

# Why Managers Don't Manage

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## (Part 1): Prioritizing Non-Urgent Responsibilities

Most of us have witnessed the first-time manager nosedive – a talented, high-performing employee is promoted to a leadership position. They're still great at the technical aspects of their job. But managing a team? It's a constant struggle, and the management responsibilities of the role either don't get completed or aren't done effectively.

Unfortunately, many of the managers having regular difficulties simply conclude that they aren't "cut out" for a leadership role. With a history of failing managers, the organization decides that next time they're only promoting the people who are "suited" for these kinds of responsibilities. But in practice, little changes with future iterations.

Why do we see this narrative playing out over and over again? Why are so many teams and organizations in this cycle? To simplify a complex issue, I see two primary reasons:

1. **Management skills are not yet engrained (lack of framework + practice)**
2. **Not enough time is taken to execute the management responsibilities**

The first reason is something I'm very passionate about and will be discussing more in the future. But, for now, let's focus on the second reason – that managers are not *actually doing* what they know needs to get done.

Is this because these managers are lazy or don't care? In some case perhaps, but I think it has more to do with a common mental obstacle of prioritization...

*Managers are not taking the time to actually perform what they know needs to get done.*

Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," Covey puts workplace tasks and responsibilities into four categories:

- I. Important + Urgent
- II. Important + Not Urgent
- III. Not Important + Urgent
- IV. Not Important + Not Urgent

	urgent	not urgent
Important	<b>Category I</b> • Serious conflicts, complaints, issues, etc.	<b>Category II</b> • Coaching, feedback, delegating, goal-setting
Not Important	<b>Category III</b> • Low priority items like non-urgent emails	<b>Category IV</b> ("Noise" - avoid this generally)

Most managers spend a ton of time in Category I and Category III – they’re constantly “putting out fires.” And it might *feel* to them like they’re managing their team well. After all, they’re addressing issues and complaints with their team as they come up, both serious issues (urgent + important) and issues that may only be *perceived* as serious (urgent + not important).

The problem is, most of the responsibilities of managing a team effectively actually fall into Category II (**Important and Not Urgent**). Coaching, giving feedback, delegating, setting goals, involving and listening to your team and understanding needs are all critically important, but are usually not tasks that *need to get done right now*.

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So, what happens? Those items that have real (or perceived) urgency are constantly getting pushed to the top of the “to do” list. And the important but not urgent responsibilities fail to be prioritized and often don’t get done. Since these critical elements of good management aren’t acted on properly, more Category I issues arise – conflicts, complaints, team member departures, etc.; the situations that could often be avoided if only more care was taken to think long-term and execute purposefully.

Managers should be spending about 80% of their time in Category II. But many spend less than 20% of their time there. Making this adjustment takes a serious mindset shift, and usually does not happen overnight. You have to know and believe that being a good manager is an *investment* – and see the Category II activities as ones that will pay dividends in the

future. You should view your team as an interconnected unit, one that requires regular coaching, feedback, communication, guidance, and support to operate properly.

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Here are some first steps to ensure your important but not urgent management responsibilities get accomplished:

- Block off a ***recurring weekly time in your calendar*** for Category II activities.
- Have a ***physical checklist*** of what you need to do on a weekly basis that involves properly managing your team. What these tasks are specifically will likely change week-to-week, but the important thing is that you're conscious of these tasks and you're prioritizing time to get them done.
- List and regularly ***review the main monthly or quarterly objectives*** of each member of your team so they're top-of-mind. If people don't have these, it's your responsibility to help set them!
- Set a goal to ***delegate at least one responsibility or task to someone on your team each quarter***. (Here's a simple process to determine what and to whom to delegate.) Delegating frees up more time for your Category II activities and is a great way to help your team grow and get more done.

Strategic prioritization is one key to becoming a great manager. As with most shifts in approach and mindset, there's a learning curve. But it's a simple habit that can truly set you apart as a manager and foster growth for both you and your team.

