Eric P. Bloom: **Will management skills alone keep you employed?**

By Eric P. Bloom

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Twenty years ago I would have answered this question with an emphatic “Yes”. Today, I would have to answer the question by saying “Yes, but only if you’re really lucky”.

Look at what has happened within the majority of companies in the last few years as we passed through the economic downturn. While it’s true that many people at all organizational levels lost their jobs, the large number of those who were adversely effected were in management jobs, namely between the individual contributors and the company’s senior management. This could be from one level to many levels of management.

The reason that many companies decided to “thin out their middle layer” is because, while these people were doing very meaningful important work, they were neither performing hands-on tasks nor making C-level decisions. Additionally, they were receiving significant compensation. Let me say they were very talented, very experienced, and very devoted employees, but as revenues continued to dry up, drastic cost cutting measures had to be made.

As this layer of management was thinned out, many of the managers that were retained possessed specific abilities beyond their management experience. They were the

- IT Manager who could also do business analysis
• The Sales Manager who still maintained a book of clients that they serviced directly
• The Accounting Manager who could still close the monthly books

Not that managers without a secondary skill set were not of great value, they were and did great work, but the company just simply couldn’t afford to keep them. To fill the void of these lost managers, companies cut business processes, reduced internal procedures, streamlined previously cumbersome tasks, and simply did without.

You may have heard it said that companies have “flattened” their management structure and this is how they did it.

So this brings us back to our original question of will management skills alone keep you employed. Yes, if you are working at a company that can continue to afford people with management-only skills.

That said, if you are currently in a management role, the next question is what things can you do that will both help you grow professionally and help protect you if your company runs into financial difficulty. The answer is to build your professional brand.

What does your staff, peers, and those above you organizationally think of you?
• Are you the heir apparent for your boss’s job?
• Do you have special industry knowledge that makes you an invaluable asset to the company?
• Do you have the reputation of being a problem solver and, as a result, the go-to person when things get tough?
• Do you have a higher level of technical ability than those on your team? By technical, it could be in accounting, computers, law, engineering, electronics, etc.
• Are you known as an industry leader locally, regionally, or nationally?
In essence, what these questions are asking are what separates you from the pack? If push comes to shove, why should they lay off one of your peers and give you additional responsibilities as opposed to laying you off and consolidating your responsibilities under someone else?

On the positive side, separating yourself from the pack is also a strategy to get promoted. Being known as someone having special industry knowledge, as the go-to person when things get tough, as having highly tuned technical ability, and is known as an industry leader can do more than help you keep your job, it’s a pathway to professional success. As a last thought, should you be forced to find a new job, these personal attributes and strong professional brand will help you find it, maybe even a better job than you have now.

The primary advice and takeaways from today’s column is to know that:

- Many companies decided to “thin out their middle layer” because, while these people were doing very meaningful important work, they were neither performing hands-on tasks nor making C-level decisions.
- Build your professional brand as an industry expert, problem-solver, technically accomplished, and/or as an industry leader in your profession has the dual benefit of protecting you from layoff and positioning you for promotion.

Until next time, manage well, manage smart, and continue to grow.

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