Frustration Free *Technical* Management

Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager

Jarie Bolander

Frustration Free Technical Management

Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager

Jarie Bolander

Printed in the United States of America.

Acknowledgements

So many people were involved in writing this book. I would like to thank the people that I have managed over the years. It was a pleasure to work with all of you and create innovative products. My managers were both great teachers and wonderful role models. The countless friends and colleagues that put up with reading my half-baked drivel. I truly appreciate all of your help and candor.

In particular, I would like to thank my editor and business partner, Annie Wilson, for making my half baked drivel at least readable. To Steve Albert, who helped me organize my thoughts into something cohesive and organized. Paul Lovoi, who taught me the beauty of the one liner and how to innovate repeatedly. Geoff Zawolkow, who taught me the power of clear communication and focus. Ajay Malik, who beat me to a published book but was a great sounding board for all my ideas. Michael Helquist who gave me great feedback on my early drafts and encourages me to be a better writer by writing brilliantly. Daniel Paley and Anno Hermanns, two great colleagues who inspire me to manage better by constantly testing my skills, in good ways. The rest of the Tagent staff who make it a pleasure to come to work. All of the readers of The Daily MBA (http://www.thedailymba.com) who support my efforts by reading and staying engaged. To all of my SCORE clients who have wonderful ideas and passion that keeps me energized.

A special thanks goes to my wife Margaret, who puts up me, helps me understand the meaning of balance and who makes me a better person.

JARIE BOLANDER

Table of Contents

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!

Emotional: Developing Interpersonal Skills

Frustration #18: Overly Negative Interactions

Symptoms

- *Focus is only on problems, not what is going right*

- *Pessimism trumps optimism*

- *Long winded, "whoa is me" explanations*

- *General negativity, even when good news is announced*

- *Peers say you are overly negative*

- *Your boss tells you your are negative*

Solution #18: Tell the Whole Truth

By the nature of their training, engineers and scientists are pessimists. It's not that they don't want to be optimistic. It's just that they are taught the scientific method as their main problem solving tool. Inherit in the scientific method, is a methodical pessimism about what is observed. This pessimism allows for great science but for lousy status reporting. This is the main reason technical people have such a difficult time telling the whole truth.

It's Not Lying

Telling the whole truth is critical to your survival. Overly pessimistic status reports or personal interaction, over time, will reduce management's confidence in your ability. This does not mean you should sugar coat bad news or lie; that helps no one. What it does mean is that you are fair and balanced concerning the situation your team is in. This concept gives most technical managers heartburn since they don't see the value in minimizing real problems or celebrating small victories. They usually only focus on the bad news since that is what

needs fixing. Focusing on what is broken is important but you must also remember that you are the face of the effort to fix problems. If you give off a doom and gloom, this will never work, your management will start to believe you and take the appropriate steps – like canceling the project or getting someone else to run it.

Dragging Out The Good

The frustrating thing about technical people is that they are optimistic if you pry it out of them. Try this experiment. Ask a techie how their day is going and what they are doing. Chances are, you will hear about every problem and bug they are working on. Now, ask them what is going right. Chances are, they will stare at you in stunned silence even though they just shipped the latest product or crushed ten bugs this week. Most senior managers don't have the time to do the dance to get the whole truth. They rely on you to tell it to them. This is an awesome responsibility that you need to take seriously. Your chain of command knows that things will go wrong but they also want to know that you have a handle on it. You do this by telling them the whole truth.

A Watershed Moment

I first realized the importance of telling the whole truth when my team actually had a bunch of good news to report. We also have bad news but the good news was a big deal. What we had achieved was a first for the company. No other group in its history ever made a radio and we got it to work. Now, it did not meet every specification, which was the bad news, but we did wirelessly transmit and successfully decode it on the other side. This was a huge deal. It was the culmination of years of work and tens of millions of dollars. How did I report it? It was a single bullet point, three points down, on a slide with six problem bullet points. That was it. What do you think became the focus of the whole meeting, You guessed it, all of the remaining six problems with almost no mention of the tremendous milestone that was achieved. So did I actually communicate the whole truth? Not even close.

