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Our ForteCEO executives work alongside our clients to implement permanent change. Each one of our executives has at least 20 years of progressive experience as an owner or leader of successful businesses.

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Author's Note

In the spring of 1980, I attended a lecture by Dr. Robert Wright at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Business where he introduced the Management Maturity Matrix (the Matrix). In the twenty-eight years since this lecture, I've applied the content dozens of times while working with all sizes of firms, both public and private. I don't know if Dr. Wright was the original creator of the Matrix, and I cannot confirm because he unfortunately passed away some years ago. However, his lecture on the Matrix has been very influential in my career.

Management Maturity Matrix

Troubled by high personnel turnover or stuck at a revenue plateau? Read On.

By John Kopeck

Well-functioning management teams are just like your favorite sports team. The right team is developed based on each team member's personality, what and how they will contribute, and how they fit into the overall bigger picture. A colleague of mine often talks about how legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson recognizes that in addition to the great skill that exists among his players, there are even larger and unique personalities and egos that need to be managed in order to make the team successful.

Great teams do not happen by accident. They are visualized, designed, built and managed to achieve results within the situation. The Management Maturity Matrix (the Matrix) is a simple tool designed to help you understand how management styles fit with subordinate maturity levels. The Matrix is not complex, but its common sense approach will help you understand the first principles of how to build and manage a winning organization.

While the Matrix is probably best implemented in the middle-management layer, the principles can be used within all levels of an organization. It is particularly useful in firms with high personnel turnover, stuck at revenue plateaus, or that appear to be missing "the next generation of leaders." When a mid-level manager says, "The senior folks here **say** they want our input, but they don't," chances are you are probably at a company where understanding and using the Matrix could make a difference.

Four Basic Management Styles

Within the Matrix, there are four general styles of management and managers: **Autocratic**, **Paternalistic**, **Communicative** and "**Laissez Faire**" (French for "let do").

Autocratic	Paternalistic	Communicative	Laissez Faire
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No ambiguity Follows military-style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong suggestions Limited flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks input Allows trying new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad objectives Freedom to figure it out

The **Autocratic** manager will tell people what to do, when to do it, and exactly how to do it. There is little or no ambiguity about what the manager wants done and little room to demonstrate creativity while accomplishing the appointed task. This management style is often associated with the military and other command and control-type organizations.

The **Paternalistic** manager will make strong suggestions about how a task should be accomplished; often drawing upon some past experience he or she had performing a similar task. There is a strong element of teaching present in this management style, and a limited tolerance for flexibility in approach.

The **Communicative** manager will use input from subordinates and use that input to drive consensus around how a task should be accomplished. He or she is willing to let people try new ways to accomplish tasks, and may even let someone "fail" as a learning exercise.

Maturity has little to do with age. There are many “Very Mature” 25-year olds in the workplace, and just as many “Very Immature” 55-year olds.

Exhibit 1

Very Immature	Somewhat Mature	Quite Mature	Very Mature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs clear direction No ambiguity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants clear guidelines Open to suggestions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has options and ideas Likes “team” atmosphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn’t need guidance or team Works to own deadline

The **Laissez Faire** manager will describe an objective in broad terms and leave his subordinates to figure out the details of how to get it done.

Dealing with Subordinate Maturity

To contrast with the management styles, there are four corresponding levels of subordinate maturity: **Very Immature, Somewhat Mature, Quite Mature** and **Very Mature**. In the context of the Matrix, maturity has little to do with age. There are many “Very Mature” 25-year olds in the workplace, and just as many “Very Immature” 55-year olds. Subordinate maturity describes the degree to which the subordinate needs, or wants, specific direction to accomplish an objective. (Exhibit 1).

The **Very Immature** subordinate needs clear direction about how to best accomplish a specific task. Often this is because the task is new to the person. For example, an intern from high school or early college who is working in a professional organization will be “Very Immature” and need strong direction. Communication comfortable for this subordinate would be, “You should...” or “I want you to...”

The **Somewhat Mature** subordinate still requires clear direction, but prefers to receive it in the form of suggestions rather than direct orders. This person has the basics of task accomplishment down, but can use some guidance on efficiency improvements. Communication comfortable for this subordinate would be, “I think you will find that...works best.”

