Frustration Free *Technical* Management

Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager

JARIE BOLANDER

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Jarie Bolander

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Introduction: Frustrated? So Was I

But not anymore.

By applying simple techniques you too can become frustration free just like me. The trick is to figure out what frustrates you and eliminate it. Simple. You have done the first step already. You have the desire to be frustration free. That is a great first start. The act of recognizing your frustrations will naturally lead to resolutions. Good work! Let's begin by briefly reviewing the main sources of technical management frustration. In general, the frustrations technical managers deal with gravitate towards:

1. **Poorly Trained Managers:** Most technical managers don't really have the necessary training to properly manage. They usually get thrust into the role because of their superior technical ability and their ability to get things done. Just because you have superior technical ability and you get things done does not make you a good manager. A good manager makes his staff productive. Creating a good manager takes training – just like creating an engineer.

2. **Pace of Technological Change:** Technology changes so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. Most technical managers, deep down, want to be technically relevant. They struggle to keep up. This struggle can put management skills on the back burner. On top of that, managing the pace of change requires constant training of staff.

3. **Myopic Focus on Getting Technical Tasks Done:** Technical work is not the only type of work yet most technical managers only focus on getting technical tasks

done. There is a lot more to managing a team than just ensuring the work gets done. No thought is put into how the organization can improve moral or how additional requirements may effect the solution. It's just grind away at the task list.

4. **Unpredictable Development Schedules:** Innovation is hard to schedule. This makes predicating when products will be completed nearly impossible. The ensuing tension wears on the staff and creates some of the most frustrating interactions managers have to deal with.

Freedom from frustration comes from tackling them one at a time. Systematically working your way towards the solution will allow you to reduce your frustrations immediately. To facilitate this, I came up with a simple memory method to focus on the different skill areas that frustrations cluster around. Once you improve these skill areas, then sustaining a frustration free management career is a snap.

The Solution: POEMS

This book is laid out according to the POEMS method. POEMS stands for Personal, Organizational, Emotional, Managerial and Sustaining. The first four sections represent the main categories that frustrations fall into. The last teaches skills to maintain your frustration free existence. With POEMS, frustration free technical management can be achieved. Each part has a list of common frustrations that can be eliminated by using the techniques presented. The last category, sustaining, contains methods that will allow you to remain frustration free. A brief part synopsis of the POEMS method is presented below:

- **Part 1: Personal:** Eliminating your frustrations starts right now. This section gives practical tools that you can apply today. No need to get permission from corporate or your boss. These techniques are all up to you. You can control what you do. That is the first set to being

frustration free – helping yourself.

- **Part 2: Organizational:** Once you have straightened out your own house, it's time to take a look around and figure out what organizational structures generate frustration. This step will require a little more help from other people. Don't worry about it. Once you have demonstrated that your life is in order, it's much easier to get others to change.

- **Part 3: Emotional:** Organizational changes can only get you so far. Humans are emotional beings who don't always act rationally. Frustrations grow exponentially when tempers flare. Luckily, there are ways to deal with these difficult emotional situations. It's not easy. It's not quick but it's effective when done right.

- **Part 4: Managerial:** The whole goal of management is to make your staff successful while attaining the goals of the company. It's not about you or your career. Managerial skills will allow you to excel by helping others succeed. Your career is important but your main job is making your staff and company successful. Everything else should fall into place.

- **Part 5: Sustaining:** Remaining frustration free is simple. Now that you understand your frustrations and have successfully dealt with them, the sustaining skills allow to you maintain your new frustration free existence. These techniques eliminate the frustrations before they start. By continuously applying these skills, you and your team will be frustration free and more productive.

Now that you have a good understanding of the POEMS method, it's time to jump in and get to work. The first four parts has a list of common frustrations along with a methods to solve them. As you read through each section, you will start to see how applying these techniques will eliminate your present and future frustrations. The last section then presents skills that will sustain your frustration free existence. Applying all of these techniques will allow you to become frustration free!

Sustaining: Remaining Frustration Free

Skill #5: Respect the Dead

Improves

- *Morale*
- *Honest dialog*
- *Productivity*
- *Dealing with legacy issues*

Don't Blame The Past

Every organization has a history. Part of this history includes the pioneers who came before you. Some of these pioneers did not make it off the mountain. These brave souls are part of the fabric of how your company came to be. In some cases, they were the spark that ignited the rocket of innovation while others are barely remembered. No matter their contributions, it is best to respect their contribution and don't speak ill of them. There will be a temptation to question what was done in the past and blame others for the current situation. This is counterproductive. Remember, you were not there when the decisions were made and have no idea of the circumstances. Blaming your present situation on the past may be valid but never solves the present challenges. Solving today's challenges requires the realization that the past is the past, it cannot be changed and moving beyond the blame game is the only way to be successful.

