

# Low-maintenance Management: Using a Simple Classification to Rate Employees' Productivity and Support Requirements

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*mployees vary in their productivity and their need for guidance, support, and other inputs that may be called "maintenance." This article provides a guide to classifying your team members by a gross ratio of perceived managerial inputs to productivity outputs. It also gives some approaches to understanding your own reactions and dealing with the needs of each group.*

**Key Words:** Management; leadership; human resources; employee classification; employee productivity.

As a leader, you manage employees who exhibit a variety of personality types and work styles. Sometimes you may feel frustrated, even exasperated, with those who do not fulfill their tasks efficiently and/or seem to require a great deal of time and attention. You may find it helpful to review each employee's attributes and to evaluate his or her status based on the grid discussed here.

## THE CONUNDRUM

Think about your employees, specifically those who are established in their positions. They have been around for a long time and know (or should know) how to do their jobs—that is, they are not in need of training or orientation. Now focus on those you would describe as "great employees," the ones you wish made up your entire team. They produce a high, rapid, accurate volume of work, with a service focus, and require little or no input, coaching, or direction. They have initiative, help others, and are proficient with little or no influence from you, the manager. They make your job as a manager seem easy. They achieve a high level of productivity while remaining "low maintenance." High-productivity/low-maintenance employees' contributions to the practice success is exponential. Since human resource-related expenses are likely to constitute your largest expense, employees who pro-

duce more while requiring less of your managerial time and effort represent a much greater return on investment.

If a high-productivity/low-maintenance employee is ideal, three obvious questions follow:

1. Where does each employee fit, specific to the combination of productivity and maintenance levels?
2. Can an employee with a suboptimal combination of productivity and maintenance levels be developed?
3. If the answer to question two is yes, what is the most appropriate approach to developing an employee into one of higher productivity/lower maintenance?

## THE PRODUCTIVITY/MAINTENANCE FOUR-QUADRANT GRID

The following model can be used to plot employee productivity and maintenance and establish a development plan.

### Productivity

Before judging someone's productivity, make sure assigned tasks are in alignment with overall position focus and agree to measurable performance indicators or quotas. Clearly delineate expectations and the definitions of successes.

In the proposed grid model:

- The Y-axis (vertical) represents productivity—the work itself. If the employee is a telephone receptionist, the Y-axis refers to answering and handling phone calls

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**Table 1. Productivity/Maintenance Grid**

High Productivity	High maintenance High productivity (HMHP)	Low maintenance High productivity (LMHP)
	High maintenance Low productivity (HMLP)	Low maintenance Low productivity (LMLP)
Low	High	Low

Maintenance

Y = Productivity  
X = Maintenance

quickly, efficiently, and according to protocol. If the employee is a nurse or clinical assistant, productivity refers to the actual nursing or assistance itself. Note that productivity assumes the appropriate degree of service orientation for the position or work.

- The X-axis is maintenance—the undeniable majority of the effort required in effectively managing people. It is the coaching, development, guidance, performance management, talking, encouraging, facilitating, counseling, intervening, mentoring, and listening that effective managers and leaders engage in with their employees, so that their departments, organizations, and companies accomplish or exceed their goals. Notice the degree of maintenance decreases from left to right on the X-axis.

Each established, trained employee has a place on the productivity/maintenance grid, shown in Table 1. Plot each of your employees on this grid. The plot point on the grid should not be limited to one of the four quadrants. Consider where an employee is positioned within a single quadrant.

### Low Maintenance/High Productivity (LMHP)

In this four-quadrant model, the upper right quadrant is the ideal position for an established, trained employee. Employees who fit in this quadrant make management feel easy, smooth, perhaps even pleasant. These individuals produce in a speedy, accurate, service-oriented way. They demonstrate initiative by taking on additional work. They volunteer to help you and others when they are finished with their own work. They produce and produce. All the while, they do not seem to require much of your time and energy. They take direction well, and they rarely seem to need conversation, devel-

opment, or coaching. They virtually never require performance management. You find yourself saying, “If only they could all be like \_\_\_\_\_.” (See sidebar.)

*Place the initials of the LMHP employees in the upper right quadrant of the grid.*

Just because LMHPs demand very little managerial effort, this does not mean you can afford to ignore or forget them. The most effective managers recognize these employees and know that losing them would be costly beyond basic turnover rates. Re-recruit them constantly. Check in with them regularly to demonstrate your appreciation. Make sure they are *not* having to “make do” with insufficient equipment/resources or a difficult situation. Pinpoint their positive attributes, the actions they have taken, the results realized, and thank them for being a part of your group. On those rare occasions when they request your time or input, always make time for them—they do not ask unless they have a need.

Don’t underestimate the power of the other three quadrants of employees. Your management of those other situations sends a constant message (of encouragement, discouragement, or indifference) to your LMHP employees. If you tolerate—or worse yet, reward—employees who operate in the other three quadrants without signs of coaching and improvement, you lower the standards throughout your group. LMHPs will wonder why they work so hard and get so little attention. They may lower their standards and slip into one of the other quadrants.

***Just because LMHPs demand very little managerial effort, this does not mean you can afford to ignore or forget them.***

Employees in any of the other three quadrants can be developed and coached into or toward LMHP. The suggested approaches differ depending on the quadrant in which they have established themselves.

