

# Changing ladders: The move from individual contributor to manager

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from The Rational Edge: This article addresses some of the challenges inherent in moving from individual contributor to manager and offers some real life lessons about what can be done to minimize the hurdles. It also discusses some of the challenges for supervisors and other high-level managers when an individual contributor joins the management ranks.

*As companies address the issue of high growth coupled with labor shortages, many are looking internally for management talent. And why shouldn't they? Hiring management talent from inside the company saves time, motivates employees, and allows companies to deal with fewer unknown variables. Also, current employees understand the company, the products, the culture, the customers, and what it takes to succeed in their environment. But is that all it takes to be a successful manager?*

*Having moved from Aerospace Engineer to the management ranks myself some years ago, I have learned many lessons from my own experience as well as by watching colleagues as they tried to make that leap. This article addresses some of the challenges inherent in this move and offers some "real life" lessons about what can be done to minimize the hurdles. It also discusses some of the challenges for supervisors and other high-level managers when an individual contributor joins the management ranks.*

## What Is a Manager?

Let's start by defining a few terms. When we hear the word *manager*, we typically think of someone who controls, directs, guides, and advises. Although this is still a good textbook description, in truth, today's managers must do much more. Modern managers must also be *leaders*, although it's important to note that leadership takes many forms, and that one need not be a manager to be a leader.

So what is the difference between *leadership* and *management*? Answers will vary, depending on whom you read or ask. Traditionally, leaders do what is right and managers do the right thing. In other words, leaders lead by determining the vision, goals, and objectives for their team and creating an environment in which a team can thrive. Managers then make sure the team is carrying out the right activities to deliver on what the leader has articulated.

In today's business environment, however, the lines are often blurred. Companies have realized that a team organizational structure is essential for productivity and success, and they depend on managers to supply the traditional leadership qualities that spur a team to work faster and more efficiently. In addition, today's workforce is a "knowledge" workforce. More than ever, the success of a business rests on the quality of its people, their motivation, and their intellectual capital. Often, managers need to articulate a vision and display an innovative approach to thinking and problem solving in order to fully leverage their team members' knowledge potential: to guide, motivate, inspire, and focus them toward success. Whenever I use the word *manager* in the discussion below, I am assuming a role that encompasses these new leadership demands.

Moving from an individual contributor -- engineer, consultant, technical or sales representative, etc. -- to a management position is not just a step up the corporate ladder, but a jump to an entirely new ladder in terms of skills, motivations, perspectives, responsibilities, and impact to the organization. Given these demands, it amazes me that some companies do not spend more time grooming and training their new managers to meet them. Support that companies can and should provide for new managers includes management training, personnel skills development, business training, and mentoring. People are the most valuable asset in any company (and very costly to hire, train, and replace!), so upper management should work hard to create an environment in which neophyte managers and their teams can be successful and grow.

It is also important that hiring managers think ahead when interviewing candidates for individual contributor jobs; they should identify people with management potential and position them for future growth within the company. If the training and mentoring process begins early, then both the supervisor and the new manager will have a greater chance for success.

## Challenges and Strategies for New Managers

Below are suggestions and strategies for handling specific challenges that you may face as a former individual contributor -- particularly if you have a technical background -- as you move into a management position. As you read, keep in mind that I am by no means suggesting that you should abandon your technical background as you move up. Quite the contrary: This special knowledge will be an asset for the rest of your career.

### Lack of Individual Recognition

One of the hardest things to accept when you move into management is that you will not as often be singled out as an individual for exceptional performance. As an individual contributor, you were recognized for your accomplishments and achievements, and it was easy for you to measure your success, based on recognition from your managers and peers.

As a manager, you get recognition through your team. When your team succeeds, you succeed -- and when they fail, you fail. Most new managers wonder, "How will I know whether I'm doing the right things?" The answer always lies with your team: If it is performing and meeting objectives, then you're on the right track.

As a manager, you will often have to defer your own needs and desires to accomplish this. Too often, I see managers competing with their teams for recognition or visibility. It's important to

remember that building a high trust environment, forging relationships, and creating *esprit de corps* is an essential part of your job and the key to a high performing team.

