
Frustration Free
Technical Management



*Proven Techniques to Thrive
as a Manager*

JARIE BOLANDER

FRUSTRATION FREE TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT

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Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager

Jarie Bolander

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ISBN 978-1-60910-035-3

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Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2009

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.

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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

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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.

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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!

Frustration #34: Politics Is A Waste Of Time

Symptoms

- *Focus is only on the work*
- *Can't understand why decisions are made*
- *“Black and White” decision making*
- *We don't have politics here, so why worry*

Solution #34: Learn The Full Contact Sport

Politics is everywhere. You cannot avoid it. When you get more than two people together, there will be politics. The political landscape throughout company will vary a lot. Within your own group, you will have some control of the agenda and who does what. This does allow you to maneuver around potential political issues more freely. When it comes to the company politic, the interactions become more confounded and knowing the players' motivations and power base becomes more important. In general, the more you interact with other groups, more of the political landscape will reveal itself. Knowing the power brokers in each group will give you an edge in dealing with the inevitable political power struggle that seems to happen every time a reorganization happens or a new hot shot executive comes on board.

Political Landscape

Surviving and thriving within the company politic requires astute observations and cunning countermeasures. Observing the political tide as it ebbs and flows will allow you to determine when action is required. New executives will tend to test their staff early to figure out who is a political mastermind and who they can safely ignore. These tests need to be dealt with by asserting your position in the most favorable light related to the success of the company and not for your

personal gain. This is always the best way to lead off since it shows commitment to the company's vision.

Don't Make It Personal

In politics, it is always best to not make it personal. Attacking someone's character is a risky move that can backfire. It will be tempting to take advantage of a political opponent's character weaknesses for your personal gain. My advice would be to resist the urge unless they directly attack your character in such an overt way that saying nothing would reflect badly on you. Most political operatives with flawed character will eventually self destruct or have help from the list of enemies they have accumulated. Just sit back and watch them destroy themselves. This self control will get you noticed as a political operative that can play the game without resorting to the low brow methods that in the long run, always lead to self destruction.

Look Out For Caesar

Understanding the political landscape includes figuring out who the empire builders are. Empire builders are those managers who want to accumulate more and more power. These power hungry managers want nothing more than influence. They could care less about building products or what is good for the company. It may appear that they what what's best but that is just a means to an end. The most obvious sign of a empire builder are the managers who criticize other group managers when they are delayed or screwed up. They also look after their direct reports too well or will favor weaker direct reports over stronger potential rivals. They tend to covertly undermine rival managers and groups by marginalizing external successes while amplifying failures. Going against an empire builder is draining since their desire for power and influence overwhelms their duty to the company. Remember, company success for an empire builder is just a means to an end for their ultimate world domination.

Band Together

Countermeasures for an empire builder will take a lot of energy. Since their desire is so great, they will be constantly thinking of ways to gain power. The best way to deal with this is to resist stooping to their level and paint your group in the best possible way by telling the whole truth while exposing any falsehoods. Gaining allies is also a good way to look out for other group managers. Since the empire builder wants ultimate power, they will go after anyone. Creating a cohort of managers that share your thinking and duty to the company will allow you to spread out the work to contain an empire builder. Ultimately, an empire builder might succeed but if enough of your fellow managers are aligned for the good of the company, you will still be able to influence decisions for the better.

It's All Political

Don't despair about having to play the political game. It is part of your job as a manager. Embrace it. Even though politics seems like it gets in the way, it is really the way humans interact. Everything is political. Playing the political game fairly and above board will, in the long run, show that you are looking out for the best interests of the company. Which as a manager, is one of your main jobs.

Additional Solutions

- Solution #5: Managing Your Boss
- Solution #33B: Managing Different Levels

Frustration #35: Burn Out

Symptoms

- *Every task is a #1 priority*
- *No down time*
- *Always in “fire fighting mode”*
- *Working on weekends to catch up*

Solution #35: Take Your Time But Hurry Up

Research and Development (R&D) is an endurance event. Sprinters need not apply. Innovation takes time but cannot take so much time as to miss market windows. You need to pace yourself and your team. This is the only way to ensure consistent results. The common trap of “we can work 80 hour work weeks” and get it all done on time just does not work. Make no mistake. You will work hard but you will burn the team out if you constantly have insane project schedules.

Urgency Yes, Panic No

Pace is important because it sets the cadence of the group. A sense of urgency should always be in the air but never a sense of panic. Panic is what slowly drives your people away and burns teams out. There will always be moments of panic. That is natural and unavoidable. The problem is when everyday is filled with panic. Not every problem is an emergency and not everything can be a number one priority.

Too Much Of A Good Thing

Training for and running a marathon is a great lesson in pace. When I did my first marathon, I trained like mad for it. In fact, I overtrained (yes, you can over train). My incorrect assumption was that the more I

trained, the better I would get. To a point, that works but when you over train, you don't give your body enough time to fully absorb the training. You actually end up performing worst since your overtraining has taken too great a toll on your body. That is exactly what happened to me. I ran too much, too close to the race and ending up walking the last thirteen miles. I finished but I was so exhausted that I could barely stand up. This is the same thing that can happen to a development team. Too much hard work can prevent them from seeing critical issues. When you focus too much on getting it done you tend not to focus on getting it right.

