



**The
Manager's
Magic Potion**

*Better Management
Made Easy*

Julie F. G. Lynch

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By Julie F. G. Lynch

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Introduction

The practice outlined in this e-book began as an aside. In my conversations with hundreds of managers over the past 20 years the same themes kept surfacing: “I don’t have enough time to manage”, “my staff won’t take initiative”, “I’m constantly interrupted”, “I’m under-resourced”, and so on.

I began to coach managers to use a simple set of inquiries designed to hold staff accountable for their own initiative, resourcefulness and professional growth. As managers implemented this practice, we quickly noticed several positive side effects – interruptions decreased, conversations were more efficient and productive, greater depth of knowledge and skill was developed in the team and team members felt more valued for their contributions.

It seemed we had hit on a powerfully concentrated management tool that was easy to use and easy to teach. Encouraged by those who were finding success with this new technique, I developed a short management course based on the five simple inquiries. In less than two hours participants were visibly relieved – not only to have an easy, practical tool at hand but also to find that they were not alone in the burdensome feeling of having to have and give all the answers all the time.

My philosophy throughout my career – first in delivering management training and later as I led Human Resources teams – has been that management practices should be natural, respectful, mutual and easy. Given the success that literally hundreds of managers have had with this practice, I have created more ways for people to learn and adopt the concepts. I offer this material in workshops, in an e-course and, now, in this e-book - simple, short and to the point. My hope is that, with the Magic Potion, your management practice becomes easier and your staff becomes more self-sufficient and feels more valued for their good thinking.

Easy Peasy

The Manager's Magic Potion will save you time, develop staff capability and increase innovation. As if that weren't enough, by using the Potion's five easy inquiries you will more effectively delegate, manage performance and reward your stars. In short, you will run a more productive and motivated organization.

So, what is the Magic Potion? You'll get everything you need in this book, but first, let's start with you.

What's in your way?

Take a moment right now to consider the myriad management challenges you face.

This is your opportunity to vent about all the frustrating aspects of managing people. Really, how often do you get to whine, rant and rage about your job? Here's your chance! Grab a pen and paper - no one will see your work – you can burn the evidence once you're done – so let it fly! Shoot for at least ten things that frustrate you. (Note: Nine times out of ten one of the things on the list is simply: "PEOPLE"!)

You've got a big job. Most managers these days have full-time responsibilities and are expected to manage on top of that. If you could minimize just a few of the challenges you just identified, you would relieve a little bit of the pressure and free yourself up for more meaningful work.

What do you want?

If by magic, the challenges you just listed simply disappeared, what could you achieve? What would the impact be on business objectives? On your team? On you personally? What would you be able to do with that time? That capability?

Take another moment to just think about that and write down what could be accomplished if you were free of these management hindrances. This is your opportunity to dream. Dream of a job where you had the time and space to do all the great things you know you could do. Include that project list that you haven't gotten to but try to go beyond even that. Try to list at least three things in each category: organization, team and you personally.

The purpose of this exercise is to get crystal clear about the TRUE value of minimizing these people management challenges and becoming a more effective manager. What's more compelling: an entry in your calendar for "strategic thinking" or an entry for "blow the doors off the competition"? The more specific you can be about what you're trying to achieve, the more energy your goals will give you.

You're doin' it wrong

Much of what you just envisioned can be achieved. It will take a bit of discipline, the courage to try something new and a new perspective on the role of the manager – but it CAN be done.

What do I mean by a new perspective on management? Well, it might surprise you to know that the job of a manager is NOT to:

Solve Problems

Answer Questions

Make Decisions

Of course, those are the things we tend to assume managers are responsible for, and those are generally the things we do – as a knee-jerk reaction.

We need to challenge ourselves here. In fact, the manager's job ought to be focused on an entirely different set of objectives. Namely:

Develop Problem Solvers

Support and Confirm Answers

Delegate Authority Responsibly

The crimson “M” and the cape

Now, you may be thinking: “The manager’s job is not to solve, answer or decide?! Well, this lady is nuts if she thinks I have time to do anything but!”

You are definitely not alone. And this is exactly why the Manager’s Magic Potion has been such a relief to those who have adopted it. It acknowledges the fact that our days are full of solving, answering and deciding, and it gives us a natural, easy way to wean our staff and – more importantly, ourselves - from this unproductive habit.

Let me explain what I mean. Think about your typical day. An employee walks into your office with a problem. What happens? The employee has barely gotten a few sentences out when you slap the crimson “M” on your chest, tie on the cape and swoop headlong into solving the problem.

