

Why is it that while “professional” work can only be done by professionals, everyone seems to understand management?



Istvan Juhasz 
MBA | People & Process Management | Agile (PAL I, PAL-EBM, PO) | Executive Mentor (IMC CMM) | Coach | Business Advisor | IT, ...



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I read an article by one of my acquaintances which made me think. He was talking about the era when he started to work, and he was very proud of not starting in a position which didn't need any special knowledge. While he was very proud of starting his career as a programmer, he mentioned a few positions which do not need any special knowledge, such as management, product management.

Certainly, I didn't start my career recently, and at that time I didn't start it as a manager, so I understand this approach. I understand that everybody is capable to do the work of a manager, and everyone is able to lead a team or direct a company but there are no managers who are truly competent in "professional" jobs. If we talk about the IT area, this means that e.g. managers are not capable of writing software codes (even if they used to work as a software developer for years). If they ask anything or give any advice, then they get a contemptuous look: „What are you trying to do / say here? You do not understand this!“. At the same time, their opinion is that the manager cannot do anything well, they constantly get criticisms such as, "why would they do this now?"; "why don't they do this, or that?"; or simply "they don't understand what they're doing anyways".

This, of course, is completely reasonable and I would like to shed light on the process of this type of attitude, with a personal example. I remember I just started my second year in university, when one of my teachers offered me to begin a project with him in the Department of Automation. I will be grateful for that opportunity forever, as it defined the next seven years of my life. After I graduated from university and began doing my PhD course, his partner asked me if I was interested in earning some money. Of course, my answer was yes, as I was in need of a salary, which I did not receive in university. When he told me about the job, I refused his offer. He made the offer again a few months later, and my answer was the same. After the third occasion, he asked me why I kept refusing the job offer. We had an honest discussion, and I admitted to him, that I had never done anything like this before, and I did not want to jeopardize the success of their project by making a mistake. He looked at me and told me that this is the Technical University where they do not train unskilled laborers. Let's not forget the fact that by that time I had already graduated as an electrical engineer. For a while, I kept thinking about our discussion. The next time I got an offer, I asked three questions, and then I immediately said yes. The entire meeting lasted for ten minutes. I learned that I was not an unskilled laborer, I was capable of understanding any task, I could learn all I had to in order to be able to complete it, and after finishing the project I felt like I would be able to do anything I set my mind to. Of course, it would be a completely different story, had they asked me for instance to do a chemical task for a pharmaceutical project.

When I was appointed director, I immediately went up to my manager and told her I wanted to complete a proper management training. She replied that this was completely unnecessary, as there were those people, who were born to be leaders and they did not need training, while others could attend all the training in the world, and they still could never become good managers. Even though, since then I realized that what she told me that day was true to a certain extent, I insisted, so the company supported me in getting a degree in management. In the following years, as a continuation, I also earned an MBA degree. I never regretted this, as my education helped me to always make decisions consciously, and solve specific problems based on knowledge, not solely instincts.

So, is it really true that anyone can manage and run a company? The only thing we keep forgetting about this issue, is that being a manager is a profession, just like any other job as well, and so while there are plenty of capable, talented managers, there are also people in this profession, who have certainly chosen the wrong career. At least, if they were the ones who made this choice... Why am I saying that? I am saying this, because unfortunately, in a lot of cases people are forced onto this career path by their bosses, or life itself. We know the saying that each and every person is capable of climbing up the career ladder until they reach a position, they are unfit to fill.

I see and experience the same, even in larger companies. A career does not necessarily have to mean a managerial career but could also mean a professional one (such as software developer). We should really start listening to good HR people, as there are some who emphasize the importance of this. By a professional career, I mean where one is able to advance to the level where they can acquire deep knowledge and problem-solving skills, which will result in them being able to see through the issues and plan complex projects. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they can also manage the project, because that would require a different skillset. Understanding and leading people takes talent. Surely, it can be learned and improved as well, but certainly there are people who lack this ability. Of course, everything can be learned without attending a school, all it takes is strong will. Though, unfortunately, while a programmer is learning their profession, they will struggle a lot. At the same time, while a manager is learning their profession, the people who will struggle a lot will be their subordinates. Whose job is it to notice this? First of all, the specialist. The specialist, whom we used to say about "HR is too important in the company to be done by an HR manager". This, however, is a flawed approach. Just like it is an inaccurate belief that it is not an issue if there is no HR manager, as it is not a problem if someone does not understand people management, as in time, they will learn it. Maybe they will. Maybe they will learn it, if there is someone to help them. If there is someone to coach them, but of course that cannot be expected from their supervisor who has no competence in this area, as they had never received any help either when they were in the same situation, and they have no idea what I am talking about right now.

By this, I am not trying to imply that the only way to succeed is to complete a school as that is the only place where one can learn something new. Life is a school as well, and I have known many IT professionals, who used to have different jobs, such as a musician, a history teacher, a litterateur, and I could go on. Anything can be learnt, but that will take time, effort, motivation and perseverance in order to gain enough experience in a particular area.

And we haven't even mentioned if they have a degree and as a result, they have an appropriate skillset. Here we only talk about whether they would be able to do something somehow, which will have positive results. The outcome is still doubtful, and even though the person might not feel this at first, as I've said before, the organization behind them will suffer strongly since it is difficult to explain to them what they are doing... no, not poorly... rather what they are NOT doing any way and what the consequences will be. By consequences I do not just mean people leaving the company (as that would be the smaller problem), but the morale would be deteriorating, there would be no advancements and developments, no increase in efficiency, no individual goals and career paths, as we will force the better workers into a position from which they cannot return but there is certainly failure, or if the person does not reach that point, the torment remains for them, as well as for their subordinates.

By the way, my acquaintance has also gotten to this point in his article. He even reaches the point of wondering if he would be better off if he had chosen to become a manager after all. Of course, that would not be better for him (it is not me saying this, but himself), but in the current field, that would mean reaching the pinnacle of the profession. You could say, he is pompous, but unfortunately, I'd rather say he is just being realistic. His judgment is realistic, and unfortunately, until we do not accept that management is also a profession that needs to be learned, practiced and constantly improved, he will be right. Since then, I have also realized that my manager was right when she told me that there are people who get appointed to become managers, who could complete multiple trainings, and yet they still would not be capable of doing this job. Why? Because they have no affinity with people, and they do not want to face and accept this. This will create a struggle also for them, and therefore they will not be able to make the company more successful in this position. Even if, in this case the company does not have to hire someone new, who would need to get a salary that is consistent with their qualifications. The less costs, the more damage it will cause to the company. Not only to the company directly, but also to the employees' mental wellbeing, whose motivation and therefore their performance will decline soon enough.



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