What Works, What Doesn't, What's Being Done

Thankfully, I had a great management mentor who took me aside and explained to me that while what I said was true it did not give the executive managers a true picture of the state of the project. The goal of the whole truth is to create a picture, in the executives' minds, that is the true state of the project. In this case the project was going great and we had a few little things to fix. Instead, what they heard was: it's not done and it has all of these problems. I needed to tell the whole truth. My mentor's premise was simple: Tell them what works, what doesn't and what's being done. This simple method allows you to focus on all aspects of what is going on. It gives you the opportunity to give proper weight to all parts of the project: achievements, problems and solutions. Remember, that what you say may not be what is heard. You need to ensure that your words, tone and materials have the desired effect. Senior managers are busy. They tend to filter what you say and only remember simple things that are reinforced. So, even though you might have great news, it needs to be presented with the right attitude and delivery.

Practice With Others

Telling the whole truth takes practice. The best way to practice is to find someone outside of engineering that you trust. Maybe a marketing or sales guy and ask them to help you work on your delivery. Your delivery is the key to communicating your message. How you stand, what you say or don't say will craft an impression that will be all they remember. Marketing and sales guys do this everyday – they know how to get the desired message across.

Additional Solutions

· Skill #1: The Platinum Rule We Don't Even Know

Frustration #19: Information Hoarding

Symptoms

- *Last minute announcements of major screw-ups*

- *Private conversations differ drastically from public ones*

- *Nothing is written down or updated*

Solution #19: Know When to Blow Up

It's a fact that calm people make better decision since being calm allows you to control your emotions. Controlling your emotions allows more rational decision making in the face of a crisis. You should try and remain as calm as you can when dealing with a difficult situation. Freaking out never really solves anything except to show that you are out of control and don't know what to do. A calm, rational manager instills confidence in others, showing that they can handle whatever is thrown at them.

Remain Calm

Dealing with a crisis in a calm, rational matter will allow you to separate and process the pile of data that will be flung at you. Believe me, if it is a true crisis, data and recommendations will be coming at you from all angles. You will need to sort through all of it before you can make a decision. Now, if the crisis is a matter of life and death, then you clearly need to act fast and trust your gut. A work crisis is hardly life and death. So, it's OK to take your time and remain calm. When you do this, others will also calm down and whatever freaked them out will feel a little less scary. Once everyone is calm, then issues can be dealt with in a rational way.

Sometimes, You Can Freak Out

There are times when you need to freak out a little to make a point. This should not happen very often since it will lose its intended shock value. Circumstances that warrant a freak out are when the team is bickering over trivial things, bad news is not shared until the last minute or complaining about doing a necessary mundane task. Then and only then, it makes sense to read them the riot act and be a little irrational. It shows that you are human.

The Calm Before The Storm

One of the hardest things to do is remain calm when someone is blowing up at you. Even though it is hard, this is the most important time to stay as calm as you can. It again demonstrates the ability to deal with issues in a calm and rational manner. I got to practice this first hand during a project trouble meeting. It was a forgone conclusion that this was going to be a bad once since it was our fifth or sixth trouble meeting. I had prepared the pitch a week before and sent it out to every affected vice president in the company. The problems we were having cut across the entire company and no one wanted to have their issue come up first. So they were all lobbying me to put their issue second or third because they all knew that the CEO was going to go ballistic. At this point, a little background is warranted. This particular project was a first for the company. We had acquired two other companies to get it done and the costs were spinning out of control. We were late to the market with a product that looked like it was not going to be competitive. We were primed for a nasty blow up.

Full Blown Hurricane

The day finally came where I had to present our status. I was scared. This was not going to go well and I would be right in the cross-hairs. All I wanted to do was get it over with. I decided to lead off with the issue that we had the most data on and was the easiest to explain. After the usual introductions, I started in on my first slide. Right away, you

could see the anger building in the CEO. This was going to be bad. I was only on slide one and I can already see the vein popping out on his forehead. Remain calm. Just state the facts and don't loose it.