It’s what you’re good at. It’s how you got the job. It gives you satisfaction. It’s why the employee showed up on your doorstep in the first place.

And like any bad habit, it’s healthier to kick it.

Monkey management

A Harvard Business Review classic called "[Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey](#)" by William Oncken Jr. and Donald L. Wass describes this habit beautifully. The article tells "the engaging story of the overburdened manager who has unwittingly taken on all of his subordinates' problems."

When an employee comes to you with a problem and you say, "Let me think about that and get back to you," that wet, hungry, unruly monkey of a problem has just leapt from your employee's back...to yours.

The article encourages managers to leave the office at the end of the day with no more monkeys than they arrived with.

You'll find the Manager's Magic Potion supports excellent monkey management.

The dangers of solving problems

Managers in my classes will express concern that if they didn't answer questions all day, they'd be out of a job. They'll argue that it's what they're paid to do. So, what's the problem with solving problems?

When managers dive in and solve problems they miss out on some crucial information and opportunities to make their lives easier.

Worse, in our haste to solve problems and get things on track we can inadvertently:

- Start solving the wrong problem – wasting precious time
- Miss a chance to assess capability by failing to ask what the employee thinks
- Prevent employees from testing their instincts, learning and growing
- Deny employees the opportunity to get the right answer and be recognized.

And most important, by solving the problems ourselves, we are in fact training our employees NOT to take the initiative to be problem solvers. That's something that is damaging to both organizations and employees.

Decades of research on motivation and engagement have shown that true motivation is intrinsic. To be happy and motivated, people need:

- A sense of meaning (Why am I doing this? Why does it matter?)
- A sense of mastery (I'm learning, I'm getting better, I'm progressing)
- A sense of independence (I make my own decisions, I can do it myself, I'm trusted)
- Recognition (My work is valued, I'm making a contribution, Someone noticed)

For these reasons, the Magic Potion is an excellent way of supporting and nurturing employee motivation and engagement.

What kind of magic can you expect?

I was leading a management development program for high potential leaders in an organization and my short course on the Potion was one segment. After lunch one day, one of the participants was compelled to share an experience she had just had at the break. Here's what she said:

"We have a huge project going on back in the office and I've been feeling like this was the worst week I could have possibly been out. So I called the office to see how things were going and of course there was a problem. Normally I would have jumped right in – in fact I had to stop myself - but I figured I'd try the Potion. At first there was kind of a silence when I started asking the questions – I had never done that before so I'm sure it was unexpected. But when I found out what they had already done and that their plans for next steps were good ones, I was able to tell them they were doing a great job. My staff sounded SO HAPPY and now I know I can feel better about being here at the program. I can't believe how much of a difference that made."

The Magic Potion helps you:

- Identify and motivate your star employees
- Identify performance problems
- Delegate more effectively
- Develop your staff
- Save loads of time
- Become a tremendously better manager

So, here it is:

The Manager's Magic Potion

Inquiry #1 - Tell me more

Inquiry #2 - What have you done so far?

Inquiry #3 - What are your next steps?

Inquiry #4 - What obstacles do you foresee?

Inquiry #5 - How can I help?

Deceptively simple

The Magic Potion is both a philosophy and a practice. The philosophy, as discussed, is that managers should not generally solve, answer and decide but instead develop that capability in their staff.

The practice consists of the five inquiries above, which you can modify to fit your own style. If the wording seems awkward or unnatural for you, change it! The idea here is to have a reliable plan for resisting the temptation to solve problems yourself and for setting expectations for employee initiative, resourcefulness and professional accountability.

Managers are also encouraged to use their own judgment.

In one of my workshops a manager asked what you should do if the employee doesn't have any next steps or can't identify the obstacles and just needs help at that point. Naturally, the answer is to stop asking irrelevant Magic Potion questions and just help the poor soul out.

The value of a tool is in its applicability and its use. Years of application across many managers and teams have shown that the Potion is widely applicable and incredibly simple to use. We managers often don't have time for anything fancier!

(Note: you can also apply this philosophy to other facets of work and home life. It works great with spouses!)

Using the Magic Potion

Today we need to do much much more with much much less. This means that we need to tap into the talent at hand in a deeper and more effective way than we have in the past. By posing these five inquiries when a problem is presented, the team develops capability and capacity.

Over time, you'll find you can adapt the Potion philosophy and practice to many other settings. For example:

Career-growth Conversations: When an employee asks for more opportunity or professional growth you can ensure that the responsibility and accountability for the definition and pursuit of career growth lies squarely with the employee and that your involvement is one of mentor or coach instead of administrative servant or taskmaster.