This is not to say that new managers should never expect thanks or recognition from upper management. Nothing is more satisfying than having your teams achieve goals and be recognized for their hard work. At the same time, the high-level managers who promoted you should take advantage of opportunities to publicly acknowledge your achievements. They should also provide consistent and relevant feedback whenever possible. As a new manager, you will naturally feel concerned about what you are doing and how much you are contributing, and you will be eager for advice on what you can do to be better. Clear and frequent communication and coaching can do much to reduce this anxiety. If your supervisor isn't offering it, then don't be afraid to ask for it.

## Adopting a Top Down Perspective

In your previous assignment, you were mostly concerned with your world, how things affected you directly and indirectly, and what you could do to contribute. You had what is called a "bottom up" or "vertical" approach to work situations. Now, as a manager, you must take a broad, "top down" or "horizontal" approach to your work. You must see the big picture and how it relates to the goals and objectives of the entire organization. Then, you must guide your team to ensure that everything the team does contributes to meeting these goals.

I recall an electrical engineer who was promoted to branch chief for a group of five engineers designing satellite antennas. This fellow was an expert satellite antenna designer, but he had a hard time letting go of the details that were important to his previous job and focusing instead on meeting project schedules, reducing costs, communicating with his teams, and keeping management informed. Unfortunately, he never really did make the leap. After struggling for a time, he eventually retreated to his previous assignment as an engineer.

In this instance, good mentoring and communication might have made a critical difference. Instead, his own manager incorrectly assumed that since the branch chief was a top-notch engineer and worked well with others, he would instantly excel at this new position. In fact, the branch chief could never see beyond his own area of expertise to understand what was important to the business or upper management.

For technical people like this engineer, developing a top down, horizontal perspective is especially difficult. Why? Because technical people tend to see the world as an engineering problem: State the observables, define the system and its surroundings, throw out any data not relevant to the immediate situation, collect as much data as possible, and strive for many decimal places of precision. They are comfortable engaging with problems analytically, referring to empirical data to perform analyses and reach definitive conclusions. While this is an excellent approach for a technical environment, it is not effective for problem solving in a management environment, which frequently requires taking into account ambiguous information as well as people's opinions, desires, fears, and personalities.

It is critical for high-level managers to understand that the demand for a new way of thinking and seeing the world may create frustration and anxiety for a new manager as well as his or her team.

New managers need close mentoring as their thought processes evolve to accommodate their new role, as well as help with avoiding and mitigating potential problems that could undermine their confidence or -- even worse -- their credibility.

## Putting Aside Perfectionism

The old saw, "Perfect is the enemy of good enough" is an apt one for new managers to keep in mind. In contrast to analysts, who often have the luxury of putting off a decision until the *n*th hour and waiting for all the relevant information to be assembled, managers must be able to make *timely* decisions based on whatever information is currently available.

How do you develop the ability to make good "gut" decisions? Experience. Until you have gained enough experience to truly understand *your* thought processes and build confidence in your ability to make these decisions, you may feel uncomfortable with them. Remember that, in general, you will learn more from failing than you will from succeeding, so you must put aside your perfectionist tendencies and not become discouraged if you sometimes make the wrong call. As you become more familiar with your new business environment, you'll acquire the knowledge you need to understand what is acceptable and possible. It's a continual learning process, and the key is to adapt to new situations as they arise. In addition, when you have enough time and distance from your decisions to judge their effectiveness, it's important to analyze each one carefully so you can learn from it. Make sure you understand the reasoning behind the right decisions as well as the wrong ones.

## Developing New Skills

As you move up the management ladder and assume more responsibility, you will need to acquire new skills and strengthen others to operate successfully at each level. What skills does a good manager need? In general, effective managers have the ability to:

- Lead by example;
- Communicate critical information clearly, succinctly, and in a timely way;
- Respond quickly and decisively to changing situations as well as to others' ideas and needs;
- Motivate others to work effectively both as a team and individually;
- Listen to coworkers up and down the chain of command (a crucial one to master);
- Get along with others and display good will and humor;
- Mentor junior staff members.

