

Manager: Superhero or Pilot? Stephen Carver

Steve Macaulay Today we are going to look at management styles and the effect that has on performance. I am going to start off by asking a question: are you a superhero or a pilot?

To explore these two issues in more detail and explain them is Stephen Carver. Now, let's start off with pilot; I expect most managers think of themselves as cool, calm pilots, looking at all the instruments, taking in all the data – keeping a cool head. Is that the way you see it?

Stephen Carver No in my experience most managers unfortunately aren't. They like to wear the hat, they like to call themselves a pilot – preferably a captain of course – but no, actually most of them are crisis managers because they enjoy it.

Steve Macaulay So that is the superhero?

Stephen Carver It is indeed; running round with the red cape, in this case a couple of Blackberries, running for taxis, running off to Heathrow; that is what they enjoy, it is the adrenaline buzz.

Steve Macaulay But isn't there a place for the superhero?

Stephen Carver There is, but superheroes should come after the pilot, not the superhero before the pilot. Let me explain.

Last time you flew you got into a thin metal tube, it has no crash resistance, they filled it up full of fuel, they took it down to the runway, they accelerated you up to take off speed. This lunatic at the front turned you into a flying bomb, took it up to 10,000 metres at 750 miles an hour. What was his name? Did you say thank you? The answer is no I didn't know his name and no I didn't say thank you, he is only doing his job. But he made something really quite dangerous and exciting really quite boring because he planned.

Good managers plan before they get themselves up to 10,000 feet; bad managers just take off and then think where are we going? How am I going to get down? And then they turn into so-called superheroes.

Steve Macaulay So how come our heart rules our head then and we end up as being more like superheroes than pilots?

Stephen Carver I think Sir John Harvey Jones summed it up years ago, which was people don't like to plan, planning is unnatural – it is far more fun just to do and the nice thing about just doing, in other words action,

superman, is that failure comes as a complete surprise. And, if I may say so, also gives you the opportunity to be even more superhero; whereas if you have planned the failure might be preceded by, shall we say, despair and worry – I call it planning.

Steve Macaulay So let's look at this issue of planning. How do you actually get to be the good planned manager – the pilot – rather than stick in much preferred mode – superhero?

Stephen Carver OK, the first thing you have to do is get control of your time. It sounds really quite inane, but most managers I have come across have lost control of their time agenda. And as they say, the 1% kills you – its rather like drowning. The water can come up this far and it worries you, but it is not going to kill you; it is that last 1% that kills you.

If you can reduce, by getting good time management techniques into your life, your workload by 5%, then it gives you time to stop panicking and actually start to think about the future as opposed to the next few seconds.

Steve Macaulay So that is great prescription, but I would say most managers would say to you, you don't live in the real world; I get so much thrown at me I can't possibly operate with that kind of head on my shoulders.

Steve Carver Yes; it is a bit like a pilot. It is funny because if you go into a modern aeroplane they have taken out most of the dials and switches that you used to see because they realise that actually it just heightens the tension in the cockpit and the pilots spent far too much time looking at the dials as opposed to thinking about flying. So now they have something called a glass cockpit, where if you want to find out what the oil temperature is, you can find out, but it doesn't automatically tell you unless there is something wrong. So a lot of this is management by exception. And so people are actually getting less information in the cockpit, but the right information at the right time when they need it. That is a pilot behaviour.

Steve Macaulay So is pilot behaviour encouraged by setting up the right systems, or is it more an attitude of mind?

Steve Carver I would say both; the attitude of mind means that you will then set up the right systems against incredible opposition because most superheroes enjoy being superheroes; they get recognised and they like that. And so if someone starts to try and build some structure in the organisation – better planning – then they fight it tooth and nail.

Steve Macaulay But surely nobody will admit that in the real world?

Steve Carver No they won't. So this is very much a culture change and I think in many ways because we have had the crises in the last two years,

people have now grown tired of crises. They have seen the results of crisis and of course the crisis that got us into the crisis in the first place was whole bunch of superheroes – shall we say bankers – getting us into this mess, and now having even more fun trying to get us out. Perhaps we shouldn't have been in the mess in the first place if we had better planning and people were thinking about how we were flying and where we were going.

Steve Macaulay

A good message; thank you very much, Stephen.

Steve Carver

My pleasure.