading closely, because it describes exactly what the handover note will test. Both led teams of similar size in the same industry. The first, Marcus, was outstanding by every conventional measure: targets met, projects on time, reviews meticulous. The second, Priya, had good figures that were "not always the best in the division." Then each was promoted. Of the first, the canon writes: "When Marcus was promoted, his team functioned well for about three months. Then, slowly, it began to deteriorate. Not dramatically — just a gradual dimming." Its explanation is one sentence: "Because that intelligence had lived in Marcus, not in the team." Priya's team, by contrast, went on producing results after she left, because what she had built was in the people.

The story is the canon's own, told as an account of two people it met, and it should be read as illustration rather than evidence. But it has one feature that makes it useful to an organisation, which is that the difference between the two managers was invisible while they were present. Both teams hit their numbers. Only

the absence told them apart. That is the same thing the economists found from the other side: the value of a manager shows up in what her people do, including whether they stay, and some of it shows up only over time.

The canon names the cost of leaving it unmeasured in a sentence from its book on how wisdom passes between people: "It is the silence of a retirement party where decades of institutional wisdom walk out the door in a single afternoon and no one thinks to ask what is being lost." The fourth project on the handover note is that silence in small. What the manager knows about the difficult client exists in one head. If she left tomorrow for good, the firm would find out what it was worth by losing it.

The canon is equally honest about a less comfortable pattern, one that measurement can expose and good intentions often hide. Managers, it warns, tend to "extend more trust, more autonomy, and more developmental opportunities to people who look like them, think like them, or remind them of their younger selves." A manager who believes she develops her whole team may find, when she looks at who got the stretch projects in a year, that she developed three of them. *The Cairn*, another of the house's books, reads [the second file of recognition other people keep about us](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and why recognition works best as evidence rather than as warmth. Who was given the chance to grow is a matter of record.

A measure both sides believe

If a manager's capacity to grow her people is worth something to an organisation, it can be measured, and the measurement can be honest. What makes it honest is the same discipline the house has written about at length in *Where the Flow Stops*: the measure is agreed before anyone knows what it will say.

For the development of a team, the records usually already exist. Departures, and which of them the organisation regretted, are in the payroll and the exit records. Internal moves and promotions, and where the people promoted came from, are in the personnel system. The time a new joiner takes to work without supervision can be read from the dates on which they first lead a piece of work. And the decisions made below the manager, and how they held up, can be recorded by the team itself over a period long enough to see a pattern. None of these is a perfect measure of development. Each is a proxy, and the canon's caution about proxies holds: "trust itself is not a number," and neither is a person's growth. But proxies agreed in advance, read over a long enough history and checked by someone without a stake in the answer, can be believed by both sides.

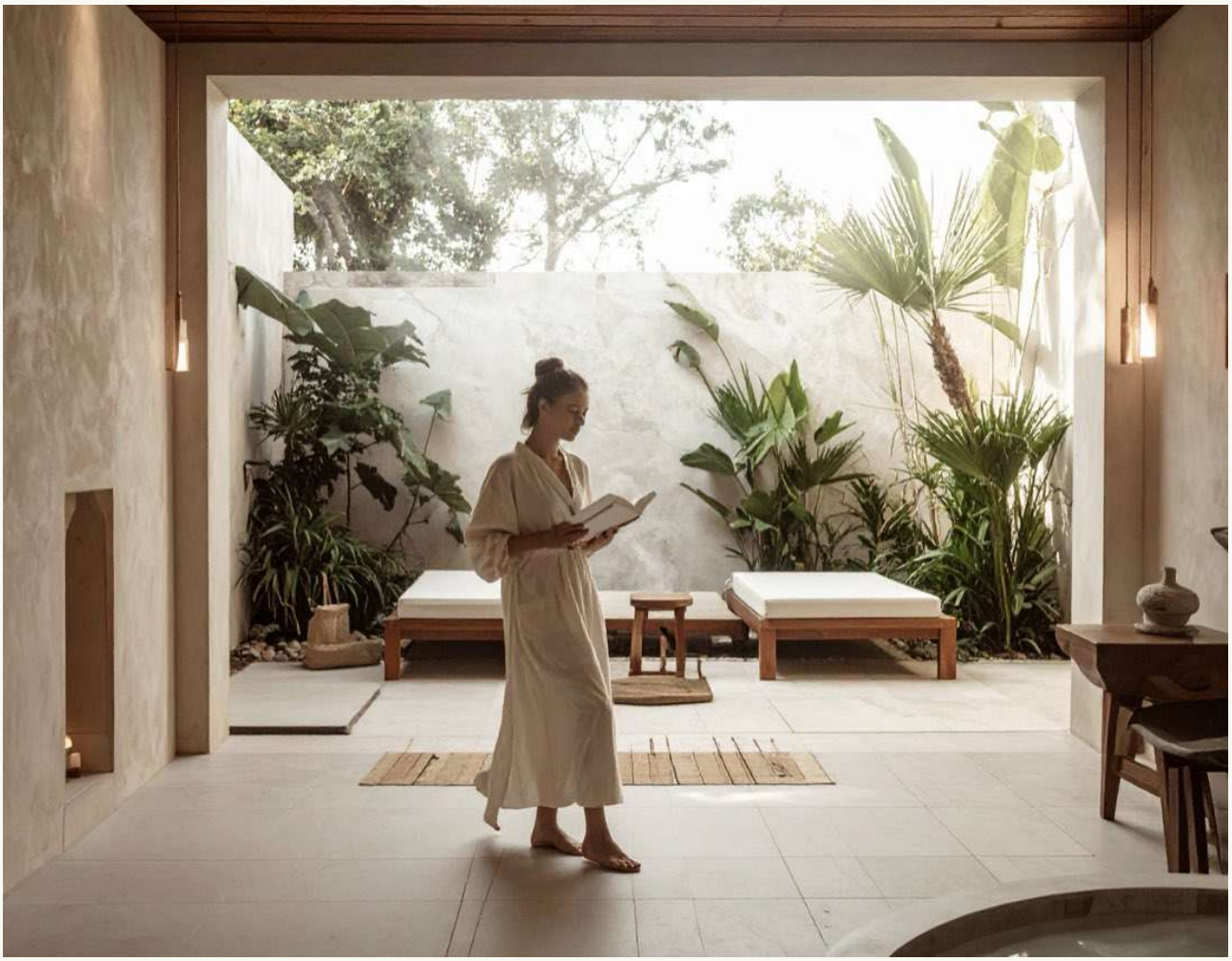
One of those records needs reading the right way round. A person who leaves the team for a larger role elsewhere in the organisation is a loss to the team and a gain to the firm, and a manager measured only on her own team's departures will be tempted into what the canon calls "relationship hoarding (leaders keeping talented people on their teams beyond what is useful, rather than allowing them to move where they would contribute most)". Internal moves upward belong on the credit side of the ledger, not the debit.

