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## Book Review: It's the Manager: Moving from Boss to Coach

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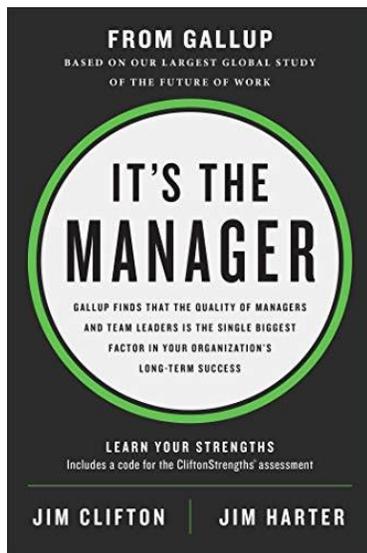
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## ***It's the Manager: Moving from Boss to Coach***

**Authors:** Jim Clifton & Jim Harter

**Publisher:** Gallup Press

**Original Release Date:** 2019 (448 pages)

**ISBN:**1595622241 (ISBN13: 9781595622242)

**Reviewer:** Cam Caldwell

### **Engaging Employees by Creating “Great Jobs”**

The Gallup Press publication, *It's the Manager*, represents an exhaustive study of employee engagement and identifies the limitations of managers as the fundamental reason why many organizations struggle to motivate and inspire their employees. The book provides empirical findings which are useful in understanding employee attitudes and claims to offer convincing solutions for resolving the problems of ineffective organization.

Clifton and Harter have written a clearly articulated book about the importance of leadership in behavioral economics that contains many useful insights – yet their book fails to hold accountable the Top Management Teams that are ultimately responsible for the strategic focus of organizations and the creation of organizational cultures (Schein & Schein, 2016). The focus of this review is on identifying both the brilliance of *It's the Manager* and the shortcomings of the book – despite its compelling presentation of important information.

Clifton and Harter's research acknowledges that there are 6 million U. S. businesses, although the book's findings primarily have significance for the top 18,000 U.S. companies of least 500 employees – or the companies that often have an international customer base and a multinational role. The major conclusion of the book is that the failure of organizations to engage employees is due to ineffective managers who are poorly trained and who do not understand what is required to help employees to have the “great job” that the authors suggest is the key to employee engagement.

### **Understanding the Job**

Fundamental to the findings of the authors is their premise that the key to effective employee involvement, motivation, and productivity is the employees' perception of the work for which they are hired. Differentiating the three types of jobs that are offered to employees, Clifton and Harter, (2019, p. 11) define them as follows:

**Lousy Jobs** – A “lousy job” is one in which you are underemployed, receive a very low wage, and work less than 30 hours when you want to work full time.

**Good Jobs** – Gallup defines a “good job: as working full time for an organization, with 30+ hours a week and a living-wage paycheck.”

**Great Jobs** – A “great job” has all the qualities of a good job but with one big differentiator: Employees are engaged in meaningful and fulfilling work and feel they are experiencing real individual growth and development in the workplace.

Clifton and Harter note that only 15% of the world’s workers self-describe as fully engaged at work – or feel that they have great jobs. The book documents the causes of common failures of managers to be effective leaders. Their findings include their fact that more employees are actually negatively engaged at work than those who are fully engaged partners contributing to their organizations’ success.

Explaining why first-line managers and supervisors must become effective leaders, the authors cite research evidence about leadership and what today’s employees seek from those who lead them. Clifton and Harter explain that today’s employees seek jobs with leaders who do the following:

- **Leaders communicate the purpose of an employee’s work.**  
Emphasizing an organization’s purpose gives meaning and importance to the work performed – a vital factor that motivates employee commitment. Employees seek to be involved in meaningful work where their contribution makes a difference.
- **Leaders view relationships with employees as long term.**  
Most employees seek a career rather than a temporary assignment. They prefer not to be treated as a short-term participant hired to complete a task but want to be a partner in an organization’s future.
- **Leaders seek employees’ professional development.**  
Employees place high priority on the commitment that leaders demonstrate in employee growth and development. Leaders who demonstrate a willingness to invest in their employees’ futures convey to employees that they are considered to be valued and important.
- **Leaders care about employees’ lives rather than just their jobs.**  
Employees want to be valued as participants in an exchange relationship who perform a job in exchange for a paycheck. They want leaders to acknowledge their significance as individuals who have life goals that complement their work.
- **Leaders emphasize employees’ successes rather than failures.**  
Leaders who help those with whom they work to develop their skills and to improve their talents take advantage of employee capabilities. Focusing on what employees do well, rather than their shortcomings, enables employees to optimize their ability to create organizational value.
- **Leaders coach employees rather than reviewing performance.**  
Leaders who interact with and coach employees on a regular basis are far more likely to see those employees improve. Employees want ongoing conversations with their managers and constant communication that helps them to improve is far more important than an annual critique.

