

Just Like Driving a Car

It has been said that managing a team can be just like driving a car. On a winding road. Through the woods. With no brakes. On a heavily overcast night. In the fog. With no headlights at all. And the car keeps going faster and faster. It can be at times, a bit challenging; and with some luck, managing your team won't be that intimidating. But it can be challenging. Common sense might tell you that if you could remember what it was like when you learnt how to drive to begin with, that might be helpful.

I remember when I learnt how to drive. It was on a four-speed, manual transmission car that had a very light clutch. My father taught me how to drive and whilst having parents help you learn can be both good news and bad news; in my case, it was quite the experience. Before going out onto some deserted road where I could do little damage to his car, he would recite to me the entire process of shifting. At the same time you begin to accelerate gently, you ease out the clutch slowly. When the clutch is out, you take your foot off of it and accelerate a bit more until the engine speed was in the shifting range to change gears. Depress the clutch and begin to move the shift lever to the next gear position. Slowly release the clutch pedal whilst depressing the accelerator. When the clutch pedal was completely out...well, the repetition of this process this went on for all four gears, over and over again.

The slowing down process almost worked the same way, with minor adjustments. To go from fourth gear to third gear, you would first depress the clutch, and then just before moving the shift lever into the third gear position, you would increase the engine rev's a bit to have all the non-synchronous gears "line up" so there would not be any sound of gears colliding. Again from third gear to second, and second gear to first gear. And just about the time I had this shifting up and shifting down process burnt into my brain and filed under "proper gear shifting procedures," he then began to give me a proper bollocking when the shifting action from gear to gear felt "lumpy" to him. "No, you need to work your left-foot on the clutch, your right-foot on the accelerator, and your hand on the gear lever

together so you won't even feel the gears changing." It took a while to get this process done in an acceptable manner for sure. I practised until driving, and more importantly, doing all the gear shifting smoothly, became second nature. I no longer needed to think about all the things I needed to do each time I wanted to shift up or shift down. Once I had actually learnt how, shifting the gears became instinctive.

Managing a team so it will be able to deliver on the expectations of performance is a process that is much the same. You have to have a team that is able to work together for a common goal. You have to have a team that is willing to accept the challenges that they face. You need to have a team that has the right sets of skills that can be applied to those challenges. And if anyone reading this feels that one or more of these areas are a bit lacking, who do you suppose is the person whose job it is to make things better? Of course, it is you. You – the manager of the team – are the person whose principal job is to create an environment in which your team can succeed. You are the person who needs to demonstrate the behaviours that you want to have your team members exhibit. You are the person who needs to ensure that the team has the resources and skills it will take to deliver the performance that is expected of them. You are the person that needs to help them understand the importance of the impact of cause and effect on their efforts. And it is you who are the person that needs to give them the confidence that they can do what they need to do.

And here is the thing. If you are able to create this kind of positive, nourishing, rewarding experience for your team, then your team will deliver. Creating this type of team environment will mean you won't need to second-guess or micro-management team member's actions. They will do the right things, at the right times, and for the right reasons. This is good for the team, good for the company, and good for your customers...and well, pretty good for you too.

James B. Rieley advises senior leadership teams from all sectors of business and industry, higher education, and government, and has written extensively on the subject of improving organisational performance through leadership.

Just Like Driving a Car: Questions to Consider

1. Do you remember what it was like when you learnt a new skill, of any type?
2. Why did you want to learn that skill?
3. What did you think would be different after you were able to learn it?
4. What do you think could have been done to make the learning process easier?
5. Do you remember what you had to do more of or less of to learn the skill?
6. What did you have to unlearn in order to learn a new skill?

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Global Leadership Advisory Services +44 (0)208 638 6843 leadershiplessons@rieley.com
www.rieley.com

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