## (Part 2): Deep Practice

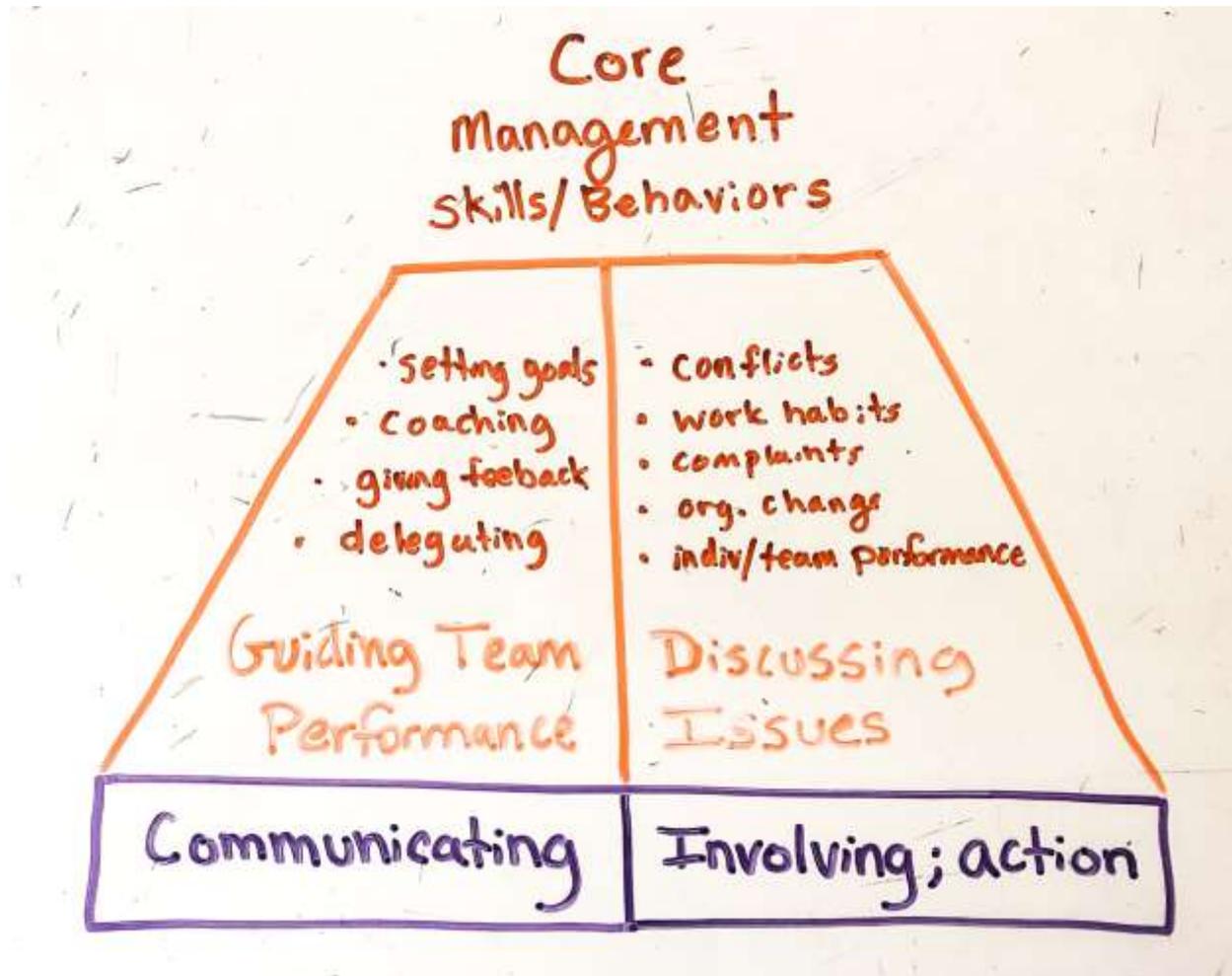
In [part one](#) of this series, we started to explore why many managers don't fully execute their management responsibilities. One reason is that managers commonly spend very little time on their important but not urgent activities. Effective managers must overcome the tendency to only work on urgent tasks and instead commit to consistently making long-term investments in their team.

