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# Management Style: At Least Once Ride A Wild Horse into the Sun

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Perhaps you do not wish to make a difference. After all, it is no crime to avoid confrontations and controversies. Maybe what you really like is a status quo operation. Perhaps you devote your skills and energies to keeping the peace. You apply all your management training and what we generally mean by your management style to smoothing the ripples and steadying the boat.

When you have an unworkable, undesirable situation in your area—perhaps a problem employee—you really hope the problem will just go away. Addressing problems, especially personnel problems, is unpleasant and can disrupt the morale of the whole library. You prefer just to avoid the matter when you can. If you can't avoid it, you try to work around the problem, spreading the work to other employees. In the worst cases, you let the hard workers carry the slough-offs. Better that than get everyone and everything in a stew.



Dr. Jerry Campbell, Vice Provost for Library Affairs and University Librarian at Duke University, delivered this address at the Library Administration and Management Section's program at the NCLA biennial conference.

I suspect that this describes more of us than we like to admit. This is management by avoidance. If management by avoidance is your practice, it is unlikely that you will ever reach whatever real potential you have in management and leadership.

My topic is management style. But since I've made reference to a line from a poem by Hannah Kahn in my title, I will take some "poetic license" with the topic. After all, it really doesn't matter much what your management style is. Doesn't matter much at all. You may fit any one of the classic Myers-Briggs personality types and still fail miserably at management. Or you may be any one of the types and succeed brilliantly. You may subscribe to Theory X or Theory Y or any other theory and succeed or fail. You see, it's not style in either of these senses that makes the difference between success and failure. It's not style in either of these senses that makes you reach your potential as a manager—or keeps you from it.

Style in both these senses is just a diagnosis of your personal proclivities. Certainly you ought to know what your personal proclivities are in what we might call the classic categories. You ought to know whether you are process oriented or goal oriented; whether you derive conclusions primarily by thinking or by intuiting; whether you tend to make up your own mind or whether you prefer to know what others think first; or whether you incline to the hierarchical or the participative environment. Self-knowledge is a starting point for everything you undertake—and that's no revelation. You need realistic self-knowledge so that you can learn how best to apply your talents, how to compensate for your weaknesses, and how to supplement the gaps in your own skills with the strengths of those whom you choose to be your colleagues. But even with the benefit of self-knowledge, it is not your style that matters. It's what you do with it.

So, I want to talk about management style in a slightly different sense. Much could be said about style in the context of this different sense, but three things stand out, and I will focus my

observations on these three elements of style. They are, I believe, universally applicable and critically important if you are to reach your potential. They are important because management is not a game; it's not an undertaking to be entered into lightly. It's not something you ought to get into just to enhance your salary, to improve your resume, or to alleviate boredom. All management—and I mean management at every level—has as its purpose nothing less than carrying out the mission of the parent institution. If you do not know what that mission is and if you are not supportive of it, in the end you cannot effectively manage an institution or any of its parts.

These three elements of management style are important not only because your management affects the institution's pursuit of its mission, but also because your management affects the lives and careers of your colleagues. For better or worse, management affects peoples' lives. This is so whether you manage a hundred people, one person, or only yourself. You cannot arrange it otherwise. If you practice management by avoidance, you only postpone and therefore accumulate problems. You may even defer them to your successor, but the impact on human lives occurs nonetheless and will be the greater for the delay.

This is only to say by way of preface that management is a high stakes game for both institutions and people and that this is reason enough to enter it advisedly and to take it seriously once you enter it.

Here then are the three elements of management style that I find common to all great managers and that can shape your own effectiveness.

#### **Element of Management Style #1: There Must Be an Evil Dragon Laying Waste to Your Territory, and You Must Be On a Quest**

You cannot be a successful manager if you operate in a business-as-usual mode. Management by avoidance is one form of a business-as-usual approach. This, or any other form of business-as-usual, is a timid and reticent approach. It is dull, lackluster, and devoid of spirit. It doesn't create enthusiasm. It kindles neither love nor hate, neither respect nor fear. With it you cannot evoke inspired performance from yourself or from others. Indeed, business-as-usual will eventually lead you to a sense of purposelessness or even burn-out. It will, at best, allow you to lead your unit to the level of hopeless mediocrity. Business-as-usual is a mode of operation best carried out in graveyards and cemeteries. Business-as-usual is what you have when you have no dragons.

I refer you to the sad poem by W.H. Auden, entitled "And the Age Ended." It goes like this:

And the age ended, and the last deliverer died  
In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:  
The sudden shadow of the giant's enormous calf  
Would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside.

They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt  
A sterile dragon lingered to a natural death,  
But in a year the spoor had vanished from the heath;  
The kobold's knocking in the mountain petered out.

