



turning managers into leaders

Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – December 2009

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji turns managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and facilitated workshops, she gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403-605-4756

Seek out specialized skills to solve workplace problems

Legions of army ants swarm in extended colonies (as many as 200,000 in one colony) over the forest floor in Central and South America catching anything they find in their way. In a testament to social cooperation, army ants do not eat each other, but instead overwhelm their prey (usually non-army ants or larger arthropods) through their sheer force of numbers. In an intriguing 2006 study, Bristol University researchers Scott Powell and Nigel Franks observed that some ants took on a specialized role in order to benefit the colony overall. Traveling over the uneven surfaces of the forest floor is equivalent to driving down a pothole-ridden road – the journey is much slower than if the road was well-paved. In order to speed up the trek, the army ants use their bodies to plug potholes in the natural ground surface, so that their fellow ants have a smoother surface to travel on. Individual ants size-match to the hole they plug, and when necessary, cooperate with other ants to plug larger holes. The resulting surface allows the prey-laden foragers to attain maximum speed. Powell and Franks were able to demonstrate that this highly specialized behaviour resulted in a clear net benefit to the colony. They quantitatively proved that extreme specialization by a minority can significantly increase the performance of a majority, and thus benefit the overall group.

This is a useful metaphor to apply to the workplace as well. In your organization or department, you have no doubt encountered the inevitable potholes in your day-to-day journeys. Are you developing the specialization in expertise and skills that you will need to plug these potholes? Are you proactively seeking out these experts and nurturing these relationships? Sometimes you will be able to develop the depth of knowledge and proficiency you need within your department or immediate area. Other times, you will have to seek the capabilities you need within your larger organization. In yet other situations, you may need to go outside the boundaries of your company to get the skills and know-how you need. No matter where you have to go, what is critical is that you recognize that obtaining specialized skills to solve the problem at hand significantly increases the productivity of all your employees, and thus improves performance as a whole.

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