30 Days To Live

Half-way into the first slide, the CEO stopped me. At this point, I was doing pretty good. I remained calm and was only stating facts about what I knew. So when he told me to stop, it kind of shocked me. The next minute was the most uncomfortable I have ever been. Now, this particular CEO is a smart guy. What I was starting to tell him was that the foundation of the company was fundamentally screwed up. Something he did not want to here, so he blew up. The exact phrases and four letter words are a bit of a blur. All I remember was the ending, where he basically looked around the room and told our whole group we had thirty days to live. Solve these problems in thirty days or you are all fired. I guess it could have been worst, I could have been fired on the spot.

Don't Take It Personal

This story illustrates two important things to remember. When someone is blowing up at you, remain as calm as you can. They will try and get you to blow up as well. Don't be tempted to loose control. Remain calm and try and deal with it rationally. The second thing is that blowing up can be effective if done correctly. The CEO had a right to be angry. He had spent a lot of money on a project that was in deep trouble and no one on his staff was working together to solve the problems. They were hoarding the bad news from him. This had the predictable response of lashing out to prove a point. After the meeting, we got a ton of help. We eventually fixed everything in thirty days and kept our jobs.

Additional Solutions

· Solution #12: Have A Process, Any Process

Frustration #20: Problem Employees

Symptoms

- *Underperforming*

- *Confrontational*

- *Checked out*

- *Uninterested in making progress*

Solution #20: Understand The Root Of Employee Issues

Occasionally, you will run into staff who have checked out for some reason. These people usually performed well up until some sort of event. This event can be a personal issue, a change in company direction or group expansion. When you notice a change in their behavior, try and deal with it right away. Sometimes people just get into a funk and need to snap out of it. If this doesn't work, then you need to work with them to resolve whatever issue it might be.

Understanding The Issues

Getting to the root of why your once star employee is underperforming is challenging. Usually, if you ask them if anything is wrong, they will just clam up and say that everything is fine. This is a sure sign they have gone "radio silent" or won't answer your direct questions. Typically, the "radio silent" types don't think anything is wrong and they will just continue to do whatever they want until you do something about it. Assisting them through a difficult time requires you to come up with creative ways to get at the real issue. For example, "radio silent" staff members might be bored with what they are doing. Try giving them a side assignment that is more stimulating to see if that perks them up. Chances are, they just need a little bit of stimulus to get them going.

What's Changed

Another common cause of "radio silent" behavior is when the dynamics of the group change. This can be because your problem staff member is either not used to additional people around or feels that these new hires are unnecessary. You can tell by how they react to assignments given to new staff. If they are questioning why we need so many people or why the new people get to do this and that, then they may be having growing pains. Group growing pains is a common cause of the silent treatment since the affected staff feel that their status in the group is getting diminished. Pay particular attention to times when your group is rapidly expanding. If they feel left out, then they turn into the next type of problem employee – a walking zombie.

No One Home

A walking zombie is an employee who sulks around and really gets nothing done. They say they will get tasks done but it turns out it is just lip service. These types have really checked out. They feel that they don't really know what to do about the situation they are in. Usually, when a problem employee is that at this stage, they are two steps out the door. If you want to save this type of employee, you need to act quickly and figure out what the problem is. You need to make it crystal clear that their behavior is unacceptable and that they need to change. Offer to assist them in any change they need to make. Also realize that the change they may need is for you to let them go. Sometimes confronting the person will get them motivated to turn around. If you end up trying everything you can think of and it is just not working out, then you owe it to you and more importantly, them, to let them go. It really helps no one to have an employee who is not bought into the company still around. As with any human resources problem, make sure your HR group is involved early so that any actions taken are within the company's policy and the law.

Additional Solutions

- Solution #22: Assholes Need Not Apply

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.