First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals

REVIEWED BY PAUL GLEN CMC

Most professionals start their careers in the same way. Training in a field of specialty is usually followed by a stint as an intern or junior employee of an organization that allows them to build their technical skills. After that, career paths diverge. Some go into private practice, some go to work for clients, others perpetually hone their technical skills as employees, and some get "promoted" to lead a group of professionals.

The first experience of leading a group can be very disorienting and difficult. Few of us who have had that opportunity have been adequately prepared for the challenge. Even those with extensive business and management training can find leading such groups shockingly difficult. Little about the experience of being a professional prepares us for managing professionals.

But far from being a rare problem for a few people, this may be one of the most important challenges we or our clients will face in the future. In *California Management Review* (Vol. 41, No. 2, Winter 1999), Peter Drucker observed:

> The most important, and indeed the truly unique, contribution of management in the 20th century was the fifty-fold increase in the productivity of the *manual worker* in manufacturing. The most important contribution that management needs to make in the 21st century is to similarly increase the productivity of *knowledge work* and *knowledge workers.*
>
> Knowledge workers are rapidly becoming the largest single group in the workforce of every developed country. They may already compose two-fifths of the U.S. workforce—and a still smaller but rapidly growing proportion of the workforce of all other developed countries. It is on their productivity, above all, that the future prosperity—and indeed the future survival—of the developed economies will increasingly depend.

Patrick J. McKenna and David H. Maister, consultants who specialize in the management of professional service firms, have written a new book that addresses this critical and difficult topic. McKenna is the coauthor of two previous books, *Beyond Knowing* and *Herding Cats.* Maister, who was among the first to bring academic focus to the study of professional services, is the author of three previous books, *Managing the Professional Service Firm, True Professionalism,* and *Practice What You Preach,* and the coauthor of *The Trusted Advisor.*

In four parts comprised of 23 short chapters, *First Among Equals* touches on a wide array of topics that reflect the complexity of managing professionals. Part 1, "Getting Ready," deals with the challenges of adopting the role of manager. This part alone is worth the price of the book. One of the greatest challenges of leading professionals is getting started; that is, establishing the manager's tasks, responsibilities, and relationships. The book appropriately recognizes that the choices are different for each professional group. The section's four chapters, "Clarify Your Role," "Confirm Your Mandate," "Build Relationships—One at a Time," and "Dare to Be Inspiring," offer a compelling approach to establishing leadership. The insights and checklists in this section reflect the authors' deep understanding of the professional's working environment.

For a manager of professionals, positional authority offers relatively little power, which is a considerable divergence from the traditional hierarchical

practice. Without explicitly exploring the nature of power, the book acknowledges this dynamic through its selection of topics.

The 14 chapters in Parts 2 and 3, "Coaching the Individual," and "Coaching the Team," explain how to build personal relationships with professionals so that managers can influence, cajole, energize, and evaluate those over whom they have little power. These chapters offer good advice and insights, most of which would be valuable for managers of all types. The chapters on how to handle prima donnas is especially relevant, since most professional groups both suffer with and extol the value of a few particularly talented performers who resist being team players. The main questions the authors address in this section are:

- How do you get people to accept your guidance?
- Do people think you are a good listener?
- How can you understand and respond to people's differences?
- How can you be useful to those who need assistance?
- How do you deal with difficult people?
- How do you get people to buy into the need for change?
- Does your group have specific, clearly, articulated, shared objectives?
- What do members of your group owe each other?
- What gets group members to trust each other?
- Has your group selected an exciting challenge?
- What are good meeting disciplines?
- How do you acknowledge accomplishments?
- What do you do when team members fall out?

- How do you respond to dramatic events?

The five chapters in Part 4, "Building for the Future," focuses on nurturing junior professionals, integrating new people, managing the size of the group, measuring results, and why we should bother to worry about all this.

Although the book covers a broad range of topics, it is very readable. In fact, the book is organized to be a skimmer's dream. Key points are highlighted within the text, inviting us to skip along grabbing the most valuable nuggets of insight. Quotes from the many established managers interviewed for the book are set off, allowing us to skip over the stories or read them as we choose. Lists of advice and questions are everywhere, inviting us to pull out the most useful ones to pin up over our desks.

While these lists are very useful and comprehensive, they can also be a bit overwhelming. By the time readers reach the end of this book, they are likely to have two distinct reactions: first, "I'm really glad that someone has finally put all of this good advice in one place"; second, "I'm really intimidated. This job is very complex and hard to do."

Of course it's hard. But it is doable. At the end of the final chapter, the authors say we can handle the job by asking 10 key questions each week:

- Is anyone not complying with our group standards?
- Is anyone struggling?
- Who needs help, even if they're not struggling?
- Who needs energizing?
- Who needs recognition or appreciation?
- Is there anyone I haven't had coffee or lunch with (or otherwise paid personal attention to) in a while?

- Is anyone doing things that are disrupting the group?
- Who do I have the least solid relationship with?
- Are the juniors being looked after?
- Are there any conflicts going on between group members?

For those who have the responsibility or aspiration to manage professionals, this book offers a jump-start. Even for those with experience, it's not hard to find solid suggestions to improve performance. And for solo practitioners, the ideas in this book should be handy in client assignments where professionals are involved.

Paul Glen CMC (pglen@C2-Consulting.com) is the author of Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology *(Jossey–Bass Pfeiffer, 2002; www.leadinggeeks.com). He is a principal in C2 Consulting, Marina del Rey, California, where he consults, writes, and speaks on building effective technology organizations.*