Here in part two, we'll look at another main reason managers tend to struggle with their responsibilities – they don't have the needed skills.

### Fundamental Skills for Managers

The skills required to be a successful manager are pretty simple and intuitive. While there's some level of variance with the specifics, if we're focusing on *management* ([versus leadership](#)) skills, it roughly breaks down to:

- **Communicating** openly, consistently and clearly to your team
- **Involving** your team; observing their needs and taking appropriate action
- Managing and **guiding your team's performance** (setting goals, coaching, giving feedback, and delegating responsibilities)
- Effectively **navigating and discussing issues** as they arise (organizational change, conflicts, work habits, complaints, team and individual performance).



79% of organizations offer *some form* of manager training. Yet 45% of HR and L&D leaders admit that their organization [struggles to develop effective managers](#). And [studies](#) have found that only 18% of managers *actually possess* the skillsets needed for their job.

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So where's the disconnect? A big part of the issue is how these managers are learning new skills...

## Exposure to Information vs. Changing Behavior

A lot of times, I find organizations provide their managers with some basic information (in the form of a succinct online course or 1-day seminar) and expect a magical transformation to occur. L&D teams frequently face an uphill battle with small budgets, limited resources and unrealistic expectations. *(Side note: I have some tips for how to get good results with a limited L&D budget – more on this later.)*

The reality is that manager development silver bullets do not exist. Managers need continual practice within a good framework to get results.

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I'd argue that practice plays *the* most critical role in learning outcomes. Both the quantity and the quality of the practice matters. This is something I think a lot of folks overlook (or at least downplay).

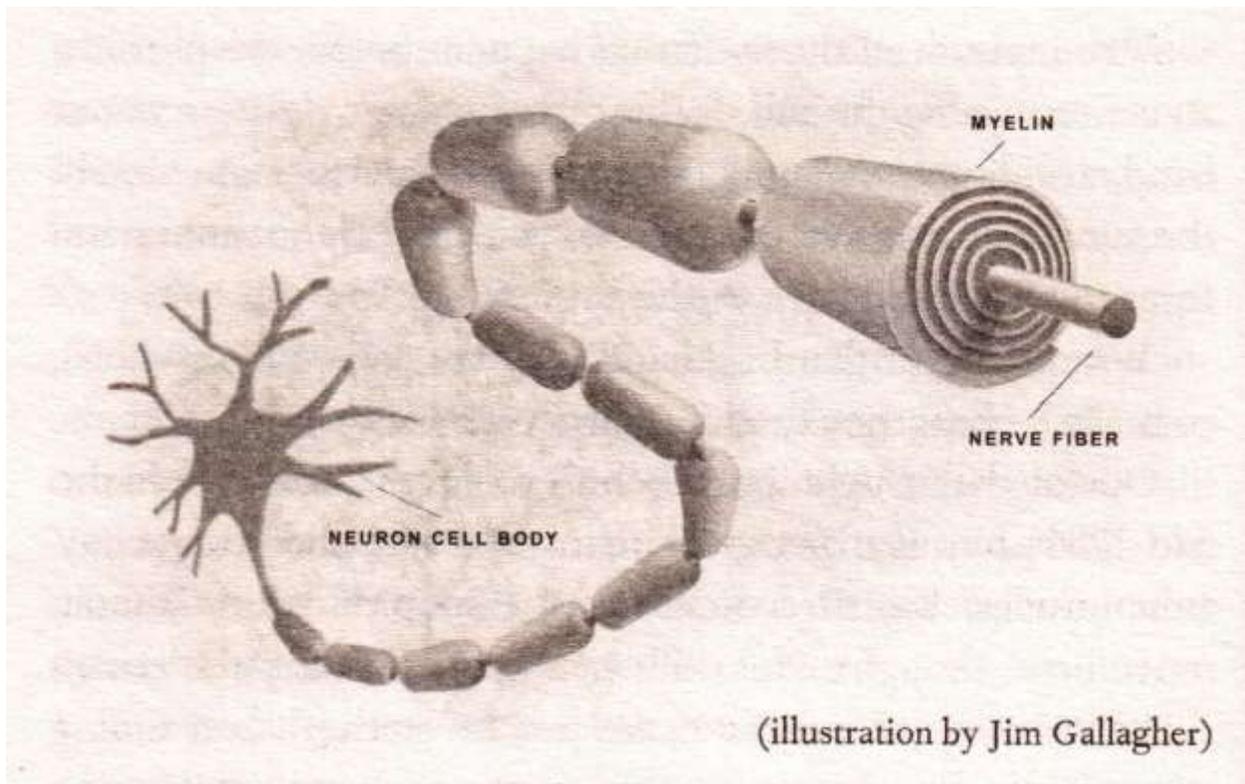
To better understand why practice matters and what happens when we practice, let's briefly put our science hats on and take a trip inside the human brain...

