

## Where are the managers?

*Tony Manning*

**While staying at an exclusive Cape hotel recently, my wife and I never saw a manager. But even in this age of empowerment and workplace democracy, someone has to take charge or things will go wrong ... go wrong ... go wrong....**

And did they go wrong!

The place was fabulous, the facilities excellent and the staff charming. But service levels ranged from 10/10 to utterly pathetic – even though there were hardly any other guests.

As is usual, the receptionist took an imprint of my credit card when we checked in. But less than an hour later I got a call from the credit card company querying a whacking bill from the hotel. I've never had that happen before, although I've stayed in many hotels around the world over the past 30 years. The lame excuse I got from the receptionist – that it “didn't really mean anything” but was “just policy” – was as irritating as the act itself.

I ordered a beer at the pool late that afternoon, and signed a bill for R18. At that price, you'd have thought the waiter would be back every five minutes, especially since I was the only customer around. But he stayed away and I never was able to get a second drink.

Then there was the TV problem. Although CNN was listed as being available in our room, it was nowhere to be found. The nice woman on the front desk said there was a DSTV fault in the area, but then said she'd send a technician to our room. I asked what he might do, given that DSTV's transmission wasn't working, so she said he'd check the hotel's central controls instead. Five minutes later, we had CNN. But when I switched on again early the next morning, it was gone.

Later that day, in another place just down the road, we had no difficulty tuning in. So when I got home, I called Multichoice, and asked about the break in service. Surprise, surprise: they didn't know what I was talking about. So what was up? Could it be the hotel hadn't paid their Multichoice subscription?

Every business has hassles. But what really rankled here was that every complaint was met by a barrage of conflicting excuses. All the problems were someone else's doing. And not once did anyone resembling a manager appear to sort things out.

This experience was a personal bummer, but it highlights a very serious business problem. A cause of under-performance in more companies than you can imagine.

Organizations do not run themselves. The idea of self-managed work teams is a sexy one, but has serious limitations. Under some circumstances, some teams can function pretty well some of the time. But they're the exception, not the rule – and they have not caught on for good reason.

Life is messy. There's always a lot going on, and lots more new stuff flying in through the window. So someone has to make sense of it all. Someone has to make choices, decide priorities, inspire action, raise standards and so on. Without a firm hand on the tiller, things quickly come unglued.

Absentee managers ask for trouble. They either assume people will work out for themselves what to do, or they issue a few orders and hope they'll be followed. There's high risk in both courses.

Managers need to walk a fine line between doing work their people are paid for and creating conditions in which it will be done. They have to be both "hands off" and hands on". They have to be evident in order to make a difference. Their presence really matters.

Managers who won't make sales calls, attend to customer queries and fix problems shortchange themselves, their people and their customers. They miss the chance to set an example and they lose out on learning.

Every executive would do well to think about how he or she gets results, and to be more "in your face" more of the time. They should call on a specified number of customers each week, work in service areas and personally follow up on complaints. Doing this would send a powerful signal to both staff and customers and would ensure that the managers kept their fingers on the pulse of profit.

***Tony Manning is a strategist and author. His latest book is Tony Manning's Management Toolkit. He can be contacted at [strategist@tonymanning.com](mailto:strategist@tonymanning.com).***