Remain Positive

Being respectful should start with how the departure is handled. Don't treat them like invisible people or lepers before they go. Acknowledge their contributions while minimizing whatever conflict occurred. People are not stupid. The real reasons will get out. Do your best to focus on the positive contributions not the ugly circumstances of their

departure. Handling it this way will ensure that the remaining staff feels confident that departing employees are treated with respect.

Learn From The Past

Respecting the dead also includes learning from past mistakes and successes. While bad decisions might have been made, learning what went wrong and preventing it from happening again is productive. There is nothing more frustrating than rehashing a failed strategy because the tribe forgot what happened. Prevent this culture from taking hold by acknowledging past mistakes and encouraging honest dialog. Along with mistakes, there should be plenty of successes. You just can't run a company for any length of time without having some. Celebrate them when appropriate by making an extra effort to remember the good memories from past contributors. It is important to remember that one day, everyone will be a past employee. The way you treat the memory of those that came before you will dictate how your contributions are remembered.

How Not To Handle A Departure

A friend of mine worked at a company that forced a senior executive to resign. He had disagreed with the CEO and wanted the board to know his honest opinion. Honest dialog is important and if compromises cannot be reached, then something has to give. Usually, that means someone has to leave. This senior executive's departure was announced after he left via an impersonal email from the Human Resources manager. It's not like this senior executive was so bad that they had to walk him out the door. He had made valuable contributions up until that point and just disagreed with the CEO. He knew that it would mean his job and his integrity dictated he leave. His sudden departure and the subsequent scapegoating fowled the company for months. Productivity declined and the bad feelings started to spread. No good comes out of speaking ill of past employees – it's only the present that matters.

Exercises

1. The next time you find a nasty bug left by someone else, resist the temptation to bash them. Instead, remember the positive contributions they made.

2. When someone leaves, make it a point to publicly thank them for their contributions.

3. Keep in touch with past employees and frequently ask them how things are going.

4. Always give credit to past employees for contributions that improved the company.

Skill #6: Focus on the Incremental Solution

Improves

- *Problem solving*
- *Product quality*
- *Schedule predictability*
- *Group pace*

Keep Up With The Jones

In todays technology rich world, focus can be a challenge. There are so many new and exciting technologies that you soon get overwhelmed. Keeping up with the pace of technology change is a job in itself. So, don't try and do it all. Instead, focus on what will improve your present product first. There will be a desire to pile on the latest and greatest advances just because they are oh so cool. Not a good idea.

Resist The Pile On

Adding all new hardware or software to a project increases risk and complexity. Staff need to be trained and it still might be buggy. So, add new technologies or hardware incrementally when you need a better solution. Many a project has been delayed or canceled because so many new technologies were added that it collapsed onto itself. Focus on what will really help the product. Make incremental changes that are easily reversed.

Ask The Tough Questions

The best way to handle the new technology pile on is to objectively evaluate each new technology development. This is a great way to strike that careful balance between getting stuff done and working on

cool stuff. It's a common trait among engineers and scientists that they want to try the latest technology. Before jumping to the next big thing, ask yourself these questions:

1. **What does this buy us?** This can be a tough question to answer but one that is fundamental to understanding the benefit of any new technology. If this is a struggle to figure out or is too complicated then beware.'

2. **How do we use it?** Akin to question one but more along the lines of the implementation aspects of the new technology. There may even be dependences that must be dealt with before you can even start implementation.

3. **What kind of training is required?** If whatever you are looking at is brand new, their might not be much in the way of training out there. This will clearly put a hamper on your ability to get moving. Check out what training options are available and how long training will take.

4. **Are there alternatives?** Take a look at the alternatives to the next big thing. There might be other, better solutions or some that complementary.

5. **How does it differ from what we do now?** It's important to figure out why it's different than what you do now. This is so you can evaluate if you really need to do something new. It might be that your current method just needs to be tweaked a bit to make it just as good as the new one.

6. **What are the long run implications?** This could be support (or lack of it) or something being obsoleted. It's critical to understand these long run implications or you may have to scramble to fix whatever you broke by using the new methods.