### Neurons, Myelin and the Brain Science of Practice

At least for non-scientific people (like myself!), there's a tendency to think of improving skills as an abstract and intangible occurrence – it just kind of happens.

But building skill is actually a defined process occurring in our body, just like building muscle. As we continue to better understand the human brain, we form a clearer picture of specifically what happens when we grow our skills.

In [Daniel Coyle's book](#), *The Talent Code* (I highly recommend it), Coyle explains that, "Every human movement, thought or feeling is a precisely timed electric signal traveling through a chain of neurons – a circuit of nerve fibers. Myelin is the insulation that wraps these nerve fibers and increases signal strength, speed and accuracy. The more we fire a particular circuit, the more myelin optimizes that circuit, and the stronger, faster, and more fluent our movements and thoughts become."



Ever heard the phrase “practice makes perfect?” Well, the neuroscience version of that saying would go something like, “Practice makes myelin, and myelin makes perfect.” This process of firing and strengthening nerve fibers adds a physiological explanation to why we *need* practice and experience to be able to comfortably do anything.

Sure, managers are likely *aware* that they should be delegating or giving feedback to their team. They may have even taken a course on the subject. But until those managers continually practice those conversations (ideally using a proven framework) and get real experience, these specific management activities remain a concept, not a skill.

### Deep Practice Makes Permanent

Neuroscience has also discovered that not all practice is the same. In other words, all else being equal except the quality of practice, very different outcomes can occur.

That’s why it’s crucial not just to practice, but to practice *in the right way*.

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The most beneficial method to build myelin and develop skill is what Coyle calls “deep practice.” Here are the basic steps of deep practice:

- 1) Break the skill into small steps
- 2) Practice each individual step methodically
- 3) Tie all the steps together and work through the full process
- 4) Add complexity to your practice and push the boundary of your skill level
- 5) Repeat this process over and over again



Structured proven frameworks and experienced coaches can guide learners on their journeys. To optimize deep practice, learners should be getting immediate feedback when anything is “off” and then work to correct that action. Over time, learners should be able to feel themselves when something is “off” and then self-correct.

In the context of developing better managers, deep practice means breaking down their management responsibilities into basic steps. For example, having a conversation to delegate a task has 5 essential steps.

Managers practice within this framework and receive immediate feedback. They continue to practice over time, adding complexity to the situations. The managers start using the skills on the job (ideally with additional aids to guide them) and reflect on how they did.

Eventually, these managers develop a comfort level and confidence in having these conversations. While there's always room to improve, the first milestone is engraining those core skillsets critical to being successful as a manager.

## **Takeaways for Learning and Development**

If you've already recognized that your managers need to build their management skills for their teams, their departments, and the organization as a whole to be successful – kudos – you're ahead of the game.

The next step is to determine how to provide your managers with this critical skill-building and practice. There are a lot of options out there. The best solution depends on your organization, its managers, the workplace and other factors.

But before installing a solution, please make sure that, at a minimum, it has these two core components:

1. It's actually covering *management* skills (providing a good framework for how to handle the day-to-day responsibilities of managers – communicating, giving feedback, setting goals, delegating, handling issues, change, etc.)
2. It enables your managers to have relevant deep practice for each given topic and provides tools and opportunities to continue practicing over time.