



The Invisible Spotlight

Why Managers Can't Hide

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *The Invisible Spotlight*, management experts Craig Wasserman and Doug Katz make a compelling argument that all managers work in the heat of an invisible spotlight where their every word and deed are scrutinized by employees. Remarkably, most managers are unaware of this reality. As a result, they underestimate the impact of the passing moments that are at the heart of their management relationships.

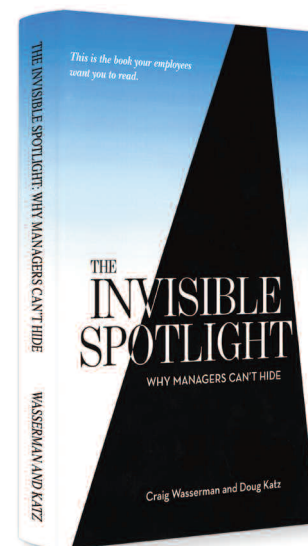
Wasserman and Katz tell illuminating stories from their nearly 40 years in the trenches about management successes and misadventures in the unseen spotlight. Each story acts like a mirror, reflecting the reader's own management challenges. The authors' realistic observations and insights gained as consultants enrich the lessons that are offered.

The Invisible Spotlight presents a fresh, practical perspective on building sound management relationships. Whether you're a brand new, first-line supervisor, an experienced middle manager or a seasoned senior executive, you'll find something here worth your time and contemplation.

The Invisible Spotlight: Why Managers Can't Hide offers readers a hard look at the soft side of managing.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why the management role does not come naturally.
- How instincts and reflexes alone can be as self-defeating as they are useful.
- How management requires practice, discipline and self-reflection.
- How managers are architects of the relationships they form with their employees.
- How people don't change when they're comfortable; they change when they're uncomfortable.
- Why no paint-by-numbers approach to managing will protect managers from missteps.



by Craig Wasserman and
Doug Katz

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE INVISIBLE SPOTLIGHT

by Craig Wasserman and Doug Katz

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Introduction

Whether managers appreciate it or not, they are a central and dominant influence in their employees' lives. Employees spend countless hours watching, listening, thinking about, talking about and trying to please their bosses. This is what is meant by the invisible spotlight. Being in that constant spotlight comes with the territory.

Because of the management position you hold — because of its status and authority — your words and deeds carry enormous weight. They can heighten your employees' commitment in a profound and lasting way. They can help your employees perform — and want to perform — at exceptional levels. By the same token, your words and deeds can cause your employees hours of uncertainty and distress — even the off-handed remarks you make without malice. What you say and do can erode your employee's spirit and contribute to all manner of performance problems. It's important, therefore, to take stock of what you do, how you do it and how you want to do it. ●

PART I: THE MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP

So much of your relationship with employees is forged in brief, unscripted moments. Sometimes the moments are dramatic, sometimes quiet and fleeting. A passing conversation with an employee, a glance of approval or disapproval, a gesture of encouragement when an employee's confidence flags — these are the moments that can make or break your relationship with anyone who works for you.

Unfortunately, the popular management literature of the day encourages you to develop “reliable management systems” and a “consistent management style” as if the secret to success were in your everyday, predictable management routines. The fugitive moments I'm referring to here barely get a mention. Let me assure you that you can raise or lower the spirits of an employee, eliminate or perpetuate confusion, make important things happen or stall ... all in a matter of seconds. And yet you might barely notice what you've done.

Once you pay attention though, you can create these pivotal moments rather than relying on your reflexes. The trick is to consciously control the influence you have and to act with intention. This control — this self-control really — makes it possible to turn a glancing moment into a lasting result. *These moments form the foundation of the management relationship.*

Inspiring Your Staff to Deliver and Innovate to Their Potential

If you're in a management role — whether out of desire, duty or fate — you must understand that at the core of your work are your management relationships. No amount of inspired business savvy, motivational energy, administrative skill, marketing expertise or technological genius will compensate for an unhealthy relationship. None of these talents will bear the best possible fruit unless your management relationship is well watered.