Client/Customer Conversations: When a client calls with a problem you can better understand the context, including how your product or service is being used, leaving the client feeling fully heard and partnering with them on a solution that may be more effective than what they were initially asking for.

Colleague Conversations: When a colleague presents a challenge you might still apply the philosophy but adjust the inquiries. For instance, "Tell me more" might be followed by "How did that impact you?" "What do you see as your options?" "What obstacles do you see?" and "How can we best partner on this?"

This is not abdication of your own responsibility. This is curiosity about the other person's context, perceptions, perspectives, creativity and resourcefulness. This is the determination of the exact nature of the problem and an identification of where your unique contribution will make the most impact.

Let's take a look at what specifically we gain with each of the inquiries.

Inquiry #1 - Tell me more

Alternative Wording: “What else can you tell me?” “Can you give me more context?”

This inquiry provides more context for the problem and clarity about what the real issue is. It also gives the employee a chance to vent if necessary, diffusing the emotion of the situation. It also buys you time – if nothing else – to remember not to take the monkey.

Results:

- Context
- More complete understanding of the problem
- Buys you time to remember not to take the monkey
- Allows employee to be heard and be more open to ideas as a result
- Avoids the potential for solving the wrong problem

Pitfalls: Not always applicable. Some problems are not well suited to the “Tell me more” inquiry. That’s where your own judgment comes in. For instance, if an employee comes to you and says the copier is broken, you might consider skipping right to Inquiry #2. Use judgment but err on the side of asking for more information when you can.

Inquiry #2 - What have you done so far?

Alternative Wording: “Take me through what’s been done already.” “How have you handled it so far?” “Bring me up to speed on what’s been done.”

This handy question avoids the following common and unsatisfying exchange:

Boss: Did you try this?

Employee: Yep.

Boss: Did you try that?

Employee: Yep.

Boss: Did you try the other thing?

Employee: Yep.

...and so on. Why we put ourselves through this unproductive and time wasting exchange is beyond any of us – not to mention the potential damage to morale that it causes. Have you ever been in the employee’s shoes in that conversation? You head back to the water cooler and complain to your colleagues, right? “Can you believe she asked if I’d done this, that or the other thing? What, does she think I’m a moron?!?”

Results:

- Time saved by not asking the basics
- Insight into performance level of employee
- Opportunity to recognize good work in real time
- Avoids insulting employee’s intelligence and damaging morale
- Identification of potential resource for future delegation
- Opportunity to manage performance in real time

Pitfalls: No major pitfalls to speak of but, as always, use your judgment.

A different approach

By assuming that we know what the problem is, that the employee needs soup-to-nuts guidance, and that the answer is all up to us, we are doing ourselves, our employee, the team and the organization a disservice.

You can see from the first two inquiries that the Manager's Magic Potion offers a different approach. It asks that you ASK. By asking for more context and inquiring as to what someone has already done, we can avoid insulting our staff's intelligence and give them a chance to demonstrate their initiative and resourcefulness. This provides a fantastic opportunity to recognize good judgment.

The conversation back at the water cooler might go a little differently too.

Inquiry #3 - What are your next steps?

Alternative Wording: “What do you think you’ll do next?” “What do you think should happen next?” “What options do you see?”

When an employee comes to us with a problem, we often assume that they have come to us for the solution to that problem. Crazy as it sounds, they may not really want that at all! In fact, it’s just as likely they have a different need entirely: encouragement to use their own solution, validation or recognition of their independent thinking, advice on how to productively navigate culture or politics.

And even if that’s not what they’re looking for, isn’t it what we ultimately would like to help them get to? Asking the person what they plan to do next offers an opportunity for them to shine, to demonstrate ability and to receive confirmation on their instincts – building confidence and independence for next time.

If, on the other hand, their next steps are misguided, it gives you the opportunity to offer constructive guidance at the perfect time – BEFORE they put themselves out there. This is real-time performance management at its finest.

Results:

- Insight into capability of employee
- Opportunity to recognize good thinking in real time
- Opportunity for employee to stretch professionally
- Identification of potential resource for future delegation
- Chance to manage performance in real time, relatively safely
- Excellent monkey management

Pitfalls: If the person is clearly at a loss for next steps, either don’t pose this inquiry at all or, if you do, move on quickly. You can still proceed to Inquiry #4 if applicable.

Inquiry #4 - What obstacles do you foresee?

Alternative Wording: “What’s in your way?” “What might prevent those next steps?” “What concerns do you have?” “What do you need in order to feel more comfortable about taking next steps?”