These skills may seem pretty basic, but never underestimate their power and importance. Without them, you cannot be a successful manager.

The responsibility for acquiring and developing these skills resides with both you and your supervisor. When you assume your new position, you should collaborate on a skills development plan with specific goals and timelines and then review it together periodically. Although this will require a considerable investment on your supervisor's part, ultimately it will save him or her the time and trouble of having to "clean up" problems that might otherwise arise from lack of mentoring and coaching. Management training programs can also be helpful, and field experience with customers, peers, and upper management can provide invaluable benefits and insights.

Trustworthiness, integrity, and sound ethics are also key requirements for a successful manager and leader. Your people are now watching you. Everything you say, everything you do will be observed as they try to figure out what makes you tick. It doesn't matter how smart you are or how much experience you have: If your team thinks you lack of any of these essential attributes, then it will be hard for you to gain their respect. And if you don't have their respect, then you have lost the ability to lead the team.

## Three Steps: Advice from a Well-Known Expert

Norman Augustine, former CEO and Chairman of Lockheed Martin, Inc. was once asked about the best way to manage. He said to follow three steps:

"...hire people smarter than you, tell them what you want, and get the hell out of their way."

This is good advice. Let's look at each step more carefully.

### 1. "Hire People Smarter Than You"

A mark of great managers and leaders is they surround themselves with very capable people who can grow the organization, mentor others, and take their teams to a higher level of success. Jack Welch, CEO and Chairman of General Electric, claims that today's managers must leverage the "brain power" of their entire company in order to develop effective business strategies and stay on top of the competition. The ability to recruit talented people, keep them challenged, and retain them is a primary qualification for successful managers.

For some people, however, this piece of advice may be very difficult to follow. They may feel threatened by others who have skills or talents they lack. Also, in order to determine what skill sets they need in people they hire, managers must be able to assess their own skills and talents as well as those of their team members. Taking a hard look at your own strengths and weaknesses is not always fun, but it is almost always revealing. To be a successful manager, you must be able to do it without feeling threatened in the process. And as a new manager, with very understandable insecurities, you must overcome the need to "have all the answers" yourself.

### 2. "Tell Them What You Want"

This means you should communicate direction clearly and succinctly; it doesn't mean that you should be a dictator. As a manager, you must take the lead in establishing goals and monitoring performance, but you should also be sure that all team members help to define the goals and play a primary role in prioritizing their own activities. To take full advantage of the team's talents, you have to get everyone's buy-in. If you solicit input and allow everyone to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, it can only improve the team's performance.

### 3. "Get Out of Their Way"

To be a good manager, you need to trust the people you supervise and not micromanage their activities. If you put smart and energetic people in a supportive environment, they will figure out a way to reach the goals you have set collaboratively and will not need to be monitored every step of the way. This does not mean that your management must be strictly "hands off," but it does mean that you should know when to step in and when to step back. If you give your team a little elbowroom, they'll have the freedom to develop their own innovative

solutions. Under these circumstances, their buy-in to these solutions will be almost certain, and they will be willing to do whatever it takes to execute them effectively.

## Finding Your Stride

Every person you manage will present you with a different set of circumstances, opportunities, and challenges. It's important to understand what motivates a person and then act accordingly. Truly effective managers engage with each team member in a manner unique to that individual. You do not need to develop a completely different style or tempo for each person, but you do need to understand that what works for some will not work for others. How you speak, respond, and use body language will send an important message to your team members, so always be cognizant of who they are as individuals and notice what approach works best when you try to engage them.

It is equally important to acknowledge that you're not going to shine along every dimension of management. What really matters is how you leverage your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses as well as those of your team. Make careful, honest assessments on all fronts, and then bring in new team members with complementary skills who can resonate and thrive in the existing environment and culture.

Above all, never assume that just because you excelled at your previous position that you will "naturally" do the same as a new manager. Just because you've reached the management level doesn't mean the learning stops. On the contrary, you need to develop and refine an entirely new set of principles, tools, and methods. Give yourself time and be patient as you grow and learn and evolve into your role.

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