An employee doesn't set the tone, standards or direction for the way the two of you work. The foundation



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of this relationship always falls to you. You're the *architect*. You're the one responsible to create the conditions that promote your employees' best work. It all boils down to an inescapable truth: If the foundation of the management relationship is solid, it's because you're doing something right. If the foundation falters or fails, it's because you're doing something wrong. It's that simple and that difficult. ●

The Invisible Spotlight

A new vice president joined a large company where I was consulting. A vacant corner office was assigned to him and was scheduled for repainting in advance of his start date. But a miscommunication between the facilities department and the contractor delayed the job by a few weeks.

When he arrived for his first day, there was some confusion about where he should park himself. The VP noticed an unoccupied office on his department's floor and insisted that he set up there for the interim. The office was sterile and cramped, with barely enough space for a visitor's chair. Not an office befitting a corporate officer. Yet the VP insisted.

He used that office for two weeks as his home base. He met his staff and colleagues there and spent hours at the desk, acquainting himself with the organization he'd just joined.

When I stopped in to meet him days later, he made no reference to his undersized quarters; never reached for a polished explanation nor an assurance that he would soon move to a more suitable space. He allowed his decision to speak for itself. He knew his behavior was making a statement about his values and his leadership. He knew those around him were noticing and hearing through the grapevine about his choices. He was yet another manager who understood that his people were talking about him at dinner — that he was front and center in an invisible spotlight.

He made a deliberate decision. He regarded the logistical delay not as an inconvenience, but as an opportunity rich with symbolism. ●

Management Is Work

It was apparent to those with whom I spoke that Phil had brought significant improvements to the business. But one other theme ran through every conversation I had with his supervisors and staff. Just about everyone told some version of the same story: a supervisor demeaned in mid-sentence for a scheduling procedure

that Phil thought was misguided; a newer supervisor's safety improvement recommendation harshly dismissed because Phil declared it too costly for the presumed benefits; a department head's carefully conceived plans for the layout of the truck bays summarily overridden. The word in the hallways was that Phil had no patience, his ideas were the only viable ones, he was callous, thoughtless and intimidating. He was like the cow that gives good milk but then knocks the bucket over.

Working in Phil's world was hard on his work force. It was beyond just stretching to do their level best as professionals. It had become personal. The relentless pressure had become demoralizing. Each supervisor described the same journey: from initial skepticism soon after Phil arrived, to full throttle enthusiasm and an eagerness to please, to a sense of tentativeness and cowering — both at work and after hours — as the atmosphere became abusive. Several supervisors were actively seeking other jobs.

The Risk of Self-Acceptance

This should have been a pretty tough message for Phil to digest. But as I held up the proverbial mirror, Phil simply looked at me, occasionally nodding in agreement. When I was finished, he reflected a moment. Then, "You're not telling me anything I don't already know. My family has been telling me these things for years. I don't suffer fools well. That's just the way I am."

I had to respect the guy for his candor. But his self-acceptance was self-destructive. "Phil, we've just come to the reason your VP sent me here. He didn't give you this job so you could be a bastard. He gave it to you with the expectation that you would be a professional leader. Those are far from the same thing."

Phil sat calmly and considered my response. So I continued, "At this company, working as a manager, you're expected to work at *being* a manager. You can't simply rely on your 'natural ways.' You're the guy responsible for making these workplace relationships work, not driving them into the turf. You're the guy who has to develop these supervisors into confident captains, not shadows of themselves, limping away for safe harbor. You're the guy who has to establish an atmosphere that encourages best efforts, not one that exposes vulnerabilities and insecurities. Being an effective manager is your job. It's a set of skills that needs to be mastered. In this regard, you're failing."

Phil worked hard at catching himself. He began to allow others to succeed and err more on their own and to learn from both. He began to insist on the critical things, recognizing that not everything is critical. He

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learned that his natural impatience was a virtue so long as it served to energize, not humiliate. And most important for Phil, he came to appreciate that his employees wanted to please him; he needed to master the art of making that possible for them. ●

PART II: MANAGEMENT MOMENTS

The idea that you can discuss unwanted news or provide a critical assessment and at the same time keep an employee smiling is silly. There's just no way around the fact that speaking the truth about a failure, an oversight or an inconvenient development is thorny for all parties.

And yet, over the past half century, we've clung to the idea that managers should manage conflict without anyone feeling ill at ease. We ask managers to read books, watch instructional DVDs and attend training classes on how to achieve a mutually satisfying, "win-win solution" through "open, empathic dialogue" with their employees. We've somehow convinced ourselves that if only managers polish their communication skills, change can be comfortable.

