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How to address the “Gray Areas”!
Tough Questions for Leaders

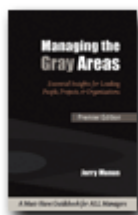
By Jerry Manas

“If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.” - Francis Bacon

Leaders face dilemmas every day. Decisions we make are translated into real-world outcomes, with each decision cascading into other actions. Sometimes, we mentally frame difficult choices and decisions in terms that simplify them—at least on the surface. We turn them into black or white just to get some clarity around them, yet in reality, they are not black or white, not either/or—they are gray.

How we address these difficult choices—as black and white, or as gray—will determine the feel of our organization. It will determine how people interact, and how work gets done. It will determine the strategies of both our present and our future.

These gray areas pull us into different directions and decision paths regarding resources, time, space, functions, people, culture, and a hundred other things. How we approach these gray areas is vital to our success as leaders. Learning to live in the “gray,” and dialogue about the gray with others, opens up opportunities for us as leaders to expand our thinking, and to see the bigger issues from broader perspectives. In doing so, we are able to move from tactics to strategies, from either/or to unexamined possibilities, and from quick fixes to long-term solutions.



Managing the Gray Areas, Premier Edition

Essential Insights for Leading People, Projects, & Organizations

By Jerry Manas

Published by RMC Publications, Inc.

True leadership is about understanding and managing complexities instead of taking black and white or universal approaches to problems.

Supporting this premise, this book explores typical challenges many leaders struggle with, and offers a set of guidelines, principles, and tools that can help them navigate these murky waters—challenges such as:

- How can I empathize with my people's needs in the face of organizational pressures?
- When should I share the big picture with my team, and when is it prudent not to do so?
- Is it best to assemble a team of targeted specialists, or should I look for people who can do a little of everything?
- How can I implement and enforce internal processes without hurting morale or stifling creativity?
- How can I ensure adequate accountability without resorting to micromanagement?
- Given limited time and/or money, should I first focus on creating a good image for my organization, team, or product, or should I spend more time ensuring that it functions well on the back end?
- Should I centralize my organization to gain economies of scale, or should I decentralize to take advantage of local or regional expertise?

To address these questions and others, we will explore new insights from history, science, and business, as well as expert opinion from today's foremost thought leaders. We will examine concepts and tools that have been proven to aid in dealing with complexity. And, we will learn to ask the right questions and set the right priorities.

In the end, we will see that leadership is abstract—not concrete— and that applying a set of principles, guidelines, and tools, rather than relying on unilateral, all-purpose formulas, is appropriate. And while we cannot guarantee right answers, we can ensure that we arrive at thoughtful answers.

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

By learning to deal with the gray areas, we can begin to achieve wisdom, not just knowledge. In their superb book, *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense*, authors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Bob Sutton discuss the differences between knowledge and wisdom. "Wisdom," they say, "is about knowing what you know [i.e., knowledge] and knowing what you don't know." They go on to describe how wisdom is built over time, by learning and adjusting. It also involves questioning.

Voltaire once said, "Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers." This is especially true of anyone in a leadership position. In fact, Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, felt that we not only have a right to ask questions, we have a duty to ask questions. Socrates was considered the wisest of the wise by his followers, yet he stressed that if he was wise, it was only because he knew what he did not know. He was famous for posing challenging questions to his young disciples, teaching them to back up their claims and accept nothing as gospel. Unfortunately, he was persecuted for these very beliefs. When, in 399 B.C., Socrates was condemned to death by poison, he declared, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The Socratic line of questioning is still taught in law schools today. We'll see examples of Socratic questioning in Chapter 10.

Indeed, as Socrates and Voltaire knew, it is through asking the right questions and striving to set the right priorities that we can best achieve wisdom, not by seeking perfection and pointing fingers at those with differing opinions. We need to move away from black and white thinking and begin to acknowledge shades of gray.

