

The Great Debate: Process or Outcome?

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ADVANCE
Columnist

What do managers do? We get things done by working with others. If we can do what needs to be done ourselves, we don't need managers. We can just be workers. Because we need to work with and through others, every good manager needs to consider what are the best methods to accomplish our task of facilitating the work that our colleagues actually perform.

Typically, the actions of managers relate to the following functions:

- Selecting
- Structuring
- Supporting
- Delegating
- Motivating
- Correcting
- Guiding

Each of these seven topics could present as fodder for a full article. For now, let's assume that this is what we, as managers, do.

Focusing Energies

All resources in health care today are limited in their availability, including the energy and attention of managers and staff. As managers, we need to answer a fundamental question: Where do we best focus our energies to maximize our chances of success?

I believe we have two choices. The first is that we could focus on the process or actions that we take in each of the seven areas listed above. Taking this approach would encourage us to be sure that we were experts in each of those seven areas. The stronger our skills in each, the better and more successful managers we would be.

Simple, straight forward? Yes. Accurate? Maybe. Complete? Definitely not.

The second choice we have is to focus on the outcome of our actions. Taking this approach would encourage us to just get the job done in a way that produces the best result—whatever and however that may be. Although each of the seven actions listed above may be important, they would be seen as important only to the degree that they contribute to the results we want.

The essence of this debate is whether we focus on management process or outcome. The former suggests that there is more value to be gained in performing tasks correctly. The latter suggests the answer is to be sure to do the right tasks even if not done as well as possible.

This is more than just a discussion of "ends vs. means." We address this in our daily interactions with our staff. We confront it when we design quality assessment and improvement programs, staff performance improvement programs and organizational restructuring activities.

Developing Skills

Although the answer to the fundamental question of process or outcome is not always as clear as we may want it to be, there are sev-

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eral things that we do know. Clearly, poor process is most likely to lead to poor outcomes. Performing the wrong tasks to perfection will also lead to poor outcomes. Management is not figure skating, gymnastics or platform diving—there are no style points for managers. However, it is necessary to develop significant skills in the basics of management as listed in the seven actions above.

Think of those actions and your skill and ability to perform them as your tool box. The better your tools, the more likely you can accomplish your task well.

Even the best tools will not yield a suitable outcome if the design of the task or the task itself is fundamentally flawed. This is where managerial judgment comes into play. Some may call it "wisdom." I prefer to call it success planning. This is the process of deciding (individually or collectively)

what is likely to lead to the desired outcome. Once that is established, we then proceed with those actions that, if skillfully applied, will lead us to that desired outcome.

A manager's job is to get things done. Managerial productivity is actually getting stuff accomplished. Success planning is the process of putting your skills and energies to work to get the right stuff done—many would consider that a very workable defin-

ition of success. ■

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