How to Discuss Serious Problems and Deficiencies

Unfortunately, managers too often come away from these "lessons" believing they can discuss serious problems and deficiencies without causing any pain and suffering. How "comfortably" the conversation goes becomes their measure of success. But here's the thing: *Contrary to popular belief, people don't change and improve when they're comfortable. They change when they're uncomfortable.*

When managers varnish the truth, they may avoid tension and conflict, but they'll fix nothing. They'll improve nothing. And this is because they create no incentive, opportunity or direction for change.

Watch deliberate managers handle difficult conversations. Their objective is to speak clearly and frankly enough to carve a path to change while protecting the relationship. The truth is, some degree of discomfort sets the stage for change. The trick is not to avoid it, but to manage it head on and with respect. ●

The Internal Dialogue

You can't rely on your reflexes alone when you need to walk a tightrope; managing important moments requires anticipation and rehearsal.

To the untrained eye, it may appear that capable managers are endowed with a knack for thinking on their feet. They seem to know just what to say, just how to

act. What's uncanny is how spontaneous their reactions seem. Unscripted. Off the cuff. Capable managers seem to respond in the moment, to the moment, without time or need for planning.

Don't be fooled.

Sure, all of us have had the good fortune of a sudden insight in the midst of turbulence. But managers with staying power don't count on their reflexes alone when they walk a tightrope. Nor do they expect the tightrope itself to somehow reveal how to balance on it.

Being *naturally* quick on your feet is a management myth. Quickness requires years of practice, lots of mistakes and recoveries, and careful preparation. The reality is that conscientious managers spend hours anticipating the rough roads they expect to travel. They score their important interactions the way a composer scores a symphony. This is the *internal dialogue*.

How to Prepare for Pivotal Conversations With Employees

When managers prepare for pivotal conversations with their employees, they don't do it with a broad brush. In fact, what they do resembles the vivid, private rehearsals of a stage actor or the pre-visualizations of an Olympic athlete. They don't imagine their challenges in general terms; they engineer them down to the particulars.

You've seen these managers as you commute to work. They're talking to themselves in their cars. Sometimes they'll turn their rearview mirrors toward themselves so they can speak into their own eyes. You see their lips moving, but they're not singing with the radio or having a Bluetooth chat. They're talking out loud to themselves. What you're catching a glimpse of are diligent managers in an internal dialogue — anticipating how they'll navigate the ebbs and flows of a tough conversation with an employee. ●

Moments of Recognition

More thought than you ever imagined goes into the art of recognition and encouragement.

To effectively recognize and encourage employees, you need to know what you're looking for. You need patience as the employee moves toward success in small, uneven steps. You need a sense of timing. And you need to use language that not only conveys that you're pleased but what you're pleased with. None of these skills comes naturally to most of us.

Clarity Makes It More Instructive

"Well done, Peggy." "Good work, Janice." "I'm real-

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ly proud of you, Herb.” These are always encouraging words, but they’re not always as useful as they can be.

Words this general will make an employee feel good. But too often they don’t communicate *what he or she should feel good about*. They’re too broad to convey what the employee did to earn them.

Recognition can instill more than a positive feeling. It can be instructive. It can help an employee develop specific abilities and perspectives. To make it useful, you need to speak in words that your employee can “see.” Being specific is powerful, whether you’re catching an employee doing something right or wrong. You have to clear your head, formulate your thoughts and know exactly what you saw, heard or read that you want to recognize and encourage.

“Paul, I realize it’s not easy for you to pose those challenging questions about this project to your own colleagues, but I’m glad you did it in today’s meeting. It makes us all sharper.”

“Diane, I know you would have liked more time to review the proposal, but I appreciate your decision to release it now so we have a shot at making our deadline.”

Your employees will learn most from vivid words of recognition and encouragement.

As for taking the time to get good at this management skill, there’s one more thing to consider: Your employees will be able to digest more forthright criticisms if you’ve conveyed both a readiness and an ability to recognize what they do well. Praise is not just “nice.” Nor is it just “motivating.” It actually positions a manager to critique more candidly if and when a moment of instructive discomfort is called for. ●

Credible Moments

Your management relationships are defined more by the disconnects your employees see than by the declarations they hear.