Set A Brisk Pace

You should be aggressive in your scheduling but realistic in your demands. Most technical people like a sense of urgency because it means that what they are doing is important. What they hate is a management team that puts their feet to the fire every waking moment. Teams need down time. They need to take a break every once and a while to refresh themselves and their skills. They also need time away from work so they don't burn out. When deadlines are unrealistic and people get pushed to the breaking point, they tend to work hard but not smart. You can see this by the mounting task list even though the number of hours worked goes up. This is the first stage of team burn out. Once burn out sets in, it takes a long time to recover. Couple this with the pressure to meet deadlines and you will start to see your team unravel. Some will shut down while others will leave. When the pace is brisk but not insane, your team will sense the urgency but will also know that what is expected of them is reasonable. When the team feels that schedules are aggressive but reasonable, they will strive to meet them. They will go the extra mile to ensure the job gets done.

Agreement Does Not Mean Commitment

A place I used to work at would demand aggressive schedules even if they were unreasonable. The theory went that whatever schedule an engineer would come up with would be too conservative. This led

management to push the staff aggressively since management figured whatever schedule was finally agreed upon would slip anyway. Most projects would go through this schedule dance until the project manager was so exhausted, he would agree. Once set in stone, the team would work like mad to get it done, knowing full well that the chances were slim to none that they would meet schedule. When the inevitable slip happened, management would go ballistic and demanded a detailed analysis as to why things went wrong. This made the team dread reporting a schedule slip to the point where no one would be proactive in solving problems – they would just wait until the last minute. This unrealistic, aggressive pace had the opposite effect – almost every project ended up being late not only to the aggressive schedule but to the originally proposed schedule.

Strive For Balance

There will be a constant battle between management reality (I want it done faster) and team reality (we are working as hard as we can). Your job is to translate between the two and ensure that both sides understand the motivations of the other. Remember that the natural pace of the team will always dictate when things get done, no matter how well you schedule, how smart they work or how much management wants it done faster. It's your job to balance all of these factors to ensure that you take the time to not miss anything but hurry up so what you are creating is still relevant.

Additional Solutions

- Solution #5: Managing Your Boss
- Solution #31: Understand Features, Schedule and Budget

Frustration #36: Reorganization

Symptoms

- *Streamlining the organization*
- *Upper managements desire to be more efficient*
- *Reduction in force causes a realignment*

Solution #36: Resistance Is Futile, So Embrace Change

One trait of management that is the hardest to understand is their constant desire to reorganize. This desire stems from the optimistic thought that if we reorganized in a particular way, then we can be more efficient and make more money. Still other managers, the paranoid in the tribe, reorganize to keep a grip on power because the more successful a division, then the bigger the threat to everyone else. More productive groups have been destroyed in this manner than I care to remember. Akin to a reorganization is the acquisition of a company. The acquired company is usually a competitor that in some way outperformed your company. Instead of competing, management figures its best to just buy them. The thought being that it will be cheaper in the long run. Being acquired has a different dynamic since your management figured that instead of fighting it out, they should just join the enemy and get it over with. No matter which of the three you are involved with, they all create different stresses that will create anxiety among your team.

Reorganization

Reorganization happens for many reasons. The wisdom behind reorganizing is that the present organization is not efficient enough and has to change. If done correctly, a reorganization can revitalize a company and get it back on track. Done wrong and the same problems that existed before will either get worst or create new problems.

Surviving and thriving after a reorganization requires you to be diligent as to how the new structure will affect your group. Even if a reorganization does not directly affect your group, make sure you understand how the new structure will mix with your group. Understanding the dynamics will consume you for a short time but do spend the time. It will pay off in the end.

Look Out For Your Group

If your group will be directly affected by a reorganization make sure that it is in the best interest of your group not just you. Some reorganization is good and allows new ideas and staff to blossom while others will basically destroy the group you built. Make your opinion known early and often about any reorganization that affects you or your group. Ensure that you ask reasonable and rational questions that dissect why the reorganization is taking place and why it is good for the company. Always try and bring the discussion back to why is this a good idea for the company. Try not to get your personal situation involved if you can. This will only make it harder for you to make good arguments. Once the reorganization has been finalized, go make it happen. Don't try and reopen debate or prevent it from happening. Being a good corporate citizen means once the decision is made, you need to be bought into it. If you just can't bring yourself to buy in, then you need to move on.

Additional Solutions

- Solution #5: Managing Your Boss
- Solution #34: Learn The Full Contact Sport

Frustration #37: Mergers and Acquisitions

Symptoms

- *Being bought*
- *Being sold*
- *Buying someone else*

Solution #37A: Realize, You Have a New Boss

Hopefully, one day, that startup you joined will get bought. That day, you will remember forever as one of the best days of your professional career. The next day will be equally memorable. The sheer terror of realizing that you now have to inbreed with your new corporate overlords will cause you to lose sleep. Usually, this will go bad. The culture of most start-ups does not mesh well with big corporate culture and friction develops right away. From the stack of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to the bad corporate coffee, the culture clash will be a constant source of tension within your group.

