Making the Transition to Management

You are now a manager or supervisor, or about to become one. Adapting to your new role will take time. Your responsibilities have grown, and relationships with co-workers have changed. The organization’s expectations of you have also changed. This period of transition may feel exhilarating but also unsettling. You may feel happy about the promotion, but under more pressure to perform to higher expectations.

Much of your success as a manager will depend on your “people skills” -- the relationships you have with peers, employees, and company leaders. To succeed, you will need to earn the respect of all these groups. You must now learn to “think like a manager,” as well. You must make sure that the work gets done. You must pay attention to the needs of employees and management.

You may find your priorities, concerns, worries, and goals changing as you adjust to your new role. Your viewpoint and loyalties may also change. Understanding the challenges ahead will ease the way.

Common pitfalls for new managers
It’s difficult to lead and give guidance when you are changing roles and learning on the job yourself. However, an ineffectual managerial style can lower productivity and morale, increase complaints, and lead to product and quality problems. As you work to find the right balance -- a supervisory style that feels comfortable for you and your employees -- remember some of the bosses you have had. What did they do right? And wrong? What made a “good boss” or a “bad boss”?

Here are some common pitfalls new managers encounter:

- **Oversupervising.** Micromanaging is sure to alienate employees. The best managers direct and lead without being heavy-handed. They exercise power and authority only when absolutely necessary. The more trust and respect you give employees, the more they will give you. Setting up specific “check in” times to make sure that an assignment is on track will help you give an employee more autonomy. Also, when possible, focus on required project outcomes when assigning work, rather than dictating how the work should be accomplished so employees are able to work in a way that best suits their skills and work style.
• **Undersupervising.** New managers can also give too little supervision because of lack of experience, or fear of appearing “bossy.” They don’t wish to alienate friends and colleagues they now manage. Careful managers stay on top of projects and problems so that their departments run smoothly. They give employees sufficient authority, autonomy, and resources, based on their skill levels and experience. Employees with less experience may need more support and supervision. Experienced workers can usually perform well with less direction.

• **Failing to delegate.** The manager’s job is to get the work done through others, not to do it for them. Because many managers are promoted based on their outstanding technical work, they find this shift in responsibility especially difficult. But failing to delegate leaves you little time for strategic planning, organizing, and thinking about “the big picture” -- the job you were hired to do. Effective delegating requires planning and trust as well as employees who are able and willing to perform the task.

• **Overlooking the problems and concerns of employees.** New managers are often so consumed by their own responsibilities that they forget to focus on the work problems of employees. You can show your concern by asking employees questions like, “Is there any support or advice I can give you on this project?” or, “Can I help you come up with an approach for handling this?”

• **Sharing confidential information.** In your new role as a manager, you will probably have access to confidential employee information and personnel records as well as confidential company information. Be careful not to share confidential information with anyone, either at home or in the workplace.

• **Blaming upper management for unpopular decisions.** Managers are often asked to announce and explain new company policies to their employees. Some new managers try to distance themselves from policies they disagree with, especially when they feel the policies will be unpopular with employees. Sometimes they are tempted to blame upper management for the policies, using phrases like “they are making us do this.” This undermines both the manager’s influence and the company’s ability to drive change. If you disagree with a policy, talk with your manager about your concerns privately. Make sure you understand the company’s reasons for initiating the policy. When communicating the policies, explain them clearly and give enough information so that employees can understand why the policies are being introduced, even if they do not agree with them.

• **Providing preferential treatment to favorite employees.** Effective managers do not play favorites with their employees. They make sure that they spend a reasonable amount of time with each of their employees and that assignments are fairly distributed and rotated. Of course, you will have some employees that you feel more positive about, but this should not be evident to your employees. Real
friends who are now your employees will understand this and will not expect preferential treatment. If you have usually eaten lunch or taken breaks with friends in your department, you still can, occasionally, as long as you also spend similar amounts of time with all your employees.

The pressures and challenges new managers face
The manager’s job is to meet the needs and expectations of employees and management. When these needs clash, as they are bound to from time to time, you may feel pressure from both sides. Successful managers find ways to manage their stress effectively. Here are some proven stress reducers for you to review and incorporate into your daily routines.

• Get the support you need to meet the pressures and challenges of the job. As a new manager, you are probably working longer hours and feeling more pressure than you were before. This is sure to have an effect on your work life and your personal life. Find out what kinds of support your organization offers. The program that sent you this article may be able to provide you with helpful information and resources for managing your life at work and at home.

• Take good care of yourself. As with any major change, adequate sleep and a healthful diet will also help you handle stress. Regular exercise is also an effective and healthy way to reduce stress.

• Maintain your network. New managers often feel so overwhelmed with new responsibilities that they neglect the relationships they have with peers, coworkers, and former managers. Try to maintain and even grow your network by scheduling occasional lunches, coffee breaks, or other activities to ensure that you keep up with your business acquaintances. They will help you stay connected with what is going on with your company and your industry. Also, these relationships are invaluable when you are seeking cooperation with other departments.

Tips for new managers
• Work closely with the human resources (HR) department. It is essential for you to develop a close working relationship with your HR contacts. Take advantage of all training programs for new managers so that you fully understand the HR policies and procedures you will be required to follow. Be sure that you understand the types of situations in which you will be expected to contact HR immediately for guidance, such as an employee with a performance problem. Your HR department is a valuable resource for guidance in talking with employees, dealing with problems, and understanding your organization’s policies and procedures.