No matter how artfully you orchestrate a given interaction, it alone won’t ensure the success of your management relationships. You’re in the invisible spotlight between interactions, too. During these periods, your employees are looking for signs of your credibility. They’re judging if you mean what you say. They’re comparing word and deed.

A lot goes on in the passing moments. And a lot goes on between them, too, when employees get a glimpse of how closely what you say aligns with what you do. You can rest assured that your management relationships will be defined far more by the disconnects your employees see than by the declarations they hear.

Employees Watch You Like a Hawk

Your employees watch you like a hawk, keenly observing what you say, how you say it, what you do and how you do it. You cannot escape the invisible spotlight. And as childlike as you might think it is, they will imitate you, too. That’s right: Full-grown, level-headed, self-respecting adults will imitate you. It’s not childlike really. It’s human. Keep your jacket on during meetings and others will follow your lead. Take that jacket off and observe how your employees interpret your action as permission to remove their own jackets. Wear a tie or scarf to work each day and watch them begin to appear on others.

In a more substantive and important way, your employees adopt your point of view; they mimic your approach to people and problems. If you’re open to ideas and give the benefit of the doubt to others, your employees will do likewise. By the same token, if you’re intolerant, accept nothing short of perfection, question the trustworthiness or speak ill of your colleagues, you’ll hear echoes of these same attitudes in your employees’ words and actions.

Employees act on the unspoken and near universal assumption that to be like you is to be liked by you. The enlightened manager with honorable intentions understands this dynamic and uses it to encourage the highest levels of pride and commitment. ●

Moments of Recovery

Managing is a sloppy game with too many unknowns to calculate the right moves every time. Recovering from a mistake is one of the hardest challenges to address with grace.

You can dedicate yourself to honoring every principle and prescription, and still you will stumble. More than once in your career, you’ll look dumb, give the wrong impression, bruise someone’s feelings, have a meltdown. Everyone takes his or her eye off the ball once in a while. Everyone is blind to some persistent idiosyncrasy or other that spells management trouble.

If these eventualities are not what you bargained for as a manager, go to your room and hide under your bed. You’ll make fewer blunders there.

You’re in that invisible spotlight. Your employees are talking about you at the dinner table, listening to what you say, measuring how closely your words square with your deeds. So a management mistake is always under a more high-powered microscope than a private or personal one.

Skillful managers have learned that ignoring a misstep

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or denying a destructive behavior pattern is itself destructive. They've come to appreciate that a blown opportunity or brainless act creates one more opportunity to strengthen the management relationship. Clearly, recovering from a mistake is one of the hardest challenges to address with grace. It takes more soul searching and intestinal fortitude than carrying out a routine management duty. But therein lies the chance to excel.

There Is No Undo Command

So what do you do once you've fallen off the ladder, injuring yourself and maybe someone below? If you're smart, you step up to your obligation to apologize and make reparations to your victims. You resolve to climb ladders in the future with more care. And if the injury leaves your body permanently compromised, you stay off ladders.

It's the same when you try to recover from management injuries; those you inflict and those you sustain. You apologize and begin rebuilding the foundation of your relationship with care. You do this by compensating for the damage you've done in a compelling way. Though you can't take back a slap in the face, you can stop slapping — and offer enough evidence of regret, respect and reform to dilute the impact. ●

PART III: MANAGEMENT PASSAGES

Progressing through your management career is all about adapting to changing situations.

Every competent manager learns how to make this transition eventually, but it's not without an internal struggle. As you would expect, the struggle is most acute in times of crisis. Dan, a favorite client, is a case in point. He's yet another example of how sustained, conscious effort is indispensable to mastering the management role.

Like many fast-track managers, Dan's greatest assets in some situations played out as liabilities in others. He fought his natural tendency to run over people in meetings, to grab control from those he thought were dawdling or just idling. He had the answers well before others knew what the questions were; a source of unending frustration for him. He had competitive fire in his eyes and a desire to surpass whatever goals were set, no matter how demanding.

Our earliest consultations were about the basic challenge of managing versus doing — accomplishing things through his management relationships instead of doing it all himself.

I stopped by unannounced to see Dan one morning.

"You're going to be mad at me," he said.

"Why will I be mad at you?"

"Because next week, I'm going on vacation with my wife. We're going to Europe."

"Nothing to be mad at so far."

"And I plan to call in every morning at 7:30 local time to run a staff meeting."