Two further rules keep them honest. Each measure travels with a second one that would move if it improved for the wrong reason: lower turnover beside the quality of the work, so that a manager cannot keep people by asking little of them; more decisions made below beside how many of them were later reversed. And the history is fixed before anything changes, a year or two of each record copied and dated, so that the improvement is read against the ordinary range of the past rather than against the worst recent month.

The question of who calculates deserves its own sentence, because it is the one most often skipped. A manager is not a disinterested reader of her own team's turnover, and nor is the human resources partner whose programme paid for her development. Neither is dishonest. Neither should be the last person to touch the number. A calculation done, or checked, by someone whose standing does not depend on the answer, and shown to the team in the same form the organisation sees it, is what lets each side believe a figure the other produced.

The gain such a measure finds is not small, and it is one an organisation already pays for without seeing. Every regretted departure has a cost finance can estimate, in recruitment and in the months a replacement takes to reach the same level. Every decision that waits for one person is time somebody else spends waiting. And every manager who cannot take a fortnight away is a single point of failure the organisation has not priced. Which records, which history, which allowances and which second measures are right for a given organisation are questions for that organisation and the people it covers, and they are the substance of an engagement rather than a book. How a measured gain is then shared is not described here at all.

The house's interest in this is stated once, plainly. Luminous Prosperity works with organisations to find the gains they already hold, where capacity and knowledge are spent without being seen, and to share in what is found. This book's subject is the part of that work that sits in a manager's week, and in the questions a team could already answer for itself, which Chapter 4 followed.



The fortnight away

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The fortnight away

Picture the engineering manager on the Friday before, a little earlier in the afternoon, having decided to use her leave as a test rather than an ordeal.

Three weeks before the leave, she wrote the handover note in draft and showed it to her team, blank fourth line and all. She asked them who could hold the difficult client for a fortnight. Two engineers offered, and she chose the one who knew the client less well, because the other already held a project, and spent four of the remaining afternoons with her on the client's history: what had gone wrong in the past, who on the client's side decided what, which questions to answer in writing and which on the telephone. She wrote the limits on one page: what the engineer could agree on her own, what needed the technical director, and the one situation in which she should be rung, which was a safety matter and nothing else.

She asked the team to keep, while she was away, a short log of the decisions they made that they would normally have brought to her, one line each: what, who, and why. She said she would read it when she came back, and that she would not reverse anything in it that could stand, and that she would not read her email. Then she went.

She noticed, on the first Monday of the leave, that her chest was still tight, and on the Wednesday that it had loosened. The canon's book on management would not be surprised. It describes the manager's urge to step back in as a body's forecast that control is slipping, and it is clear that the forecast is information rather than an instruction. Two weeks without acting on it was, for her, the first evidence in three years that the forecast was usually wrong.