For all of us who develop innovative products, the temptation to jump on the next big thing is overwhelming. We love new and exciting technologies that will leap frog where we are today. Unfortunately, that rarely happens. If you focus on the incremental improvements, you will eventually make the big leap. Don't worry about the number of jumps, just how high you eventually get.

Exercises

1. Write down the places in your present project that could use better solutions.

2. List the possible technologies that would make the solution better.

3. On your next project, choose one from the list to implement.

4. The next time you come across a new technology, evaluate where you could use it and it's maturity. Keep a list of these new technologies for future projects.

Skill #7: Wait for Something to Happen

Improves

- *Problem solving response*
- *Strategic focus*
- *Crisis management*

Spend Half Your Time Doing "Nothing"

Most technical managers fill their day with productive work. They usually don't connect the dots that their real job is to wait for something to happen. That's right. Wait for something to happen. This is a foreign concept to most technical managers since they got to where they are by doing something. Waiting around for something to happen does not mean you are doing nothing. Quite the contrary. While you wait, you think about what could go wrong. You do tasks that need to get done but can be dropped quickly. Waiting or monitoring will allow you to anticipate the barriers your group will face and eliminate them. Waiting and Monitoring also prepares you for the inventible crisis.

Be Ready To Jump In

A crisis is unplanned and random. You will never know when a crisis will strike so you must be prepared to drop everything and jump in to solve it. If your day is booked solid, then how can you deal with these random crises. This can be a major challenge for technical managers since waiting is not something they easily do. They got to where they are by doing.

It's About Your Staff, Not You

Having your day mostly free also allows you to be available for your staff when they need you. Since the performance of your staff is how

you are judged, you need to ensure their success by always being available to them. Having a jam-packed schedule does not say you are busy rather it says you are unavailable. This seems trivial but is a powerful tool to effectively manage people. Being free to help shows that you know what is important – your staff's success.

Exercises

1. Set aside at least an hour a day for thinking. Block it out in your calendar.

2. Progress till it's two or three hours a day.

3. Walk around your office and talk to people. See what is going on. See what help they need.

Skill #8: Wins the Battle, War and Peace

Improves

- *Ability to see trends*
- *Planning*
- *Determine future products*
- *Better problem solving*

Tactics, Strategy and Grand Strategy

Understanding the role of tactics, strategy and grand strategy will allow you to better map the course of your group. Too often, managers don't understand the overall strategy of their group nor the grand strategy of the company. Unless this is clear in your mind, the daily decisions you make may be wrong. This is why it is important to understand the differences and spend time each week thinking about all three.

- **Tactics: Solve immediate problems.** Tactics can change, depending on the types of problems you face. In general, tactics focus on the daily, to the one-to-two-months-out and are associated with getting specific tasks done. They are short in duration and are reactive. Examples of tactics would be: using a specific tool to get your job done, your weekly status meeting and attending a customer requirements meeting. Tactics can change rapidly and usually come from a vast tool kit of skills and knowledge. Tactics win battles.

- **Strategy: The path to take.** Strategy usually consists of a one to two year group direction. Strategy should be firm because it sets the direction. A constantly changing direction is the sign of a poorly formed strategy. A strategy should be well thought out and align with the company's grand strategy. Too often, strategy and tactics

are confused and intermixed. Think of strategy as the company's vision while tactics are the detailed projects that achieve the vision. Strategy should also take into account what other groups are doing as well as your competition. Examples include product roadmaps, development platform (like an operating system) and market segments to attack (like consumer). Strategy wins wars.

- **Grand Strategy: Which fork to take.** Grand strategy is what happens after you get the product out or obtain a number one position in the market. It is akin to building a platform for growth that can be expanded into different applications or markets. Grand strategy is your plan for the future. These are the big ideas that change paradigms. Some examples include migration from an established platform, changing the way products are delivered (like web-based software) and branching into totally new markets because of a core technology. Grand Strategy wins the peace.

All Three Are Important

Keep in mind that you cannot just focus on either tactics, strategy or grand strategy. You must keep all of these in your head and switch between them when conditions warrant. This is the only way to see the forest through the trees. Sometimes you will need to focus just on tactics to get past a major hurdle while other times you really need to think about the direction your group or company is going.

Practice Switching

Switching between the three takes practice. Tactics get stuff done, so most technical managers spend all of their time there. The strategic vision is the compass for which your group should steer. It should always be clear in everyone's mind where you are going and why.

