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**Beyond Empowerment:  
Relevant Ad Hockery**

by Richard J. Mahoney

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# Beyond Empowerment: Relevant Ad Hockery

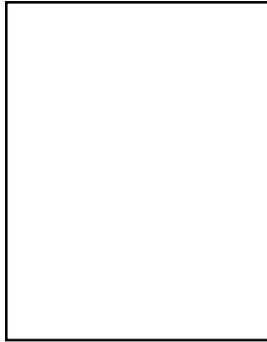
by Richard J. Mahoney

For months, they work twelve-hour days – sometimes sixteen. Their enthusiasm for the job at hand is obvious and contagious. They form their own work teams, often without leaders, and later, if necessary, they rearrange the group to form new teams. Results exceed expectations. They're not always paid extra for their extraordinary achievement. Yet sometimes they meet a year or two later "in reunion" to recall the *real* reward: the exciting time, the sense of accomplishment, the personal fulfillment. They feel good about themselves and what they did together.

Can this possibly be the "tuned-

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Richard J. Mahoney

out" generation of employees widely written about in the business press with no loyalties to their company – only to themselves or their professional life? Can these be the same people whose "career prayer" is "please God, give me patience – and I want it *right now*"?

What caused this incredible effort?

They participated in a crisis! Something big needed to be done and they knew it had to be done by *them*. There were real consequences, so they dispensed with the rules, the lines of authority, the memos, the endless e-mail and meetings. They got the job done because they were driven to – by themselves!

All too often, however, having solved the crisis, having accomplished the near-impossible, the team is disbanded and these enthusiasts go back to their "regular" jobs with all the stifling rules, procedures, reports, and endless meetings.

I have long been fascinated with this business phenomenon – "crisis" performance and its aftermath. The "crisis" may be a rapid new product launch, a

significant acquisition, a plant startup or a major and immediate issue with potential for far-reaching public or corporate consequences. It doesn't seem to matter whether the organization is a large corporation or a small business. The characteristics of group action are similar; when motivated, they rise to the occasion, then invariably return to the old ways.

### Surrogate Crisis Environment

I've talked many times with business people from all kinds of backgrounds and companies about their experiences with crisis motivation. Virtually without exception, each one can vividly remember participating in such an event. The discussion about it carries almost a wistful and nostalgic tone like remembering one's first date or driving a car alone for the first time.

Once I toyed with the idea that we could sustain a "crisis environment" twelve months of the year with extraordinary results. But I concluded that what would really be extraordinary would be the burnout rate – and the departure rate.

But the more I considered the idea of crisis management, particularly the lively description by the people involved and my own

experiences, the more remarkable were the similarities of the accounts. What each recalled about that exciting time followed a very specific pattern. And it finally seemed clear to me that it *would* be possible to produce a *surrogate* environment to accomplish the same things on a regular basis for everyone's benefit. Not the twelve- and sixteen-hour days, certainly – but the same sense of purpose and personal fulfillment.

What are the common characteristics I've learned from these discussions of crisis management?

If you could recreate the circumstances, there are almost always these common attributes:

- The mission is *clear*. It is highly measurable. Every participant knows exactly what the goal is – and importantly, what it is not.
- The mission is *worthy*. It is well beyond the expected – it sometimes seems impossible at the start.
- The mission has a well-understood *deadline*. Being late will result in failure.
- The participants are a relatively *small, cohesive group*. The talents are assembled around the mission to be accomplished. Laggards are expelled by the group and replaced.
- The participants have the *authority to act*.

- The *reward* for success is clear and direct — as is knowledge of the consequence of failure.
- Each participant believes that success *depends on “me.”* Each person knows exactly what is expected of her or him.

It sounds pretty simple in outline form. If this is all there is that weaves the individual threads into a tapestry of extraordinary value, why isn't it done more often or all the time? Why do managements perpetuate unworthy or diffuse goals and turn *off*, rather than turn *on*, the people?

### Management 101—1990s Style

This outline of the defining common characteristics sounds suspiciously like old-fashioned Management 101 with the added “1990s dimension” of small teams. Yet I don't frequently see it practiced as a coherent strategy of management — not just that kind of management that people talk about *in principle* — but the management that actually happens *in fact*. Except for the extraordinary manager, most violate at least a few of the defining principles and do it regularly. The violations are many, but most commonly what I see is failure to describe the worthiness of the goal. People want to participate in something bigger than themselves. They

want to stretch. And most of all, they want to savor the feeling of having reached beyond what others say is possible.

As CEO, I have known success when following the principles and often mediocre results in their absence. Two examples may be instructive: the first involved a fairly extended goal, the other a goal that was more immediate.

### Taking the Monsanto Pledge

In 1987, in the face of our company's first federally required published report on air emissions from our factories, I announced publicly the goal of a 90 percent reduction in emissions by the end of 1992 — with the ultimate goal of zero emissions. It galvanized our people to act — in small groups — out of pride or at least out of fear of public failure. And the social good of the goal was a very positive influence. In fact, one international environmental organization challenged other companies to reduce air emissions by taking the “Monsanto Pledge” — a phrase we co-opted for a later series of public stewardship promises. In its own way, the pledge and the “crisis” it created helped change the way we and industry behaved as other companies adopted their own forms of the goal.