### Low Maintenance/Low Productivity (LMLP)

The employees who fall in the lower right quadrant are very easy to forget—literally. They are invisible. They don’t produce remarkable amounts and they don’t require much attention or maintenance. You might find yourself thinking, “Does \_\_\_\_\_ still work here?”

*Place the initials of the LMLP employees in the lower right quadrant of the grid.*

***Make and execute a plan to increase their [LMLPs’] productivity . . .***

Make and execute a plan to increase their productivity by setting incrementally increasing expectations. Initially,

### Signs of Low Maintenance

Pertaining to employees well established in their roles and responsibilities, not those who require training or orientation, signs of low maintenance may include:

- Works well with others.
- Needs little coaching, feedback, or input.
- Requires very little time.
- Rarely “vents.”
- Doesn’t participate in gossip and rumors.
- Implements changes easily and willingly.
- Never gives cause for worry.
- Communicates clearly and kindly.
- Plays by the rules.

it may require a bit more “maintenance,” but it must be done. Helping them to move to LMHP will improve your bottom line, and demonstrate respect to those already in the LMHP quadrant. If the type of work is the same, the LMHPs may already have ideas of ways for LMLPs to increase their productivity or speed.

### High Maintenance/High Productivity (HMHP)

HMHP employees produce quality work at a high rate and service orientation, but require a great deal of the manager’s time and attention. They call or page you for issues and present them as urgent, when in fact they are not. They stop you frequently to talk. They may even become visibly or audibly excited and require calming. These employees demonstrate a need to talk, “vent” or bounce ideas off of you—a lot. Sometimes their need for maintenance is expressed in less overt, perhaps subconscious, ways such as requiring the same type of input repeatedly or re-engaging in behaviors that have resulted in constructive managerial coaching previously. Even the most nurturing and tolerant managers find themselves occasionally exasperated by these employees. The manager’s consolation is that the HMHP individual produces. Many managers will resign themselves to concluding that such is the price for high production with that individual.

*List the initials of the HMHP employees in the upper left quadrant of the grid.*

Just because someone produces does not give him or her the right to over-access the managerial resources. HMHPs can be coached into the upper right quadrant as well. In fact, if you examine your own responses critically, you may find you have enabled this behavior by entertaining conversations, granting attention, and perhaps offering suggestions or directives rather than facilitating decisions and realizations.

Take care when coaching an employee from high maintenance to low; you don’t want to give the sense that

your “door is now closed.” You must maintain the management role while alleviating some of the counselor role and entertaining chitchat.

Acknowledge your appreciation for the work/product. Give detailed, positive feedback for decisions or judgments made effectively with little or no guidance. If possible, set up a regular meeting so that nonemergency items can be discussed at a designated time with an automatic time limit. Put a time limit on impromptu conversations. Insist on the addition of proposed solutions or suggestions with every problem that is presented.

***... if you examine your own responses critically, you may find you have enabled this behavior by entertaining conversations, granting your attention ...***

Indeed, HMHP employees can become LMHPs. If they do not progress rapidly or at all, you must consider them in relation to the other employees—the “team” as a whole. Be sure that they are not taking your management time and energy to the deficit of other team members. Consider your role in placating such behavior.

### High Maintenance/Low Productivity (HMLP)

The HMLP employee requires tremendous time and energy and produces very little. These employees come to mind right away—unfortunately. Truth is, there are usually only one or two of them in a group, but because of the attention they require it feels like more.

*Plot the initials of the HMLP employees in the lower left quadrant of the graph.*

These employees are a tremendous drain on the team and leader. The only way to deal with these employees is directly. Remember, the more time and energy you spend on them, the less you have for the LMHPs and the others. And make no mistake, everyone knows whom the HMLP employees are. In fact, they are probably just as draining to their co-workers as they are to you.

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If HMLPs have been tolerated in the past, it is not fair to change the standards without offering a chance for improvement. Since LMHP is the goal, an HMLP must improve along both axes, making their development plan considerably more complex.

Because enhancing an employee’s productivity inevitably requires a heightened degree of maintenance (coaching, input, etc.), it is best to start with increasing productivity, rather than decreasing maintenance needs. Be

clear about the need to increase productivity, define methods for measurement or comparison, and set a timeline. Measure the change as objectively as possible. Throughout the development process provide employees with *specific* feedback for *both* improvement and any optimal results.

If productivity is improved and sustained to a satisfactory degree, then direct efforts toward reducing maintenance needs using the methods described in the previous HMHP section.

***If the goals for development are not met within the expected timeframe, or maintained, the HMLP employee will have to go . . .***

If the goals for development are not met within the expected timeframe, or maintained, the HMLP employee will have to go because these workers continue to drain resources while making little or no contribution. The most effective leaders do not have any employees in the lower left HMLP quadrant.

This straightforward model and these suggestions provide a framework for the effective management of trained, oriented individuals within a group or team with an efficient expenditure of managerial time and energy. Consider the relationship between productivity and maintenance by employee. Moreover, remember the impact that granting time and attention to high-maintenance employees of either type has on your LMHPs. They may feel deprived, consider their contributions unappreciated, and eventually leave the practice.

***This model requires an objective perspective on productivity and offers the components by which to measure maintenance.***

This model requires an objective perspective on productivity and offers the components by which to measure maintenance. Use the model to build a “dream team” made up entirely of low-maintenance/high-productivity contributors. ■