

## What is it?

Monkey management is a structured approach to preventing problems from getting delegated upward. In 1974, William Oncken, Jr., and Donald L. Wass published an article in Harvard Business Review that referred to unsolved problems as 'monkeys' and the problem of managers unwittingly reducing their effectiveness by taking ownership of monkeys that rightfully need to stay with the employee.

## Why use it?

A manager's job is to develop employees, create opportunities, remove obstacles, clarify priorities, etc. – things that are important, but not urgent. Problems tend to be urgent. When managers take problems over from employees, important issues get delayed and the organization as a whole suffers.

## What factors are critical for success?

- Recognition that a problem is being delegated upward
- An understanding by the manager that his or her job is to get problems solved, not solve problems
- Employees who are both willing and able to solve problems

## How do you use it?

- Step 1** When an employee presents you with a problem, clarify what your employee expects. In a highly functional manager-employee relationship, the employee may just want to be heard and feel understood. After some empathetic listening, simply asking the employee "What do you need from me?" can often result in "Nothing, I just needed someone to talk to. Thanks for listening." Don't breed monkeys.
- Step 2** If someone comes to you with a solution, make sure you know what the problem is. If the discussion begins with a solution, ask "What problem are we trying to solve?" Identify the monkey.
- Step 3** Decide if the problem should be solved or dismissed. Together the manager and the employee decide to work on a solution or not address it. Clearly stating "I agree that is an issue, but because of (.....), it is not a priority at this time," is better than an ambiguous acknowledgement. Feed or shoot the monkey.
- Step 4** Clearly communicate that the problem and its solution belongs with the employee. A good starting position is "I could take this problem, but it would be better for you to handle this. Let's look at how." Don't take the monkey.
- Step 5** Schedule the management of the problem. Set aside a specific time to address the problem, its solution, and progress until completion – "Tuesday at 2:00" is a good approach. "Let's talk later," is not good. As long as the problem remains unsolved, end each scheduled discussion with a clear and scheduled next step. Schedule the next monkey feeding time.

## Benefits of proper monkey management include:

- 1) Effective use of manager's time
- 2) Increased employee problem-solving skills
- 3) Increased organizational problem-solving capacity
- 4) Greater employee job satisfaction

