

Aaron J. Nurick. The Good Enough Manager: The Making of a GEM. New York: Routledge, 2012, 148 pages.

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Nurick bases the “good enough manager” concept on work done by David Winnicott, a British pediatrician who coined the term “good enough mother.” The good enough mother creates an environment in which the infant is allowed to develop into an autonomous and genuine self by “react[ing] to her inevitable imperfections, natural absences, and other ‘failures’” (p. 4). This leads to a relationship in which the boundary between the mother’s control and the child’s developing independence evolves continuously over time. The good enough mother realizes that the child cannot develop if she tries to control too much in the child’s life. Along that same line, a main theme in this book is the idea that a good enough manager (GEM) actively fosters a similar evolution in his or her relationships with direct reports – and that this leads to an environment of creativity, innovation, performance, and satisfaction for manager and subordinates alike.

Chapter 1 (Introduction) introduces the reader to four central questions that are explored throughout the book. How do the best managers behave? What sets them apart from their peers? What impacts do they have on their subordinates and co-workers? And what can we learn from them? The chapter concludes with a definition of a good enough manager as one who:

- is confident in working with fluidity, complexity, and uncertainty;
- builds and maintains effective relationships by managing emotions and communicating clearly and genuinely (and encouraging the same in others);
- facilitates autonomy, maturity, creativity, and growth.

Chapter 2 (Discovering GEMS: A Study of the Best and Worst Managers) describes a study in which 1,058 managers provided stories about their best and worst managers. It is interesting to note that 85% of men identified a man as their best manager, whereas only 56% of women did so. Concerning their worst managers, 73% of men and 53% of women indicated that this was a man. Nonetheless, Nurick is quick to point out that the differences between men and women, in terms of the qualities they associated with their best and worst managers, were minimal. Qualitative analysis of the responses revealed that the worst managers were associated with micro-managing, poor communication, disrespect, taking credit for others’ work, and lack of respect and trust. The best managers were generally seen as a) mentors, teachers, and supporters, who b) build and maintain effective relationships, and c) manage with high levels of integrity. Those three themes are the focus of the next three chapters.

Chapter 3 (GEMs as Managers and Teachers) indicates that GEMs allow their subordinates autonomy within established boundaries and give them the freedom to fail. The essence of these ideas is that good enough managers have high expectations of their people, and take care to give them the room and the authority to do what is asked of them. When necessary, GEMs provide their subordinates with political cover from the fallout that often follows disappointing performance. The author describes the key distinction between good enough and poor managers is that good enough managers “are more responsive and open to their

employees' needs and the organizational context; they can handle their own emotions and let go of their own certitude, and know when to move closer and when to move away" (p. 44).

Chapter 4 (GEMs as Relationship Builders) discusses the importance of trust, mutual respect, and open communication. Trust develops when subordinates believe that they will be recognized for their work and they are confident that they will receive honest, straightforward, and specific guidance and feedback. Respect for employees' expertise, ideas, and time are particularly important. Communication is important in any context, but Nurick discusses at some length the importance of being aware of potential communication problems in today's world of email and text messaging.

Chapter 5 (GEMs as Models of Integrity) highlights the importance of demonstrating solid values, fairness, and authenticity versus narcissism, taking credit for others' work, and playing favorites. Several anecdotes portray the depth of employees' emotional reactions to managers' good and poor conduct in this regard.

Chapter 6 (Becoming a GEM) presents Four C's to channel the aspiring GEM efforts. Capacity involves becoming a reflective thinker who uses emotional intelligence (self-awareness, impulse control, and empathy) to understand oneself and to release the creativeness in others. Competence includes listening well, developing the ability to confront others in a constructive way, and continuous learning. Character consists of humility, grace, introspection, living one's values, and valuing the differences in others. And finally, there is Commitment to ethics, social responsibility, and a larger purpose. This chapter includes practical suggestions for improving one's performance in each of those areas.

The author indicates in his preface that the book is intended primarily for practicing managers, but also for teachers, researchers, and students. I think the book will appeal most to thinking managers and to teachers who are developing students to become managers. The many excerpts from the respondents to Nurick's study of best and worst managers are useful for illustrating his points and making the underlying messages in the book more concrete. Although there are some references to academic work in this area, the focus is primarily on what GEMs (and their opposites) do, and how people then respond. Thus, I agree that the book will be most useful to readers who are either currently practicing managers or who intend to be someday.

I enjoyed reading this book. It brought back to me some of the best and worst managers I have had. More important, it caused me to think about myself and how I manage.

That is where I believe the value of this book lies. For those who are willing to engage in introspection and to really think about how and where they can apply the ideas in this book, it has the potential to help them make transitions to better management.