Look For A Mentor

Mitigating the transaction from hot shot startup to corporation politic requires the realization that you were acquired, you have a new boss. You can no longer do what you want or make decisions in the hallway. The number of meetings will go up. The politics are different and you will have to play by different rules. The best thing you can do is get a mentor in the acquired company that can help you make the transition. See if you can find one a level above you that you get along with. It might take a few months, but make an effort to quickly find one. The best thing about an inside mentor is that they understand the new company's culture. Adapting to the new culture will be the single best strategy to smoothly transitioning into a productive group inside your new home.

Setup A Transition Committee

Before you find your mentor, make sure to establish a transition committee that will deal with any conflicts between your old company and the new one. Make sure that there is equal representation from both companies and that the meetings are regular and productive. This transition group will be a great way to also understand the new culture. The composition of this group should be both senior managers and regular employees since you will have to integrate your group at all levels. If the new company has internal training programs, make sure your staff takes them as soon as possible. This will help them out a lot and also demonstrate that your group wants to assimilate quickly into the new collective.

Don't Fight It

Some acquired companies make the mistake of fighting the culture because they think they know better. Don't fall into that trap. Rather, be constructive about how you approach different strategies for getting stuff done. Most large companies will have a monumental development process that will be daunting at first. Embrace it and figure out how to make it work for you. Once you have understood it, are applying it, then you can criticize it. Start out by making small, incremental changes. Don't dismiss it out of hand as too burdensome. It was created for a reason and has evolved with the company. They are most likely proud of their development process and for you to tell them it sucks, will only create bad blood.

Get Established, Then Ask For Change

After you have setup the transition group, got a mentor and are starting to be productive in your new environment, it is now time to suggest improvements. Remember, they bought you for a reason and that includes your ability to develop world class products. The expectations will be high. You should resist the urge to perform at the level you are used to. It will take time for you and your team to get

used to the new work environment. Try and set reasonable expectations and don't be too aggressive right away. Get the little wins first and then move on to the big stuff.

Solution #37B: Realize, You Also Bought the Culture

Your management has had their eye on that competitor that has been beating them up in the marketplace for a while. Instead of trying to compete with them head on, they decide that buying them is the best way to beat them. This happens all the time. The other reason to buy another company is so your company can get into a different market or have an instant product. Whatever the reason, buying a company will consume a lot of management bandwidth. It is like hiring new staff on steroids since you get all of these new employees instantly. Along with the new employees, you also get their culture. It is not like hiring a single employee because that single employee knows that they chose the company and they inherently know they need to adopt to the new culture. The acquired company does not sense that. They think that they were bought because they are hot shots in their field and they rule the world. That may be true but once you are bought, that all changes.

Culture Matters, So Understand It

The single biggest problem with buying another company is the culture clash. This will be a constant source of tension for everyone involved. The acquiring company wants the new company to morph into good employees while the acquired company wants to maintain their identity. What usually happens is the acquired company begrudgingly adopts to their new environment kicking and screaming. This process is long and painful and will decrease the group's productivity. In order to mitigate the effects of these growing pains, it is best to have an on-boarding team ready to go when the deal closes. This is the same idea as the transition group we mentioned above but initially will only consist of the acquiring company's people. This team should have all functional groups (engineering, HR, accounting, etc) involved and it should be the first experience the new company encounters. This will demonstrate to

them that you are serious about making them productive.

Don't Just Dismiss the Culture

Once the acquisition deal is done, the real work begins. Establishing the ground rules quickly will ensure that conflict is minimized. Don't immediately start dismantling the acquired company's culture; you bought them for a reason, namely, their ability to create and execute products that your company could not. Their culture is just as valuable as their products and services. Understand it and learn from it. Don't dismiss it out of hand. Be willing to try new things and observe how they work and interact. The best way to do this is to transition them gradually into your culture by assigning mentors at all levels. This ensures they get the personal attention required to be successful. In the end, you want to strive for a combined culture that leverages everyone's strengths.

Ah, The Good Old Days

A successful acquisition does not end magically one day. In fact, it never ends. An acquired company will always remember the good old days when they were independent. This is inevitable. Management needs to realize that while they bought a company for its products and services, they also bought the culture. This culture is why the acquired company created successful products and why they were bought in the first place. Don't dismantle it just because you don't understand it. Learn from it. Embrace what they do better than you do and ensure that the acquired company feels it is a part of the process. In the end, the acquired company will need to be transitioned to the new company culture even if they resist. Some of the staff you acquired will just not make it; figure that out quickly and respectfully let them go. It does no good to waste energy to change someone that does not want to change, but you should at least give them the opportunity. It will show that you are fair and that you realize that sometimes it just does not work out. Being good at acquisitions takes patience. If you keep in mind that the culture of both companies needs to be married together, then you will

be on the way to success.

Additional Solutions

- Solution #5: Managing Your Boss
- Solution #34: Learn The Full Contact Sport

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.

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