Only the sculptors and poets were half sad,  
And the pert retinue from the magician's house  
Grumbled and went elsewhere. The vanquished powers were  
glad

To be invisible and free: without remorse  
Struck down the sons who strayed into their course,  
And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.<sup>1</sup>

If you are going to manage the fate of an organizational unit, large or small, you must be committed to a purpose, a mission. Without it you will, like Auden's deliverer, grow idle and unhappy and die in bed every day you go to work. You need a fire-breathing dragon, and you must burn with your own inner fire to slay the monster. Enter management like St. George . . . clad in the armor of your commitment, armed with your native abilities and your acquired skills, driven by your pledge to rid the territory of this scourge. Enter management ready to do battle. And if on some glorious day you slay your dragon, why then so long as you continue to wear the armor, you must set out after another. A dragon slayer's work is never done.

We library managers are exceedingly lucky when it comes to dragons, in that we have so many of them available to us. We have dragons around every corner and in every department. Some are large and some are small. Backlogs are dragons; poor service is a dragon; the inability to get books reshelfed quickly after periods of heavy use is a dragon; lack of space is a dragon; poor supervision is a dragon; out-of-date conceptual procedures (like AACR II) are dragons; inefficient, labor intensive, and costly work methods are dragons. There is a dragon custom designed and waiting for every library manager at every managerial level. There is a dragon waiting for you. You have only to take up the quest.

The point of Element of Management Style #1 is that in order to succeed in management, to really reach your potential, you must have zeal for some cause appropriate to your organization and situation. Call it a sense of mission, call it purpose, call it a dragon, but without it you will not have the courage necessary to address the problems or

the stamina necessary to see them through to solutions. Without it you, like Auden's sad deliverer, will grow idle and unhappy and die in the bed of every workday.

### **Element of Management Style #2: You Must Find a Way to Get Out of the Mosquitoes**

Every library is an Alaskan tundra teeming with billions of mosquitoes. Their favorite food is you, the library manager. They will swarm you. They will attack every bit of exposed skin. They will try to follow you home at night. If you let them, the teeming cloud of library mosquitoes will drive you to distraction. They might even drive you mad. Or worse, they might clog your breathing passages until you feel that you are choking.

Those hundreds of little things you have to do are mosquitoes. The myriad things you must remember are mosquitoes. The reports you write are mosquitoes. The meetings you sit through are mosquitoes. Phone calls are mosquitoes. The things on the list on that card in your pocket are mosquitoes. I am talking about the things, the activities, that fill your days, haunt your nights, and still are never finished.

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### **If management by avoidance is your practice, it is unlikely that you will ever reach whatever real potential you have in management and leadership.**

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Every manager, of course, has to slap mosquitoes. It's part of every managerial job. Your job description specifies its list of duties (and, as we all learn, implicitly requires many more), and they have to be done. I'm not suggesting that anyone neglect such routine necessities. The welfare of the organization depends upon their being done. We must all regularly take our turns out on the tundra dispensing with mosquitoes. But if you want to reach your management potential, you must find a way to escape them regularly and systematically.

I firmly believe—and I have written to this effect—that, as a manager, you have the responsibility to think about your organizational unit. Certainly you may invite others to help you in such thinking. But in the end, you and you alone bear the responsibility. By virtue of your thinking, you must lead your unit into the future. And if it is an inglorious future, devoid of genius and bereft

of creativity, you have only to look as far as the mirror to affix the blame.

Now, thinking is not in itself a difficult enterprise. Even creative thinking, once you've had a little experience, is not so hard. But thinking is utterly impossible when you're distracted by slapping mosquitoes. This is a universal principle. It doesn't matter how good you are, or how good you think you are, at management, you are not good enough to meet your potential without stepping aside from the distractions of the routine. This has been known for centuries, but it is ever worth remembering. Let me illustrate this point with a description of what we might call the management style of Gautama Buddha written by Huston Smith:

Nearly half a century followed during which Buddha trudged the dusty paths of India until his hair was white, step infirm, and body naught but a burst drum, preaching the ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir of his message. He founded an order of monks, challenged the deadness of Brahmin society, and accepted in return the resentment, queries, and bewilderment his words provoked. His daily routine was staggering. In addition to training monks, correcting breaches of discipline, and generally directing the affairs of the Order, he maintained an interminable schedule of public preaching and private counseling, advising the perplexed, encouraging the faithful, and comforting the distressed. [It was said that] "To him people come right across the country from distance lands to ask questions, and he bids all men welcome." Underlying his response to these pressures, and enabling him to stand up under them was a pattern which [Arnold] Toynbee has found basic to creativity in all history, the pattern of "withdraw and return." [Before he began his career] Buddha withdrew for six years, then returned for forty-five. But each year [of the forty-five] was similarly divided; nine months in the world, [the three months of] the rainy season spent in retreat with his monks. His daily cycle too was patterned to this mold; his public hours were long, but three times a day he withdrew that through meditation he might restore his center of gravity to its sacred inner pivot.<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting, of course, that you must become a Buddhist in order to excel at management. All of the great spiritual belief systems recognize the need for a powerful solitude and would serve equally well with examples. Examples are also available from the biographies of many great women and men without reference to religion. The point is that, like batteries, we require regular recharging in order to function continually at peak power.

