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Meet the MasterMinds: David H. Maister on Leading Professionals

Widely acknowledged as a leading authority on the management of professional service firms, David Maister has taught and written extensively on the subject. His books include *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, *True Professionalism*, *The Trusted Advisor*, *Practice What You Preach* and *First Among Equals*. He holds degrees from the University of Birmingham, the London School of Economics and the Harvard Business School. He has taught at the University of British Columbia and at Harvard.

Maister talked to MCNews about *First Among Equals*, which provides concrete advice for leaders in professional services as well as managers of talented knowledge workers anywhere.

MCNews: What motivated you to write *First Among Equals*?

Maister: The origin was really my previous book, *Practice What You Preach*, which was a statistical study of 139 professional firms that correlated employee attitudes with financial results. One of the powerful lessons that came out of that study was that financial success is driven not by strategy, processes or systems, but by the character and ability of the individual manager to energize and excite people. When I wrote that conclusion in the book, many of my clients said, if that's true, where do we go to learn how to do that?

Twenty years ago when I was first learning how to be a consultant, I found that nothing in my business education had prepared me for the real world of managing people. Managing is in no sense about intellect, rationality or logic; it is about the ability to influence the emotions of other human beings.

I had to learn emotional, interpersonal and social skills from ground zero, especially the difference between being right and being helpful. My friend and co-author of *First Among Equals*, Patrick McKenna, was also interested in this subject, so we decided to write a book about playing a managerial role in a professional environment.

MCNews: What's the significance of the book's title?

Maister: The significance is that if you want professional people to listen to you, you must focus on them not on you. My first experience of this was when I was a Professor at the Harvard Business School and I was asked to run a teaching group, meaning a group of six or seven other faculty members, all of whom were teaching the same course. To seem in charge, I made the mistake of acting as if I was one level above my colleagues. The mere suggestion of that undercut my ability to influence them because they resented me trying to lord it over them. I wasn't really trying to do that, but the mere hint of it gets people's backs up.

People with lots of achievements will only accept guidance from someone if they believe that person is trying to help them. On the other hand, if I believe that you are **not** here to help me but to make yourself look good, meet the project budget or meet departmental numbers, I may be forced to listen to you but I am not going to engage.

This is not a moral or philosophical point. The title of the book is about the approach you take to have influence, which is this: behave as if you are one of us and that you are trying to help us, and we will listen to you. If you act as if you are my boss, I will go into compliance mode until the headhunter returns my phone call, but I am not going to let you influence me.

MCNews: How would you characterize the state of team management, project management, and group leadership in the consulting industry today?

Maister: Well, I don't pretend to know the entire industry or have the knowledge from which to generalize, but I do think it's on the weaker side, rather than the stronger side. More to the point, I have observed four flaws with managerial roles in consulting.

The first is that, whether it is project management, practice management or office management, the role of the manager is ambiguous; in many firms, the cold job description does not capture what the job is. Patrick and I feel strongly that a manager is not an overseer or a policeman. **The real role of a manager is to help other people become successful**, to spark superior performance through coaching.

A good coach is simultaneously demanding (come on you can do it) and supportive (I will help you get there). Often, when consultants become managers, the notion that their job is to help gets left out. They focus on being in charge of monitoring and keeping projects on track, which are vital, of course. But that approach, by itself, is an incomplete and therefore flawed definition of the role.

The second problem is the criteria used by most consulting firms to select people for management roles. The central selection criterion should be the consultant's interpersonal, emotional and social skills. We should be asking questions like: can this person get people excited about the work? Can he help people to stretch? And, can she inspire great performance? Instead, most consulting firms promote their best business generators, or their technical or financial experts. I am not putting down those three skills, which are very important. But none of them is a qualification for performing the role of a manager.

After role definition and selection criteria, the third flaw is, of course, lack of training. Very few consulting firms provide substantive training on how to be a manager. You just get dropped into it, which wouldn't be so bad if we were all naturals at managing others.

The fourth problem is how reward systems tend to work inside consulting firms. If the job of a group leader is to make the group successful, it seems only logical to reward that manager on how well the group has done.

MCNews: But is it your experience that most firms evaluate managers on their individual performance instead?

Maister: Or on the perception of the manager's performance. Many consulting firms today continue to judge managers on their personal numbers, which of course means that managers see generating those numbers as job one, and management as maybe job two, but more likely as an irritating distraction from job one. This sub-optimizes the performance of the team.

I want to stress that none of this is an anti-money argument. The way to run your operation to make the most money is to give people time to manage and hold them accountable for being good managers.

MCNews: Aren't some of these skills the same ones we use to manage client relationships?

