



Jeff Parker  
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## From the Director's Desk

### Why Do We Judge Managers for Doing Tasks if They're So Important?

Over the holiday, I burned more glorious summer days at my desk than anyone my age probably should re-writing a paper for a graduate school class. I'm asked why I would pursue a degree at this point in my career (answer: structured professional development, intellectual curiosity and honing my game).

I'm not alone in seeing that workplace changes since COVID call for a different approach to managing public employees. The Gallup annual polling reveals, "[70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager.](#)" and regardless of whether in-office or remote, "80% of employees who receive **meaningful feedback from their manager**" self-report as being "fully engaged." Overall, the trend is toward less engaged employees which does not bode well for organizations, especially those charged with serving the public interest.

My professor and I spoke on Zoom prior to that weekend. My 15 page "draft" was good enough for an "A" then. Still, I wrestled with the topic: which can be summarized as my own case study from the Town of Avon observing how a Town Manager can successfully drive transformational and enduring change across an organization. In this era, public managers are often hired, like snipers, to complete a key strategic priority or two, before being summarily disposed of by the council that hired them. How does a manager positively shape the culture and motivational structures of an organization and what is the academic literature that supports their approach? Why should they bother?

I made myself stop and submit 28 pages on Sunday morning, though another round of research and interviews were compelling me to go on. The class, Organizational Management and Behavior, provided



a launchpad to reflect on nearly a decade of data I'd compiled from knowing two consecutive Avon Managers. I was mentored as a peer by Virginia Eggers and then was invited to interview each of Eric Heil's direct reports to provide feedback on his leadership. That was the "research," interviewing, and drafting a report these past 4 years for Eric's annual evaluation. Doing so, I came to understand the organization, people, culture and systems of Avon from a unique perspective—that of a consultant/student and supporting third-party. The further I explored the data as a potential final project for this class and dug into the literature on organizational change and motivation, the more intertwined I began to see the manager and the organization's culture.

Eggers is and was a very experienced, talented manager with stints in Telluride and Sun Valley before Avon. Council brought her in as a change agent for a town that appeared to be falling behind its peers while mired in lawsuits for a decade. Eggers drafted and then managed through a written strategic plan with a ferocity I've not often witnessed. Employees reported either that she was tough to please or that she was the best manager they ever had. I picked her brain about how she managed and evaluated staff (basically *exceeding high standards* or *failing* were the two options). Later, I was honored to participate in the interviews process when Avon promoted Eric Heil. Eggers had driven the organization to a degree that some directors two years after she left required a sort of career therapy when I met with them. My final project utilized my unique access to directors who worked for both managers. Those who had reported the two managers as having radically distinct approaches to managing an organization, and that Avon was in a different place now after Eggers and COVID. Heil hadn't managed people or teams when he was promoted.

Daniel Pink would understand how I spent much of a 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend on something no one assigned me, no one was paying me to complete or waiting to review. I'm not sure I'll even share the document with many people because of the confidential nature of much of the data gathering. Pink would see that the project brought out each of the three elements of "true motivation" as he sees it: Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose. In three words, that sums up the emerging science of employee-centered management.

When I came into the public sector as an elected official in 1998, I developed relationships with staff role players who were important to the files in front of us. I was quite embarrassed any time someone signaled that I was "the boss." I wasn't. I enjoyed town holiday parties and occasional lunches, but I wanted to blend-in, not grandstand. I was notably younger than many staffers. I didn't ask them then as I now would- **What do you work for?**

That's right. Not **"Who do you work for?"** but **"What do you work for?"** *What motivates you to be here? What does this work allow you to do in your life that you couldn't do elsewhere?* Taking the time to engage with employees on a personal level, what drives them, and listening closely enough to provide useful feedback does not come naturally for many of us. Bosses are supposed to be "in-charge," right?

Around that time when I was Mayor, I was mentored as a Superintendent and then as a Project Manager while overseeing custom home projects by Tom Solawetz. We worked together for 18 months on one of the most complex human endeavors I had personally known at the time. He must have identified an underlying depression I harbored; I think. He asked me, "Who do you work for?"

Dumbfounded, I replied, "you... and the owner of the company... and ultimately the excessively wealthy clients who are paying for this modern castle we are building in Strawberry Park, Beaver Creek."

Zen master-like he gently corrected me, "That is your issue. You do not work for those people. You work for yourself." I still contemplate that exchange from more than a decade ago. Eventually, I left construction. Although building a custom home was a fantastically interesting puzzle in space, time, interpersonal relations, management of materials, logistics, schedules, budgets, contracts, teams as well as individual people, I just couldn't shake the underlying sense that I couldn't answer the "who do you work for" question to my satisfaction. I wasn't working for me, that's for sure.

Today, I am working for me and for 55 employees at NWCCOG. It is difficult to see myself managing from the perspective of others, which is why I treasure the gift that Eggers and Heil and their people have entrusted with me. As a father, a husband, and as a manager, it is intimidating and humbling to realize the responsibility my impact has on those around me, and that whatever the skills I bring to the work, I need to keep adapting and growing.

*Jon Stavney*  
Executive Director - NWCCOG  
[JStavney@nwccog.org](mailto:JStavney@nwccog.org)



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