

## Leadership Barometer 131 Span of Control

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD**



How much span of control (number of direct reports) should a particular manager have? Years ago, I was taught that any manager who has more than 6 direct reports cannot do a proper job of supervising the individuals.

On the other extreme, with a very flat organization and self directed work teams, it is possible for a manager to be directly responsible for over 100 people.

More recently, the issue of hybrid work makes the situation even more complex. Span of control remains an important concept in today's fragmented workplace.

An overarching question is why we call it "control" at all. The idea that one must have control over people in order to influence or coach them properly is outdated. I agree that the total entity needs to deliver on the goals of the organization and serve the customer well, but the individuals within the organization do not need to be "controlled" like marionettes in order to perform well.

Most of my professional work centers around the concept of trust. If an organization has a culture of high trust, then we do not need to control the individuals within it to be effective.

If upper management act as servant leaders and are transparent with information, all workers at all levels know the goals. They feel trusted or empowered to do the right thing, so the conventional hierarchy of group leader, supervisor, manager, vice president, group vice president, president, and CEO is way more structure than necessary.

Let us look at eight manager behaviors that will allow one individual to provide the needed guidance to numerous other people.

- 1. Delegate well** – Delegate more and micromanage less.

2. **Trust others** – Demonstrate more trust in employees.
3. **Fewer Rules** – Ditch the complex operating procedures – rely on people.
4. **Self Development** – Encourage workers to have a development plan.
5. **Better Mentoring** – Have a culture that encourages mentoring.
6. **Less "Administrivia"** – Reduce busy work and complex forms.
7. **Improve Online Communication** – Reduce the email load and make it more efficient and user-friendly.
8. **Clean house** – Get rid of habitual problem employees. Shift attention from those who are causing problems to those who are doing great work.

## **Conclusion**

Increasing the span of control is good for the efficiency of any organization. Following the eight tips above will shift the burden for most managers and allow them the time to have broader influence. This saves the organization money and provides a more rewarding environment in which managers and employees can thrive.

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