Grand strategy is how you get prompted. It shows a level of thinking that takes your group and company beyond where they are today.

Exercises

1. Step back from your daily tasks and write down where your group is going in one, two and three years.

8. Using the list above, write down three to four bullets on how you will get there.

9. Take a clean sheet of paper and write down how you would crush your existing products. Think about technologies that may or may not exist.

10. Briefly describe your product's features, functions and technology. Find common or platform technologies that they are built on. Can this platform be used for other solutions? What would have to be added to make that happen?

Skill #9: It Takes A Village Without The Idiots

Improves

- *Team performance*
- *Morale*
- *Productivity*
- *Group management*

Get The Culture Right

Group dynamics are critical to get right. A properly functioning team can achieve anything. Groups dynamics start with the composition of the team and how the manager manages them. In essence, it is the culture of the group that will ultimately determine its success. You do need to be competent but the vast majority of a group's performance problems can be traced back to group culture and dynamics. Group culture glues the team together and establishes how the group behaves when times are good and bad. The group's culture gets tested the most under duress. Building a solid group culture will make stressful times less stressful.

Culture Makes The Experience

My first experience with great group culture was my first job out of college. The company was a startup that had a small group in Silicon Valley. The corporate office was out of state so they pretty much left us alone. This group was focused on building the company's semiconductor products, so everyone there was a seasoned semiconductor professional The culture was a mix of typical Silicon Valley startup with a family feel thrown in. Spouses and children would routinely stop by for lunch or to just hang out. The mood was relaxed and everyone worked for a single boss, the VP of Operations. Work

hours were flexible but everyone worked really hard. If any one of us had a problem, someone would jump in to help. There were no big egos. Everyone knew their place and what they had to do.

It Starts With The Boss

Our boss was a laid back guy who ran things more collaboratively than authoritarian. He did make it clear that our job was to get things done and he did not tolerate anyone who did not pull their own weight. He trusted us but would always verify that we had everything we needed to be successful. His style communicated that we were trusted and that our boss would always look out for us. This trust tested itself when we shut our group down. He looked out for our interest and got us a great severance package. After shutting down, we all went our separate ways but we still keep in contact. Occasionally, we all get together for lunch.

Have A Mix

When it comes to group composition, diversity is a good thing. The more diverse your team, the more productive they will be. What I mean by diversity is getting the right mix of starters, finishers, scientists, mechanics, solid citizens and superstars. The ideal mix depends in large part to the groups mandate. If you run an IT support group, then you want more finishers and mechanics than scientists and starters but the opposite is true if you run an advanced R&D group. Getting the mix right takes some practice. If you are heavy in one area, then you need to adjust your hiring plans or try and convert people to different roles.

Mind The Gaps

It is common for technical managers to manage a diverse group of technical people. This can be a particular challenge for the manager if they are not well grounded in the skills of their team. Overcoming this requires the manager to pay particular attention to their knowledge gaps and to try and find people that can mentor them in unfamiliar roles. This goes a long way to demonstrating to your group that everyone's

skills are valuable – not just the ones you particularly know well. Finding a specific technical mentor allows you to lean more about what they do so that you can ask intelligent questions and respond to your team's challenges.

Group Evolution

When creating or expanding a group, be aware that they will go through stages. These stages will frustrate you because during certain ones, not a lot of real work is getting done. It is important that your group go through them or the group dynamics will be off. In broad terms, the stages of a group include:

- **Forming:** The group comes together to accomplish a certain task.
- **Absorbing** Figuring out who does what and who will lead the team.
- **Performing:** Work is getting done.

Absorbing Takes Time

Anytime you hire someone new into your group, you will go through some form of the stages. Knowing that both a new hire and the existing group will have to form, absorb and perform will allow you to schedule appropriately. In my experience, it usually takes 30 to 90 days to get a new hire on board and productive. During that time, your groups overall productivity will suffer.

Afterword

See, being frustration free is not that hard. Congratulations. I knew you could do it.

Just remember to keep practicing and learning. Applying the solutions in this book will allow you to solve your frustrations and make your work life much easier. Continuing to remain frustration free is a matter of working on your management skills every day. Take the time. Set aside fifteen or twenty minutes each day to remain frustration free. Doing this will allow you to recognize the start of frustrating situations. Once you recognize them, eliminating them is a snap.

For additional thoughts on management, innovation and entrepreneurship, check out my blog at http://www.thedailymba.com. Thanks for reading.