Maister: Yes. I'm only half joking when I say that, when I thought about writing this book, I was tempted to just take the title of my previous book, *The Trusted Advisor*, and rename it the Trusted Manager. The activities, skills and the tactics of a trusted advisor and trusted manager are similar in many respects.

It is an interesting paradox that many consultants have these skills, and they do use them when dealing with clients. It's just when they come back to the office and manage their colleagues that they tend not use the same skills. Again, it sounds like a moral point, but it's not. I like to call it the rule of human technology: if you want other people to give you what you want, first give them what they want.

The message is not about being nice to people because you are Mother Teresa; it's about how best to run an organization filled with feisty professionals. What works best is to treat them with the same thoughtfulness that you would a feisty client.

MCNews: Let's talk about managing consulting teams that are made up of both clients and consultants. Do these teams have a different dynamic, and how can a team leader draw the best from both groups to get the project done?

Maister: One of the ideas Patrick and I tried to stress in the book is that, before you can try to manage a team as a team, you must form a one-on-one relationship with each team member. A common mistake is to try to do your managing at team meetings. It's hard enough to influence one person, let alone influence ten of them simultaneously.

So, you must do your homework and visit each team member, both on the client side and on the consulting side. I don't mean get personal; rather, I mean to talk to the team members about how they see the objectives of the project, what role they would like to play and how they like to work. If you do that, then when you do go to team meetings, you are much better able to manage the group because you understand the dynamics and the politics.

You can also be more responsive. For example, instead of arbitrarily assigning tasks, you can turn to Mary and say, I believe this is something you find of special interest, is that right? Then, people see you as the leader trying to put the parts of the project where they best fit.

Another important point is the need to establish at the outset an explicit agreement on the rules by which the team will function. One of the traps of consulting life is that there is always time pressure; as soon as the project is launched there is this terrible trap, which is the temptation to get started immediately.

MCNews: And just go with an implied set of rules?

Maister: Right. The rules are implied if you assume everybody knows what they are. For example, who is going to communicate with whom, and what do you have a right to expect from each other? To whom should you go if there is a problem? Should you talk directly to the person who is bugging you, or should you go to the team leader?

When creating your team's membership rules, ask the team to set its own rules. They will set tougher rules for themselves than you would set. Then, when you have to deal with non-compliance, instead of being Attila the Hun, you are just the conscience or coach saying, hey,

there seems to be a problem with this rule we agreed to, how can I help? You have more influence if you are not seen as the arbitrary enforcer of your own rules, but as the person whose role it is to enforce the team's rules.

MCNews: There are some good points about team and individual recognition in the book. What advice do you have on the dos and don'ts of public recognition in a team setting?

Maister: Pete Friedes, of Hewitt Associates, has made the excellent point that you want to be careful with individual recognition because you can annoy others who feel they contributed as much or more. My own view is that you should keep public recognition fairly modest in language and style. You could say, for example, I just want to thank Fred for pulling an all-nighter. By being modest in time and in tone, you don't annoy too many people. You express appreciation more in a one-on-one meeting with Fred, which I believe has a lot more impact.

Appreciation needs to be commensurate and proportionate. You don't want to overdo it because it will come back to haunt you; everyone will expect it. Acknowledge achievement, express appreciation and, if you want to do more, do it privately.

MCNews: If a consultant were going to take over a team today, what advice would you give her or him?

Maister: We already talked about visiting each of the individual team members. I would add something not yet mentioned, which is to ask each individual, what do you want from me as your group leader? How can I help you most?

The other advice I would give is that you need to be clear on your own non-negotiable minimum standards of behavior. If there are certain things that you think we have a right to expect from each other, then I think you've got to share your philosophy right up front. It's not that you are trying to set all of the rules for the team; what I am saying is that, if you are seen as a leader who has no values of his own, then I don't think you can lead very well.

And, of course, the other rule is, don't fake it; they will see that in a minute.

MCNews: What are you reading these days?

Maister: Actually, I am re-reading some old stuff. There is a new edition of the *Leadership Challenge*, by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, which is superb. The new edition has more recent anecdotes and is worth a look. I wrote an introduction for Pete Friedes' new book, *The 2R Manager*, and I've been re-reading that.

MCNews: Do you have a book in progress?

Maister: I am still trying to decide if I will launch into another one in the next few months. I am seriously thinking of writing a sort of avuncular book for the young professional about the keys to succeeding in professional life. I would like to catch people when they first enter into consulting or other professional work and say, for what it's worth, here is what I have learned about what it really takes to succeed and the attitudes and skills that you really need.

MCNews: Thanks for your time today.

Find out more about David Maister, his books, seminars and consulting services at <http://www.davidmaister.com>.