When she came back the log had fourteen lines. Twelve were decisions she would have made the same way. One she would have made differently, and on reflection the engineer's was better. One was a mistake, a small one, already corrected by the team before she returned. The difficult client had rung twice and been dealt with, and had written to the technical director to say how helpful the engineer had been.

Chapter 7 carries the fortnight away as a working page, with the draft handover, the limits, the log and the reading of it on return, beside the development ledger that records who in a team was given which chances to grow. The log is also the first entry in a record that most teams never keep. Read beside the handover note from three weeks earlier, it shows which decisions moved, to whom, and how they held. Kept every time the manager is away, and read alongside the team's departures, promotions and the time new joiners take to work alone, it becomes the kind of history against which a manager's development of her people can be read honestly, a year from now, by someone who does not have to take her word for it.

Its commonest failures are the obvious ones. A manager who reads her email on the beach has tested nothing. A manager who reverses the first decision in the log on her return has taught the team to wait next time. And a manager who chooses the holder of the difficult client by who is already strongest has developed nobody, which is the pattern the count of a manager's real span in Chapter 2 tends to expose and the diary of her week in Chapter 1 tends to explain.

Measuring what a manager builds, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended with a laptop left at work. The book can go further, into the finer points an organisation meets when it tries to measure what its managers build in their people, and the first of them is when to begin.

The measure is agreed before anything changes, and the history it will be read against is fixed first. Before any manager changes how she works, someone in finance or in human resources, together with the person who will later do the calculation, copies one to two years of each record that bears on the team, dates the copy and files it unaltered. The records are usually these: departures, with a note of which the organisation

regretted; internal moves and promotions, with where each person came from; the dates on which new joiners first led a piece of work without supervision; sickness absence; and whatever the team's own work is measured by, its output or its quality. Nothing is decided about the copy yet. It is the history any later improvement will be read against, fixed before anyone could move it. *Where the Flow Stops* gives the reason in full: once the work has changed, the baseline cannot be recreated.

The second point is the pairing of measures. Each measure of development travels with a second one that would move if the first improved for the wrong reason. Fewer departures, beside the quality of the work, so that a manager cannot keep her people by asking little of them. More decisions made below the manager, beside how many were later reversed and at what cost. Faster time to independence for new joiners, beside the errors they made in their first year. Internal promotions out of the team, beside how well the people promoted did in their new roles. The second measure is not there because the manager is suspected. It is there so that nobody can later say the first was gamed.

The third is the decision log. Departures and promotions are slow, and an organisation that waits for them will wait a year for its first reading. The log of decisions kept by a team during its manager's absence, and kept again each time she is away, gives an earlier signal: which decisions moved, to whom, and how they held. It is the one record in this list that most organisations do not already keep, and it costs a team a line a decision.

The fourth is who calculates. A manager is not a disinterested reader of her own team's turnover, and nor is the human resources partner whose development programme she attended. The calculation is done, or checked, by someone whose standing does not depend on the answer, and the result is shown to the team in the same form the organisation sees it. This is the step most often skipped, and the one that most decides whether either side will believe the number.

The fifth is how to read it. Plot each measure against the ordinary range of its history and treat a point as news only when it falls outside that range, or when several in a row move the same way. One quiet quarter for departures is not yet a gain; people leave in seasons, and a team of ten has too few departures in any quarter for one to mean much. Read over two years, against two years of history, with the second measures beside them, the same figures can say a great deal.

There are mistakes worth naming. A baseline taken from the worst recent period, which flatters the first months and punishes every period after. An adjustment proposed after the results are known. A measure used alone. Internal moves out of the team counted as losses, which rewards the hoarding the canon warns of. And a calculation done privately and announced, which nobody on either side has reason to believe.

What this chapter does not settle is how a measured gain is then shared with the people who produced it: the proportions, the timing, the thresholds and the terms. Those belong to each organisation and the people it covers, and they are decided with them; for an organisation working with Luminous Prosperity, they are the substance of the engagement, not of a book. What the measurement can do is make that later

decision honest, by producing a gain both sides already believe. Chapter 6 places the fixing of the history in the first ten days of a ninety-day plan and the measurement conversation in the last thirty, and Chapter 7 gives the records, the pairs and the one-page agreement.

Half past five, a fortnight later

It is half past five on a Friday, and the engineering manager has been back for four days. On the screen is the handover note from before her leave. She is rewriting it as a standing page, because the team asked for one: four projects, four names, and beside the difficult client the engineer's name, written without crossing out.

The log of fourteen decisions is pinned to the board by the door, where the team can see it. The pot plant on the windowsill has been watered.

She closes the note, and for the first time in three years she does not take the laptop home.

A NOTE FROM THE HOUSE

What a team can do without its manager can be counted honestly, and the hours it returns are a gain the firm already holds. Luminous Prosperity Inc. counts that gain inside organisations as a gainshare, against a measure both sides sign first, and is paid as a share of what is found.

REQUEST A CONVERSATION

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What the Team Does Without You

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