The **Quite Mature** subordinate has enough experience to have valid opinions about how related tasks might be accomplished more

effectively. He or she appreciates having their opinions asked for in planning sessions, and feels like they are part of the leadership team. Within a team environment, this is the most ideal subordinate maturity level. Communication comfortable for this subordinate would be, “What do you think about...?”

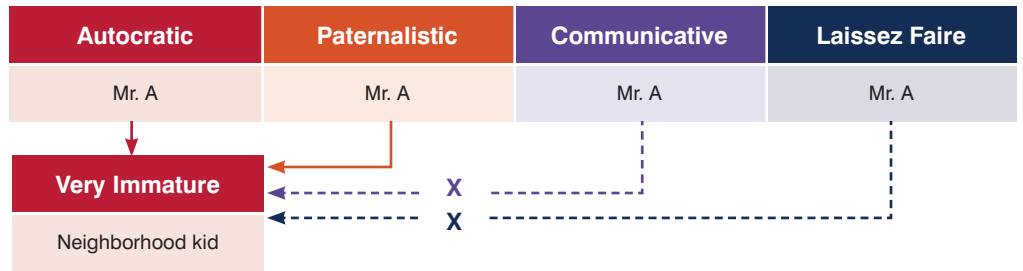
The **Very Mature** subordinate is often an expert in his or her own right and typically only requires a budget and timetable to accomplish their objectives.

The Matrix needs to be applied situationally, as well as within a static organization. A good example is the dentist taking flying lessons. Though well experienced in his profession, flying a plane is completely new and so he should act and be treated as a “Very Immature” subordinate. And the consequences of not having and following clear instructions can be very serious. Another example of a situational use of the “Very Immature” subordinate is a firefighter responding to an emergency call. The directives and actions are very clear and must be followed. The trick is to use the right management style with the corresponding subordinate maturity level, applied correctly for the organization or situation.

The Trouble with Misalignment

Mr. Adult wants to hire someone to cut his lawn and finds a 14-year-old neighbor boy looking for a part time job. Mr. A tells the young man he needs someone who will cut the front yard first, then the back yard. It is imperative to cut the lawn in a counter-clockwise pattern, and to check the oil and fuel levels on the lawn mower at the half-way point. For this, Mr. A says, he is willing to pay \$20. The young man agrees to the terms, puts on his headphones and happily starts

Exhibit 2



People who are managed at higher levels than their current maturity tend to get confused...And people who are managed at lower levels than their current maturity tend to deliver lower performance or even quit.

the lawn mower as Mr. A retires to his den to watch the game.

This situation works out for Mr. A and the boy because there is vertical alignment of management style and subordinate maturity level (Exhibit 2). Mr. A knew exactly what tasks he wanted performed and exactly how he wanted them performed. His instructions to the neighbor kid were clear and precise, leaving little room for interpretation. There was little room for creativity in execution as well, but he wasn't looking for creativity—he was looking to get his grass cut without any surprises.

Mr. A might have used a paternalistic style of management with the neighbor kid: suggesting to him, rather than telling, how he might accomplish the task at hand—perhaps reminiscing about how he had learned to cut lawns effectively from personal experience. This approach might take longer and might make the kid wonder why Mr. A is sharing stories about ancient history, but the task will likely be performed within acceptable limits of variability.

But what would have happened if Mr. A had used a Communicative or Laissez Faire style of management with this kid? If he had

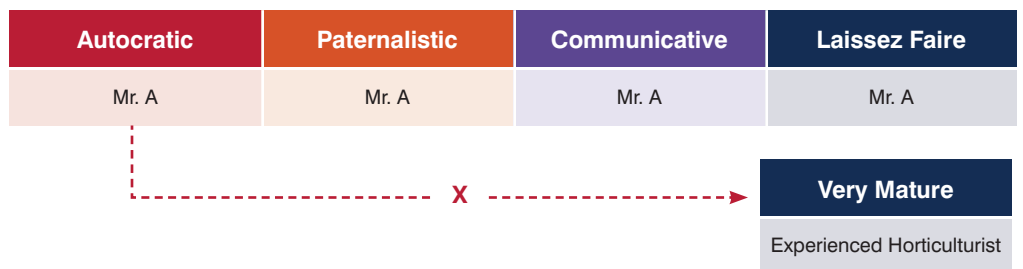
asked the kid for advice and input, or left him alone to figure out how to best get the task done? Chances are the kid would have been frustrated with Mr. A's lack of direction, and Mr. A might end up surprised with how his lawn turned out.