*It's the Manager* confirms long-established research of many scholars about leadership roles and job characteristics that motivate employee commitment and performance and sustain organizational culture (Turner & Lawrence, 1965; Hackman, Oldham, Jackson, & Purdy, 1975; Hackman & Oldham, 1982; Pfeffer, 1998; Covey, 2004; Burns, 2010; Herman & Chiu, 2014). Reporting the results of their extensive research, Clifton and Harter identify a broad range of factors that emphasize the future of the work world. The major sections of their research emphasize the need to evolve the role of managers to become resources who help their employees to develop their skills and focus on their strengths.

### **Disappointing Limitations**

Unfortunately, the authors of *It's the Manager* falls short in demonstrating the implications of some of their findings. For example, Clifton and Harter acknowledge that one in four full-time and one in every two part-time employees have a gig, or temporary job, that fails to meet what employees want in a “great job” (pp. 162-163). However, rather than addressing the significance of that important statistic, the authors simply write that “it’s unclear if gig work is beneficial for workers and organizations over the long term.” This minimizing of a vital requirement of “great jobs” reflects the weaknesses of this otherwise important book. Other notable shortcomings of the book include the following.

- **The focus on large organizations overlooks the importance of leaders and organizations in small and midsize companies.** As the authors note, large organizations represent only 18,000 of the more than 6 million companies in the U. S. The need for creating effective leaders and cultures exists in leader-follower relationships in organizations of all sizes and the principles of great jobs apply in small and midsize organizations as well.
- **The development of managers and leaders is not adequately explained.** Manager selection and development must be an ongoing priority for all organizations and requires far more than teaching managers the skills of coaching. The book fails to provide insights about how to effectively develop managers, despite the fact that it identifies that problem as critically important.
- **The challenges in establishing organization cultures that engage employees are minimized and understated.** Building a meaningful organization culture requires aligning manager attitudes, behaviors, and capabilities with the requirements associated with creating great jobs. Creating that culture requires building relationships and demands much more than “checking the boxes” of programs to institute.
- **The accountability of organizations’ Top Management Team is not adequately emphasized.** The Top Management Team is ultimately accountable for the standards, values, and relationships required in creating great jobs and effective employee relationships. Clifton and Harter have failed to emphasize the importance of that accountability – probably the major shortcoming of their otherwise important book.

Great research does more than report the importance of information about employee attitudes and performance. To the degree that *It's the Manager* fails to address these four issues, the superb research that they have generated is incomplete in addressing the importance of organizational leaders – not only at the managerial level but including the role of the Top Management Team.

Clifton and Harter provide five helpful Appendixes about leadership concepts that add value to the book for scholars and practitioners. Unfortunately, those Appendixes come across as somewhat self-serving with regard to Gallup's consulting and marketing roles in the business world. For example, the first Appendix cites the characteristics of the 34 Clifton Strengths themes (Rath, 2007) which Gallup markets to organizations and individual leaders.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, *It's the Manager's* identification of the importance of the manager's role in engaging employees makes this book a valuable resource for thoughtful readers who are willing to carefully reflect on the research, findings, and insights provided. Leadership is a challenge for those who are asked to manage tasks and activities. The brilliance of recognizing the important role of managers in impacting employee engagement must be accompanied by the support of Top Management Teams if managers are to become leaders who engage employees

Understanding the importance of what employees expect from “great jobs” and recognizing the counter-productive effort to save money by hiring so many part-time, temporary, and contract employees are realities that Top Management Teams must fully understand and incorporate if they are to engage employees fully and take advantage of their potential. Leadership is ultimately a relationship and without effective leaders at all levels of an organization, employee engagement is unlikely to occur (Carasco-Saul, Kim, & Kim, 2015; Caldwell & Anderson, 2021).

The exhaustive research by Gallup provides abundant evidence of the importance of organizations understanding the role of managers, the importance of engagement and empowerment, and the need for managers to create caring relationships with employees. It is ultimately the responsibility of each company's Top Management Team to translate their goals, values, and policies into guidelines for its managers and that responsibility is not adequately addressed in *It's the Manager*.

Unlocking the potential of an organization's employees and establishing the proper role of managers as organizational leaders ultimately depends upon the Top Management Team. Top Management must establish a system of accountability, constantly train and monitor managers, and set a personal example in modeling the roles of leadership. Only by establishing standards of accountability and honoring duties owed to employees will organization leaders create the “great jobs” that will build long term organization success, enrich employees' lives, and achieve the obligations of great leadership (DePree, 2004).

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## About the Reviewer

**Cam Caldwell** obtained a Ph.D. in Organization Behavior from Washington State University where he was a Thomas S. Foley Graduate Fellow. He has written more than one hundred scholarly papers about leadership-related topics. His book, *Moral Leadership: A Transformative Model for Tomorrow's Leaders*, was published by Business Expert Press in 2012 Leadership. He co-wrote *Touching Lives* which was published by Nova Science Publishers in 2020.

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