Vacations can count as periods of powerful solitude that clear your mind, restore your vigor, and refocus your sense of mission—but they usually don't. Vacations have mostly become something other than refreshing occasions for contemplation. It's hard to drive three thousand miles, visit five friends and fourteen relatives, walk forty miles through Disney World, tolerate screaming children in the car, replace a blownout



tire, and return rested and refocused on your work. You'll come back needing relief from your vacation.

What I'm suggesting is a weekly, if not daily, respite—a time aside. Put it on your calendar . . . "Thursday, 3-3:30 p.m. Get out of mosquitoes. Hold all calls." Don't write letters you owe; don't return calls; don't draft that report; don't read your mail. Find yourself a quiet place, pour yourself a cup of coffee. If you have an office, shut the door, lean back in your chair, and think.

That period of recharging—when you get out of the mosquitoes—is a most extraordinary time. It can renew your energy. It can bring forth your creativity. It can transform your management career. Without it, you will never escape the ordinary.

Withdraw and return—taking the time to collect yourself, taking the time for undistracted thoughtfulness, getting out of the mosquitoes—this is the second element of style crucial to the development of your management potential.

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### **Sound analysis and deliberate rational assessment do not solve problems . . . You solve problems.**

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#### **Element of Management Style #3: You Must Ride A Wild Horse into the Sun**

Good homework and clear understanding are important. You must have an accurate conceptual and procedural grasp of the organizational unit you manage. I say this only to make it clear that I do not disavow the value of the analytical aspect of management. But libraries tempt you to carry the analytical approach to extremes.

Library managers are tempted to analyze everything. It is our quintessential approach to management. How many analytical, evaluative reports have you written? How many are on your shelves? How many unfulfilled strategic plans are gathering dust in your files? I just agreed to participate in a review of a well-known university's library and received for my preparation over 250 pages of details and information.

Sound analysis and deliberate rational assessment do not solve problems. They provide information; they improve understanding; they reveal options. But they do not solve problems. You solve problems. And the options revealed by analysis and assessment are virtually guaranteed in themselves to hold no creativity.

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You turn to analysis and assessment, however, because they offer the most immediate and easy way to engage an issue, to begin to do something. You set up a task force to analyze the problem; you call around to see what other libraries are doing about it; and you write a report. Your conclusion may not be brilliant, but it feels safe. If it is brilliant, it is undoubtedly because you've borrowed an idea from someone else somewhere else who, thank goodness, took a different approach to the problem.

But if you really want to reach your potential as a manager, you too must take a different approach—you've got to dare to step beyond the merely rational and analytical. I chose the metaphor for this third point from a poem by Hannah Kahn entitled "Ride a Wild Horse." She writes:

Ride a wild horse  
with purple wings  
striped yellow and black  
except his head  
which must be red.

Ride a wild horse  
against the sky—  
hold tight to his wings

before you die  
whatever else you leave undone  
once ride a wild horse  
into the sun.<sup>3</sup>

You've got to move beyond the merely rational and analytical. You must ride the wild horse of your own creativity. Of course it's risky. Almost certainly no one else will have tried your wild horse solution. It's what you and you alone have to offer. And it's what your library and this profession desperately need.

Don't tell me that you have no creativity to offer. I will not believe you. I will believe that you don't want to go to the trouble. I'll believe that you're afraid to take the risk. I'll believe that you've never tapped your creative resources, that you've never experienced your own creativity, that you don't know how. But I will not believe that you have only the rational and ordinary to offer. And you must offer more to reach your full potential. So the third element of management style crucial to your career is a bold, risk-taking, creative approach.

## You must ride the wild horse of your own creativity.

### Conclusion

Dragons, mosquitoes, and wild horses are metaphors that suggest the secrets of truly great management style—sense of mission and commitment, undistracted thoughtfulness and reflection, and bold creativity. These are elements of style that matter.

But beware. They will lead you into action. They will equip you with power. They will cause you to make a difference. Then again, perhaps you do wish to make a difference.

### References

1. W.H. Auden, *And the Age Ended in poetry is for people*, edited by Martha McDonough and William C. Doster (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1965), p. 204.
2. Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 95-96.
3. Hannah Kahn, *Ride a Wild Horse in poetry is for people*, p. 24.

## Instructions for the Preparation of Manuscripts

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3. Manuscripts should be submitted in triplicate on plain white paper measuring 8½" x 11".
4. Manuscripts must be double-spaced (text, references, and footnotes). Manuscripts should be typed on sixty-space lines, twenty-five lines to a page. The beginnings of paragraphs should be indented eight spaces. Lengthy quotes should be avoided. When used, they should be indented on both margins.
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Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*. (New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.  
Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1979): 498.
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