Alarm bell. This would be a setback ... a vestige of Dan's need to be in the fray. The truth of it was, Dan just didn't want to be left out of the action. Were he on hand in a crisis, he knew he'd be able to dive into a phone booth at a moment's notice and change into his Superman costume. But a distance of 6,000 miles would make heroic acts impossible.

A Substantial Challenge

Dan was at a crossroads. He knew time was limited, and the challenge would be substantial. He thoroughly dreaded the consequences should his staff misstep while he was vacationing. I assured him that the supervisors who report to him were as prone to errors as he dreaded. And I reminded him that he had for some time been resolved to confront the challenges of his transition from doing to leading. This would be a pivotal one.

Dan was beginning to see the vacation not as a missed opportunity to prove his individual worthiness, but as a chance to demonstrate his *management* worthiness. The trip would allow him to test — and showcase — the leadership talents he had been working so hard to nurture in his staff. He also knew that engineering this moment capably would impress those whose opinions he cared about and respected.

The Rewards of Self-Restraint

When he returned, he found that his employees had performed admirably in his absence, some more adroitly than others. Several had war stories to tell and some bragged about their successes.

In the days after he got back, he sensed an increased level of enthusiasm and commitment within the team as they handled day-to-day details that he had previously kept for himself. He also noted that a number of the issues being brought to his attention by his supervisors were more sophisticated because the staff was beginning to dispose of the more routine matters themselves. He responded by delegating broader responsibilities to those on the team who had demonstrated a capacity to take them on and who had earned the trust of his fellow managers. ●

When the Magic Doesn't Seem to Work

Sometimes your plate gets full with unwanted developments, imperfect choices and unexpected outcomes.

Over the years, Andy counseled Kevin, established standards of conduct, tried to hide him behind intermediaries and sent him to charm school. All to no avail.

Andy faced two management imperatives. He was expected to find and support the talent that would make his company as profitable as possible; and he was expected to maintain an environment in which a team of professionals could cooperate to keep the company profitable over the long haul. But Andy reached a different conclusion:

“Enough is enough,” Andy thought. “No one person — no matter his talents — is worth the disruption to our company’s culture and to my credibility as a manager. As much as the organization may suffer in the short run by losing Kevin, and as much as I may have to pick up the slack until I replace him, we’ll be better off in the long run. We’ll be healthier.”

After giving Kevin one final opportunity to rein himself in — an ultimatum he just couldn’t bring himself to yield to — Andy and he agreed on a separation package.

And then, like clockwork, Andy spoke the words I’ve learned to expect in such complicated situations, having heard them over and over again for decades:

“I should have done it sooner.”

Andy had more to say some weeks later, and every word of it is instructive:

“The dark mood in the organization has lifted, our staff is more collaborative than ever and I feel better. But make no mistake: We lost value and lots of talent when I let Kevin go. If you’ve never been in a job like this, you can’t possibly understand what a sacrifice that is. Many close to this situation saw him only as a monster and a brute. They made him a one-dimensional caricature just so they could ignore the ambiguity of it all. But Kevin was a brilliant contributor. A money machine. He did exactly what the company is set up to do. He made our Big Guns very, very happy. And he forced us to do our best.

“Having said all this, *I should have done it sooner.*”

No Easy Way Out

So many organizations have a Kevin. These talented, yet flawed folks offer you no easy out.

They always bring something invaluable: highly developed skills and savvy; a large black book of contacts and

relationships; gravitas in the industry; a rare expertise; a strategic view of the company’s future. And, at the same time, in some other way, they are poisonous.

In these situations, when there’s no handbook to consult, you are left with your own assessment of the options, your own calculation of what your organization can tolerate and your own conscience. You’ve done your best when you’ve thought these things through with care, seeking the help of those who have fought similar battles and you’re prepared to manage the consequences — both the favorable and the unfavorable ones.

Management is work. And that’s in no small part because you practice it in a real and flawed world, not a world of formulas and fairy tales. ●

Idiosyncrasies and Imperfections

As a manager, you bring three things to work each day:

- You bring your mental map of the management role — everything you’ve learned from role models, training programs, the reading you’ve done and your own experience in leadership positions.
- You bring whatever planning and scripting you’ve done in preparation for the interactions you expect to have — the lines and behaviors you’ve worked out in your internal dialogues to make specific moments meaningful and productive.
- Finally, you bring you — you bring your battery of personal passions and preoccupations, preferences and prejudices, private anxieties and apprehensions, and even physical and social quirks. Sometimes these are natural gifts that will enhance your management impact; sometimes they’re baggage that will burden it.