This inquiry is where the focus starts to narrow to what you as the manager can uniquely offer in support of the problem. It also provides keen insight into potential development areas for the employee or organization: Is it a skill deficiency? An interpersonal issue? A process concern? We gain valuable insight by asking this question. If the problem is not so much a technical one but rather more related to your employee not being able to work around her colleague Jane’s horrific interpersonal skills, well then...now you know.

So many managers have been in the exasperating position of answering the same darn question or solving the same darn problems over and over again. “Aaaargh! Why don’t they get it?!?” We’ll never know why they don’t get it until we ask. This inquiry eradicates the time waster of answering the question but not the problem. We may be answering the question or the problem that is presented to us but without delving into the obstacles, we are only addressing the symptom, not the root cause.

Results:

- Insight into what exactly is challenging to this person
- Insight into organizational, cultural or political dysfunction
- Identification of specific professional development opportunity
- Opportunity to mentor and coach in real time
- Saves time in the long run, preventing “boomerang” problems
- Excellent monkey management

Pitfalls: Be prepared to receive feedback or information that you may not agree with. Indeed, the obstacle could be you! When receiving feedback, be open, non-defensive and curious. You don’t need to agree but you can thank the person for their perspective and let them know you’ll take it under advisement.

Inquiry #5 - How can I help?

Alternative Wording: None (I like this one just as is)

This final inquiry holds the employee fully accountable for solving the problem and requires them to remain in full possession of the monkey.

Oftentimes, at this point the problem has been solved or the actions to date and planned actions are confirmed enough so that no action is warranted on the part of the manager. Or, at the very least, you've avoided a misguided attempt at solving a technical problem when the problem the whole time has been Jane's horrific interpersonal skills.

It could be, on the other hand, that the employee asks you to take over the problem at this point. That is of course your prerogative and having gone through the Potion you are now in a position to make a purposeful decision about whether and what part(s) to take on or delegate to someone else and for what reason.

Results:

- Time saved as request for specific help is outlined
- Efficient and appropriate use of your time and salary level
- Expectation is set for employee accountability

Pitfalls: Be prepared for a request for your involvement. If you need to stall – ask for time to think about it, then determine what parts you should do and what parts the employee should do if any.

Healthy practice

At this point, you have:

- Saved time by getting more context around the issue and by not asking unproductive and potentially morale damaging questions
- Recognized or given guidance to your employee in response to his or her efforts thus far
- Discovered the extent to which the employee is resourceful and savvy
- Perhaps discovered a resource you weren't previously aware of to whom you might delegate (or perhaps confirmed that such a resource does not indeed exist in that particular staff member)

Most importantly: **YOU HAVE NOT TAKEN POSSESSION OF THE MONKEY**

It's like water and exercise. If you make this line of inquiry a habit, your management practice stays healthy. Without it, something withers: results, relationships, morale, your own patience and energy for the job...something. And when this technique is done correctly and consistently? It's like MAGIC. You end up fostering independence, improving morale and building greater capability, confidence and capacity within your team.

Bringing it home

Many managers have found it useful to communicate the Potion to their staff ahead of time. One workshop participant even wrote the steps out on a giant flip chart page to take back and hang in his office!

Consider how you might introduce your new practice to your staff. Of course, you can just start using it with no formal preamble but if you are so inclined to give them a heads up, here is sample language you can use to get started:

"Hi everyone. I just read a great little book called The Manager's Magic Potion and it prompted me to make sure I was doing everything in my power to listen to your input, implement your ideas, give you satisfying opportunities, and increase the productivity and results of the whole team. The book outlined a way to do that and I'd like to share it with you.

When a problem or question comes up, rather than jumping in and not letting you all take the lead, I'd like to know more about what you've already done to solve the problem (so that I'm not second guessing you), and about what you think we should do. This will help me get out of your way and will give you each an opportunity to get more involved in the decision-making process."

So now back to you, Reader. What will your next steps be?

A recommendation: post the Magic Potion inquiries where they will remind you to politely decline the monkey.

However you decide to implement your new practice, I know you'll get great benefit from using the Manager's Magic Potion!

About the author

An expert in the art and science of motivation, management, and meaningful work, Julie Lynch has over 20 years of experience in executive and management development, employee performance and organizational effectiveness. Her firm, Uncommon Consulting, specializes in facilitating the development of outstanding individuals and teams. Julie also has the unique distinction of serving as Master Trainer for Motivation Factor®: the remarkable new framework for achieving lasting motivation and engagement.

Learn more about Uncommon Consulting's training programs, e-courses, management coaching and other projects at:

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