What if Mr. A had hired an experienced horticulturist to manage his landscaping, instead of the local kid, and talked to him in the same way? (Exhibit 3) The lawn doctor would probably feel frustrated, since he probably knows more about lawn maintenance than Mr. A ever will, and Mr. A might still end up with some bad surprises at the end of the day.

People who are managed at higher levels than their current maturity tend to get confused, frustrated and lost. And people who are managed at lower levels than their current maturity tend to deliver lower performance or even quit.

A misalignment on the Matrix by one column can lead to discomfort, but doesn't normally lead to major problems. However, a misalignment by two or three columns will lead to substantial tension in the workplace and can result in high turnover rates and low morale.

Exhibit 3



Moving left to right within management styles on the Matrix requires a concerted effort on the part of the manager.

Even Bigger Problems

A second, more insidious pattern is when either managers or subordinates behave inconsistently or misrepresent themselves to others. An example is the research director who claims he works best when left completely alone, but actually only makes lists of things he hopes to accomplish rather than actually doing something. This person needs direction, clear goals and timetables, but would never admit it. The same problem is apparent in the manager who claims to be open to suggestion and wants to build a team culture, but becomes very directive and authoritarian whenever something goes wrong or a deadline is missed.

Moving left to right within management styles on the Matrix requires a concerted effort on the part of manager. This can be especially difficult for entrepreneurs who make all the key decisions in the firm's formative years and then find it difficult to delegate as a company grows. In our business, we call this the "Founder's Trap" and find that many business owners who have founded companies have a difficult time transitioning to a more communicative management style and with the task of building a firm that can succeed without them at the helm.

It can be fairly easy to move from Autocratic to Paternalistic management style, however it is extremely difficult to move from a Paternalistic to a Communicative style. Staying to the right of your natural management style, especially in difficult times, requires commitment and concentration. When a manager moves from right to left on the maturity matrix, it is very difficult, if not impossible for him or her to move back to the right in the eyes of his or her subordinates. Trust is easily lost.

How to Apply the Matrix

A "quick and dirty" 360 degree assessment of management style and subordinate maturity will often highlight disconnects between an individual's self-assessed style and how they are perceived by others. Consider asking each manager interviewed

to indicate their management style, by putting his or her initials in the appropriate matrix box. Next, have the manager put the initials of their direct reports in the boxes most appropriate below theirs. Ask the direct reports do the same exercise, putting the manager in the box most representative of the manager's style, and placing themselves according to their self-assessed maturity level. It would be the rare company that had managers and direct reports rank themselves exactly the same as they rank each other.

It is not unusual for managers to rank themselves at higher levels on the matrix than their direct reports rank them. Neither is it unusual for direct reports to rank themselves at higher maturity levels than their managers rank them. The different points of view open the door to meaningful discussions between the groups. Remember, a misalignment of one column will cause some tension and confusion, while a misalignment of two or more columns will often result in chaos.

Managers wishing to be promoted should try to move up the maturity curve, creating a succession plan to fill in behind them. The manager who is mission-critical to his position often cannot be promoted.

Similarly, if you are a company owner wishing to prepare your firm for sale, it is imperative to consider building and maintaining at least a Communicative style. The future value of your company is dependent on it being successful without you, and a Paternalistic or Autocratic style will not ensure the firm will operate smoothly after you depart.

Buyers, particularly financial ones (vs. strategic), will often assess the owner's management style and may start to question the deal if they suspect too strong a hand in day-to-day decision-making. After all, if the owner makes all the key decisions and tells everyone else what to do, what will happen the first day he doesn't show up at work? Chances are, not much. And the company may not succeed long-term. ■