The Knotty Thing About Your Idiosyncrasies

Your management relationships are profoundly affected by your virtues and idiosyncrasies. They find their way into every interaction with everyone you come in contact with: employees, colleagues, customers, vendors and bosses. And because they do, your personal watermarks not only affect the outcome of specific interactions, but they also define the complexion and the tempo of your entire workplace environment.

The knotty thing about your idiosyncrasies is that they’re, hands down, the hardest realities for you to recognize as a problem. Idiosyncrasies are personal; so much a part of us that we’ve grown blind to them.

It’s no surprise then, that you assume these parts of your character have no impact on your management

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relationships. But make no mistake. In the same way your employees benefit from your personal virtues and healthy management behaviors, they're held hostage by your foibles. And, for the most part, they suffer in silence. ●

Managing Managers

Learning the complexities and subtleties of management is akin to learning a new language.

Classrooms can only drill on the fundamentals; they provide ideals and abstractions. Real fluency with an unfamiliar tongue is achieved when it's practiced every day in an environment that requires it. This is where you come in. You have to do what you want your people to do.

You must be willing to inquire about your managers' relationships with their employees — discuss them in some detail; critique them as if they are as central to the work as anything else; offer strategies for creating constructive moments and handling uncomfortable moments with employees; recognize improvements when your managers make them. If need be, you must even be willing to assign tasks to your managers that are specifically designed to test and improve their skills.

Sensitize Your Managers to the Invisible Spotlight

It falls to you to sensitize your managers to the invisible spotlight. In other words, you must create a culture in which management excellence is valued and publicly rewarded in the same way other business achievements are. This establishes management effectiveness as an organizational priority.

Most important, you must demonstrate every day what you're asking your managers to strive for. This is the *sine qua non* of management development — the single most important condition for promoting management excellence.

When these conditions are met, classroom training can make a contribution to your managers' development. If this sounds a lot like what you would do with your children when you send them to an expensive tutor, you're right, it is. We are all children, employees and managers.

Your managers learn when you place a premium on what they're supposed to learn. You have the greatest effect when you take an interest in it and have the courage to tell them when they're not measuring up and when they are. This principle may never be so important as when you're in a position to manage managers. ●

Closing Thoughts

Once you see how closely your words and deeds are scrutinized by your employees and how significant your impact is on their lives, you'll begin to manage your important moments of interaction with them more wisely and deliberately. You'll also avoid many of the hazards of working in the dark.

What you say and don't say, what you do and don't do *in the moment* determine how firm the foundation of your management relationships will be.

Your behavior in the moment can cause your employees hours of uncertainty and distress, or it can heighten their commitment and contribution in a profound and lasting way.

An Honorable Profession

The magical thing about managing in an unseen spotlight is that your employees — your audience — very much *want* you to be good. They *want* you to be effective. They're rooting for you to be successful. This is because their lives are made immeasurably easier, more predictable and more rewarding if you manage your relationships deliberately and honorably. Your employees can be energized, even inspired by how well you perform. This is how powerful your impact can be. This is how much you matter.

The success of your relationships requires that you relentlessly assess how your important moments have gone, why they went the way they did, what needs to happen next and how they can be better handled next time. The point is *you are the architect* of these moments of interaction.

Remember: If the foundation of the management relationship is solid, you're doing something right. If it falters or fails, you're doing something wrong. It's that simple and that difficult.

Management is hard work. It involves complexities that can't be simplified. It is an honorable profession that demands thoughtfulness, wisdom and ethical considerations beyond step-by-step recipes. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Invisible Spotlight*, you'll also like:

1. **Multipliers** by Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown. Learn how to become a multiplier of talent and go from being a genius to a genius-maker. The authors offer a complete strategy to boost your entire staff.
2. **What's Holding You Back?** by Robert J. Herbold. The author explores why managers often hesitate to confront difficult issues and reveals the 10 core principles of confident leadership.
3. **Full Engagement!** by Brian Tracy. The prolific author and management consultant shows you how to get your staff to deliver their full potential.