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**IMPACTFUL  
LEADER**



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Monkey Management

## monkey management

To have a '**monkey on your back**' is to be saddled a problem that is making your life difficult. In one story, a creature described as something like an ape jumps on Sinbad's back and will not get off! In earliest times, it was said to have been associated with being addicted – to narcotics: opium and the like.

In our current times, new addictions have come about like being addicted to our devices, being addicted to full calendars and then complaining about it!

In 1974, William [Bill] Oncken Jr and Donald L Wass wrote one of HBR's all-time best selling articles '**Managing Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?**'

It explained how easy it was to unwittingly end up with someone else's work or tasks to do, referred to as having a Monkey on your back - one that's hanging on for grim death.

The challenge is, almost 50 years after its publication, that the article can seem dated, especially as it comes from a time of command and control management. Management and leadership have come a long way in 50 years yet the message and its immediately understood imagery is as relevant today as ever.

Our team, in conjunction with PerformanceHQ, has evolved Oncken and Wass's **Four Rules Of Monkey Management** and brought them into the current leadership realm and vernacular.

With that as the lighthouse, we have created the **PHQ Four Rules Of Monkey Management 2.0**.

They are:

1. Get Clarity About The Monkey
2. Assign stewardship of the Monkey
3. Schedule feeding time
4. Schedule health checks

## the PHQ 4 rules of monkey management

### 1. Get Clarity About The Monkey

Get very clear about exactly what the Monkey is. This is where the 5 Essential Questions [see Page 6] form an exceptional basis for gaining clarity and are invaluable in this instance.

### Stay In Control

Don't start the conversation with someone [peer, colleague, boss, one of your reporting team] if you believe there is no time to reach a conclusion . Ask how long the conversation will take and if you don't have the time, say just that.

Something like:

*"I don't have time to discuss this right now, get a time in my diary so we can discuss this."*

The Monkey stays where it is and you've created some structure around the upcoming conversation rather than being blindsided without time to prepare.

The key thing is to not say something like:

*"Let me think about it and I'll come back to you."*

You have successfully lifted the Monkey off their back and placed it firmly on yours. It also means you have lost control.

Do not end this conversation until there is agreement about what the Monkey looks like and next steps.

When you have sufficient information to satisfy yourself you know exactly what the Monkey is and to decide on next moves [from the 5 Essential Questions, etc]

Remember:

*"What is one thing you can do in the next 48 hours that could move this issue forward"*

and...

*"What can we do to support you and achieving this?"*

### Next Steps

The next steps are really dependent upon the situation, the relationship, the context of the discussion and the area and people that you work with – but you can decide that.

The key thing is to avoid taking the Monkey on yourself unless there is complete clarity about timeframe, expectations, etc.

You may elect to join forces with the Monkey holder and help them find a solution, implement the solution and/or take a number of next steps, but be quite specific around that, with language like:

*"I can support you in doing x and y... "*

*"I can help you as you search for a solution..."*

*"I can show you all of the resources you have at your fingertips that you can use... then next time you will know exactly what to do and where you can do directly for [?]"*

The outcome of any of these discussions might be agreed next steps – who will become the Monkey's steward – that may include you. But just be sure there is an agreed 'return policy' as well – when your furry friend will be given back.

## 2. Assign Stewardship Of The Monkey

All Monkeys must be assigned a steward. Someone to look after them and make sure they remain healthy. It needs to be clear who their steward is, but it need not always be you unless it's appropriate and/or you choose to.

Some examples of the language you might find appropriate are:

### Follow Up...

*"I'm going to leave this with you now and get you to find 30 minutes in my calendar to discuss next steps. In the meantime, can you get prepared by getting the following together for our meeting..."*

### Action...

*"If you do X and Y that will help move things forward to the next stage. When you get to that point give me an update"*

### Deferred Action...

*"When you have X and Y ready, get 30 minutes in my calendar and I will lead you through the resources you have access to that will help you resolve this..."*

### Assistance...

*"When you have the information together, get 30 minutes in my calendar and I can help you go through possible list of options to help you develop an action plan"*

### 'Practice Makes Perfect'

It not an exhaustive list but you can use the phrasing and the content to create your own statements. You will note that none of those instances are an offer to take the Monkey. Just remember the thing that you are trying to avoid is offering to take the issue over, so the Monkey ends up on your back.

That does not mean you can't or won't assist, provide advice, identify resources, come up the action plan - but at all times you're cognizant of not simply taking the Monkey over and offering your stewardship.

You won't get this right all the time, but you will get better at it. Take the opportunity to practice with your Triad [see the COMMUNICATION EXERCISE] because the Coach Of The Coach knows exactly what to look for.

### COMMUNICATION EXERCISE

Put together the framework for a discussion around an issue you're facing OR a situation where you ended up with the Monkey [perhaps without even realising it!]. Get your Triad together and test out your ideas.

Remember the three roles – COACH, COACHEE/CLIENT and COACH OF THE COACH.

Coach of the Coach can be timekeeper. Keep it tight otherwise there can be a tendency to waffle and stray off-piste. You can have some fun with this – perhaps work against the clock and give yourself 2 minutes to reach your outcomes.

Take input, ideas and feedback from your Triad. Practice, refine, practice some more. You will become very proficient. It will also raise your radar to detect when someone is working hard to give you, their Monkey.

### 3. Schedule Feeding Time

All animals including Monkeys need to be fed regularly and on schedule. So, agree on what the feed schedule looks like. Arrange the 'feeding sessions' in your calendar, so they are not just ad hoc and disorganised. Have the current Monkey steward arrange update times in your calendar, so that you can have a conversation about progress and not just by ad hoc emails, phone calls and chat messages.

This doesn't always need to be a long conversation (could be as little as 10-15 minutes) but it provides you the opportunity to ask questions about status and progress.

Whilst you may not have the Monkey on your back it's important to track progress.

### 4. Schedule Health Checks

Aside from regular feeding - health checks are really important. If the Monkey is around for any length of time, these can be very relevant. They should also be planned out in advance and put in the calendar.

Whether the Monkey steward is a peer, your boss, part of a reporting team or an external stakeholder, this health check allow you to get a deep dive into what's going on. It is a more in-depth conversation than Feeding Time, so warrants a structured well run meeting.

The aim is to ensure things are progressing and nothing is slipping through the cracks. Better to be on top of things and provide support where and when required or warranted. Less opportunity for surprises.

Every meeting and interaction is an opportunity for communication. It is very hard to over communicate and better that the Monkey stewards know that you are committed to supporting them as much as you can.

All of these interactions are also really important opportunities to build your brand. So, make good use of them. Use the visibility to your advantage.

END

## the 5 essential questions

1. "What's on your mind?"
2. "...and what else? ...and what else?  
Tell me more about that..."
3. "What's the real challenge here, for you?"
4. "What is one thing you can do in the next 48 hours that could move this issue forward?"
5. "What can we do to support you in achieving this?"

Based on 'The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever' – Michael Bungay Stanier - 2016