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THE WORKPLACE:

THE FIRST MIRACLE OF
MANAGEMENT



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the first miracle of management

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Those of you who have been asked to manage know that it's the kind of job that looks easy until you have to do it. Then you discover that all the "power" that seemed to be attached to the position has trickled through your fingers and disappeared; your group is persisting in doing what it wants to do rather than what you want it to do; and your boss is losing patience.

In the midst of all of this struggle, there are a few bright spots. One we have called the First Miracle of Management: There are people who love to do what you hate to do, and they are very, very good at it!

If you have trouble with corporate budgeting, there are people who are very good at this. If you hate making detailed plans, or preparing documentation, or organizing the department picnic, there are people who love to do this kind of thing.

Accepting the First Miracle just leaves you with just three things to do:

1. Make sure there are such people around.
2. Find them.
3. Get them to do the work.

The first task may be the hardest. Many organizations are kind of a monoculture – the hiring manager hires clones of himself or herself, so most people have exactly the same strengths and weaknesses of the manager. (After all, it's natural to hire someone like you because you tend to "like them.") So you may have a group with ten great coders and nobody who can document or plan. And it's usually quite clear in such a group that people were hired to code, period.

Luckily, people are pretty difficult to pigeonhole. Even in the most monocultural group, there is likely to be a spectrum of ability with respect to these "secondary" tasks, many of which are in fact crucial for the group's success. Of course, if the group was hired carefully with the idea of creating a collection of diverse, interlocking skills, then you may already have some excellent candidates.

So how do you find them? In a monoculture, these people may have gotten the message that they were hired to code, and only coding gets rewarded! In the worst case, they may get no credit for doing noncoding work, or even get criticized because their "productivity" is lower when they are doing noncoding tasks. But let's assume that the tight shoe is pinching so badly that the managers, and quite possibly the rest of the group, recognize that something must be done.

In many cases, you just need to let people know that the job needs doing, and some people will come to you (usually one-on-one) and volunteer. Many people who are good at coding nevertheless don't like to do it 60 hours a week, and they would welcome the chance to break up their other responsibilities with some planning or documentation or whatever. And remember the Miracle – they may even be really good at these jobs and like to do them.

So then the question is, how do you get them to do the work? In many cases, the answer is simple and elegant: offer to do something for them that you enjoy and are good at, and that they hate. Then they get to share in the Miracle as well. In other cases, even the most modest perks or recognition will work, because, remember, they basically like doing that job you hate. Sitting down and discussing what needs to be done can also do wonders – it may be that they like 75% of it, and the 25% that is left over doesn't bother you, so you can carve up the job differently and both be happy.

In the midst of all the “interesting” experiences a new manager faces, let's hope that she or he experiences the Miracle and learns how to use it.