A MATTER OF PRIORITY... AND VALUES

Setting the right priorities is important to all of us. Consider what noted author Ram Charan has to say in his article "Five Rules for Setting the Right Priorities" about how critical this is to an organization:

The right priorities keep the organization's physical and emotional energy focused on the important things, in the midst of all the day-to-day stress of life at work where everything can seem urgent and important. Priorities provide clarity and focus for you—and for the people who work for you.

In other words, focusing on priorities can help us navigate those ever-challenging gray areas. In his article, Charan stresses the importance of focusing on a select few priorities, communicating them frequently, ensuring you have the right people to carry out the priorities, allocating your resources to the priorities, and creating a feedback loop to make sure the message has sunk in. These actions make the priorities "real."

In essence, focusing our team on priorities can help everyone see more clearly when faced with the daily challenges of life and leadership. We must also keep in mind that, in order to focus on the right priorities, we must first have a strong sense of what values are important to us. If we don't have a clear sense of who we are, it becomes difficult to set priorities. As we will discover later in this book, values matter.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE: SEVEN GRAY AREAS

It would be foolish to try to address all of the questions that leaders might ask themselves in the course of their daily activities. Instead, we need to examine these questions through the lens of a finite set of common dilemmas.

Based on the plaguing questions I've gathered over the years, interviews with other leaders and consultants, and research on the top questions posed by today's leaders, I have identified seven "gray areas" with which most leaders struggle. They are as follows:

Gray Area	Fundamental Question
Individual Needs vs. Organizational Goals	How can I meet the needs of individuals <i>and</i> the needs of the organization?
Generalists vs. Specialists	How should my team be staffed?
Big Picture vs. Narrow Focus	How much detail should I share with my team?
Structure vs. Flexibility	How can I maintain a sense of order without compromising productivity?
Vigilance vs. Delegation	How much can I trust the people on my team to do what they're supposed to do? Where should accountability lie?
Appearance vs. Substance	Which should I address first—appearance or substance? Where can I most afford to make sacrifices, and when?
Centralization vs. Decentralization	Which work should be done centrally and which distributed? Where should decision-making lie?

For many of these gray areas, the answers may seem simple on the surface. But when we peel the onion, we will see that there are underlying complexities involved in these issues. In the coming chapters, rather than proposing simple black and white solutions and taking an either/or approach, we will examine the questions and issues that must be considered for each gray area in order to develop an integrated solution. We will see examples from multiple perspectives. And we will identify valuable principles, tools, and techniques for determining the right priorities—and promoting the right values.

Finally, as we learn these principles, tools, and techniques, we will find ourselves becoming better leaders. We will no longer adopt "one size fits all" solutions, or take rash approaches to people and problems. We will be better equipped to deal with today's complexities by setting the right priorities, which will come as a result of knowing who we are and what we stand for. And we will learn to secondguess quick-fix solutions, by asking the right

questions. We will look at issues more holistically, and from broader perspectives. Finally, with these newfound capabilities, we will be well on our way toward managing the gray areas effectively in the real world.

Now, more than at any other time, the world needs great leaders. I invite you to join me on a journey to becoming one of them.

About the Author:



Jerry Manas

Author



Jerry Manas is author of *Managing the Gray Areas* (RMC Publications, January 2008) and *Napoleon on Project Management* (Nelson Business, April 2006). His work has been cited by management guru Tom Peters and highlighted in a variety of publications, including *Leadership Excellence*, *The National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Chicago Sun Times*, and *The Houston Chronicle*. He has written numerous articles and appeared on radio programs nationwide with the release of his first book, which Kirkus Reviews called, "The ultimate case study in effective project management."

To review the Executive Summary for Jerry's new book, click [here](#).

An organizational architect with a specialty in project management and virtual team dynamics, he is passionate about helping leaders create flexible, yet integrated, organizations and teams. Pulling lessons from history, science, and the arts, he writes and consults on principle-based leadership and project management, using the cornerstones of simplicity, engagement, and trust. Jerry is president of The Marengo Group, co-founder of the popular blog site, PMThink! (www.pmthink.com), and a member of The Creating We Collaborative.

Visit his website at www.marengogroup.com.