Several dozen of our employee groups all over the world formed teams to adapt the 90 percent goal to a local target. The innovation was impressive, the dedication extraordinary. Each public report of progress brought a further rededication. Tough decisions were made locally, including shutting down some production units that could not be brought up to standard. I had never before, or since, as CEO received so many positive letters and comments from employees as those the goal elicited. Plant after plant, unit after unit met the targets and in 1993 we announced that we had achieved the 90 percent target on time in 1992. It helped make our company a very different one to ourselves and to those who were watching.

There was something about the original bold target with its seemingly impossible goal of 90 percent reduced emissions that had a galvanizing effect. In fact, while we were setting the goal, it was suggested that a 50 percent reduction target would be a real gain – and good enough. We held out for a number with a “9” in front of it because it demon-

strated to all that we were serious about our commitment to the environment and our people understood the difference clearly. The “crisis” in this case was self-declared, but it incorporated all the right principles common to successful crisis management:

- a clear goal
- a worthy goal
- a deadline
- teamwork by small groups
- freedom to act
- understood consequences
- individually understood roles

And it worked!

### Continuous Crisis Climate

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*The pledge and the “crisis” it created helped change the way*

Another example was brought home to

me in 1993, when I attended a presentation by the project manager at our plant in Muscatine, Iowa. He and his associates told a stirring story of a near-impossible task. Our scientists had developed a new agricultural chemical which found favor with the federal regulators at the Environmental Protection Agency. Approval to market the product was expected much sooner than originally planned. We had

neither a production unit nor even a proven manufacturing process. The team decided to develop both – *simultaneously*. This was something we had rarely tried in the capital-intensive production business. The rule was lab-scale first, then pilot plant to prove the process, then full production. We had occasionally skipped the pilot plant but only with a process we had confidence would translate fairly directly to production, never one with *this* much risk of translation. It was not a safety risk, those principles were well

known and established. But rather, it was a risk of missing production timeline

requirements and having to start all over again, thus missing the market opportunity. In addition, the production facility was to be “borrowed” from a very important established product which permitted only a narrow window of operation for the new product before returning the production facility to the established one.

The group had less than a year to get the job done. They worked incredible hours, empowered themselves, worked without a cookbook of instructions – and

succeeded. The result was a first-quality product in less than a year from start to finish with lower capital, lower expense, and lower waste generation than targeted.

As the team unfolded their story in their presentation to me, I immediately felt, in a vicarious way, the thrill they knew from tackling an “impossible task” and doing it. I suspect there will be a reunion one day to relive the project.

At the end of the presentation, I asked, “And then what happened?”

“Well, we went back to our regular jobs,” the project manager said.

“Wasn’t there anything else you could tackle needing the same kind of devotion,” I asked, “maybe not as big, but worthy just the same?” His answer implied that no one had thought about trying to replicate the crisis in their regular work.

### “Relevant Ad Hockery”

I believe that *any* assignment can be brought to the performance level of crisis if the crisis characteristics are put into practice – again,

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*I believe that **any** assignment can be brought to the performance level of crisis if the crisis characteristics are*

not with twelve- and sixteen-hour days, perhaps, but with the thrill of *regularly* accomplishing the impossible. For example, if a financial target is to meet a particular return on capital or an economic value-added goal, the required group actions can be aligned using the crisis approach. For a perhaps more benign term than crisis for these rapidly changing roles, let's call it "Relevant Ad Hockery." Dozens of teams can be set up, the collection of whose goals meet the overall goal – but, of course, that's pretty standard stuff. What they really need is all the other crisis principles to make the "Ad Hockery" relevant and effective.

This is especially true in cases where the *team results* will be the critical factor in meeting the goal – not just market timing, or good strategy, or just plain luck. Indeed, the team result rather than strategy usually *is* the difference. Peter Drucker once reminded us that "the strategy is nothing until it *degenerates* into work" – work by people and teams of people. A boss early in my career said to me, "Mahoney, there are only two things you have available to get results – people and money. Most everyone's got money, so don't squander the people on a fool's errand."

Good advice then – and now!

The lessons of "crisis" management or "people power" or even "Relevant Ad Hockery," then are contained in this summary of 1990s-style Management 101:

Set a mission that is:

- clear
- deemed worthy
- bound by a deadline

Engage participants who:

- work as cohesive, small teams
- have the authority to act
- know the consequences
- know their own role

## Conclusion

I've seen wonderful things happen with these principles – for everyone involved. They're simple to grasp – and simple is always better than complicated. But "simple" doesn't necessarily mean "easy." Otherwise, there would be only first place, never second – only winners, never losers. And those two outcomes are worlds apart for the participants.

I like the words of a football coach who was asked about these alternatives: "I've tried winning and I've tried losing, and winning is better!"

An employee of ours once put it very directly. She said to me, "Working on this team and getting done what seemed impossible when we started made me feel good about myself, good about my company – good about *everything*." 

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