

The Three Dimensions of Effective Management

Let's face it: management has a bit of a bad rap (and not without reason). Traditional management practices were designed to maximize profit and productivity—*not* to advance social justice—so it's no surprise that many of us have experienced ineffective, bureaucratic, or downright oppressive management. **Managers working for social justice must reckon with history:** many modern-day management practices have [roots in U.S. slavery and worker exploitation](#). When people manage without the intention to disrupt white supremacy and other systems of oppression, inequities persist (unfortunately, it's often the case that inequities persist *in spite of* our best intentions).

Still, we believe that management can be a force for good when done with the right mix of values, care, and competence. When managers instill shared purpose, build strong relationships, and cultivate belonging, teams work more effectively and strategically to advance their mission. This kind of management not only strives to fight white supremacy but also aims to build power, uplift the brilliance of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and move our communities closer to our visions of justice and liberation. **Effective management can deliver results that promote justice and build power.**

That's why we're offering a new definition for *effective management*—one that captures the fullness of what excellent management can offer. This definition is about delivering extraordinary, sustained results to advance racial and social justice with team members empowered to thrive in and through the work.

Defining Effective Management

- **Equitable:** Managers work to create an environment where staff (particularly those most negatively impacted by white supremacy and other systems of oppression) experience belonging and thrive in their work.
- **Sustainable:** Managers work with the long view in mind by investing deeply in people, relationships, and systems to produce results and a healthy organizational culture that endures over time.
- **Results-driven:** Managers make delivering excellent outcomes a guiding priority. By defining clear roles and goals, managers create a culture of shared accountability and commitment to advance the organization's mission.

We believe that management is only truly effective if it is simultaneously **equitable, sustainable, and results-driven**.

Whereas traditional management may evoke the feeling of building and running machines, **we see effective management as akin to tending a garden**—and we're not talking about manicured lawns and prize-winning roses. We're talking about **supporting healthy ecosystems** that feed our communities and movements for generations through stewardship, not control. If we want our schools and organizations to thrive—to play critical roles in our movements and communities and leave lasting legacies—we need to be intentional, attentive, proactive, and adaptive. Like gardening, management isn't just a series of tasks performed over and over—it's a practice of mindfulness and care.

Equitable

If effective management is gardening, the equitable part is 1) recognizing that specific environments favor some plants while creating barriers for others, and 2) creating the conditions for each plant to thrive. Effective managers create systems, processes, and practices that “narrow (and eventually eliminate) race-based disparities in measurable outcomes.”¹ They also work to lift up the agency and expertise of traditionally marginalized people within their teams.

Equitable management disrupts the status quo and requires inner work. Before practicing it, managers must first cultivate their knowledge about and awareness of the following:

- **Systems of oppression** and their impacts on structures, cultures, and systems within organizations. These systems form the backdrop of the work and impact how people show up.
- Their **positional power** and its impact on the time, energy, and livelihoods of the people they manage.
- Their **identities** and experiences and how they shape their interior landscape (perspectives, strengths, growing edges, biases, needs, and well-being) and inform how they relate to others.

What about antiracist management?

Effective management must also be explicitly antiracist. At TMC, we sometimes refer to **antiracist management** to name equitable management mindsets or practices that counteract racial inequities and challenge white supremacy. This specificity is important.

We also often use “equitable management” as a broader term to be expansive and inclusive. Our goal is to both **account for the multiple systems of oppression** that intersect with racism (such as sexism, classism, ableism, cissexism, and heterosexism) and **center what we’re fighting for** (not just what we’re fighting against)—racial and social justice.

Sustainable

Healthy soil creates better conditions for plants to thrive. Depleted soil leads to lower yields, poorer quality results, and vulnerable ecosystems. The same is true for management and movements.

The social justice and educational equity challenges we confront call for more than one-and-done solutions. They require long-term change at systemic and institutional levels that require significant investments of time, energy, and resources.

Let’s be real—social change work, while often purpose-driven and at times joyful, is also *grueling*. In the worst-case scenarios, people start out feeling hopeful and energized and end up leaving their organizations and schools (or movements entirely) due to burnout.

Investing in sustainability is both a strategic and a moral imperative. That’s why we’re calling for managers to approach their work the way gardeners tend to soil: creating conditions both for people to thrive and to produce enduring results. This means 1) supporting, retaining, and developing a diverse and talented team and 2) building and refining excellent systems and processes.

Results-driven

Think about what you’re working toward. What do you hope to harvest? Whom will you feed? What’s at stake if you fail? What will be possible if you succeed, and for whom?

¹ Kudos to our friends at [Equity In the Center](#) for this language.

Effective managers create the conditions for getting things done sustainably and equitably. They support staff to succeed by building strong **relationships**, seeking **input**, giving clear **feedback**, and setting ambitious **goals**.

The results of their work advance their organization's mission and create a positive impact for the communities they serve—whether that's a high-quality education for BIPOC students, progressive policy changes for immigrants, or building grassroots power for LGBTQ people. Ultimately, effective management is about building relationships, power, and results to create lasting change.

Things to keep in mind

Everyone is “tending” something. Effective management isn't just for managers and leaders. If you're not managing people, you're managing the work. Non-supervisory staff can apply the dimensions of effective management to their work and relationships, which are realms that they have power, agency, and ownership over.

You are part of the ecosystem, not outside of it. Management isn't something you do *to* other people—it's a way of relating. As part of the ecosystem, the most effective managers approach their work with a sense of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. They also understand that while they commit individual acts and choices, they don't operate alone—they are part of a broader set of relationships, systems, and culture within their organizations.

It's not about doing everything all the time. Being an effective manager doesn't mean being equitable, sustainable, and results-driven in equal measure at all times. Management is dynamic. It requires assessing conditions, managing tensions and tradeoffs, and making decisions about priorities and pacing. It also means rolling with the punches and grappling with circumstances beyond your control. At times, you may need to lean harder on one or two dimensions. You might even find that you have a tendency or bias toward one of them. Your job is to be aware about where you apply your energy, understand the implications of your choices, and recalibrate as needed.

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About The Management Center

As the **go-to resource on effective management** for social justice and educational equity organizations, we help leaders build and run more equitable, sustainable, and results-driven organizations.



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