• Meet with each of your employees one-on-one. Plan to meet with each of your employees individually within the first few weeks of any new managerial assignment. It’s important to understand who they are, what’s happening in their
lives, how they think, and what motivates them. And let them get to know you. Find out what their career goals are; what they like best and least about their current assignments; and what obstacles, if any, make it difficult for them to do their best work. At the same time, you can make sure that they know what you expect from them, what you see as the critical department goals, and what kinds of information or situations you want to be told about. You also want to make sure that each employee knows to come to you with questions and concerns. After the initial meeting, schedule regular one-on-one sessions with each employee.

- **Find ways to support and motivate the people you are leading.** If they are successful, you will be successful. Give employees credit for good work rather than taking credit yourself. Involve them in solving problems, instead of coming up with solutions yourself. When they feel engaged -- and are recognized for their work -- employees will support you with their commitment to a successful outcome. Too often, new supervisors act aloof, thinking this is how management is “supposed” to act. It isn’t. You will achieve more if employees see you as a person not just a boss.

- **Pay attention to planning and organization.** Plan, coordinate, and organize who will do what when. This should be one of your daily tasks, not a chore you turn to twice a month. Regular progress checks will allow you to monitor the group’s performance and to take corrective action when projects get off track.

- **Be a clear and careful communicator.** Keep communication lines open by providing as much information as you can. This will help build trust and reduce conflicts and misunderstandings. You might begin regular meetings by saying, “Let me bring you up to speed on some things going on in the company.” If you don’t know all of the answers, share what you do know and admit to not knowing what you don’t. Some information is better than none. This is especially important in times of change.

- **Check in regularly to see how things are going and that people have what they need to do the job.** While you want to give employees as much autonomy and responsibility as you can, you still need to keep in touch to make sure that staff members feel confident and competent in their jobs. An employee who feels less confident may need you to touch base frequently and provide more direct supervision. Another may not require as much management but may need moral support. Your style of supervising will depend on the circumstances and individual employees’ needs.

- **It is your job to provide resources to those you are managing.** You are the leader of the team and will have to offer the materials, information, and tools your team needs to succeed. Sometimes supporting employees involves acting as a troubleshooter to clear away obstacles that are preventing them from meeting work goals. You also have to make sure that they have the tools, resources, and information they need to do good work.
• **Handle any problems as quickly as possible.** The longer you wait, the bigger a problem becomes. Remember to keep your constructive feedback focused on the work not on personalities. Your goal is to move forward with a common plan and not to lay blame. Instead of saying, “You always miss deadlines,” you might say, “This project is taking longer than we expected. Where did we fall behind, and what are your ideas for getting back on track?” This keeps the conversation focused on behavior and outcomes rather than on accusation. Keep dated notes on key events for use later in performance reviews.

• **Develop a good relationship with your own manager.** You will need to communicate effectively not only with the people you are managing, but also with your own boss. It’s important to keep your manager informed. Get to know your manager and become familiar with her work habits and style. Does she like to receive regular written reports or informal verbal updates? Make an effort to understand the problems and pressures your manager is facing. This helps build mutual trust.

• **Steer clear of conflicts that don’t involve you.** Employees can feel angry or bitter about any number of perceived past wrongs. Try to ignore these conflicts as much as you can, especially when you have not had time to assess the situation.

• **Recognize and reward good work.** It’s important to give praise and recognition both publicly and privately. All employees need to feel valued. Let them know when they are doing good work. Most employees find recognition that specifically relates to their personal efforts and acknowledges the value of their accomplishments much more meaningful than bland generalizations. Feedback such as, “You finished that report three days early despite the fact that Jack was out sick, and that enabled us to look good in front of the new Regional VP when he made that unexpected call” is much more powerful than the occasional “good job.”

• **Handle problems with employees in the privacy of your office, not in public.** Reserve constructive feedback or reprimands for private, closed-door meetings.

• **Strive for shared goals.** It is your responsibility to help shape goals and steer your team toward the organization’s larger objectives. Employees must be able to see how their efforts fit into the direction of the department, division, and company. The more involved employees are in goal setting, the more committed they will be to achieving success.
Making the Transition to Management

Tips for managing a diverse work force
Most workplaces today have highly diverse employee populations. You will likely be supervising employees who are older, as well as younger, than you. You will probably be managing people from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well. Here are some tips to help you effectively manage a diverse work force:

• *Avoid age stereotypes.* Include employees of all ages in group projects. And actively seek input from employees of all ages.

• *Take care that your managerial style reflects a respect for all.* Your employees will take their lead from you. Do not make jokes that might be construed as insensitive to race, ethnicity, or other differences, and do not tolerate comments or jokes from your employees that are disrespectful or prejudiced.

• *Treat your employees as individuals.* Try to see people as individuals and focus on their personal strengths rather than labeling them as belonging to one group or another. Focus on fostering a work environment that welcomes and encourages the sharing of diverse points of view. Make sure that your employees understand that this kind of diversity often leads to innovation and breakthrough thinking.

• *Commit to creating a diverse employee work force in your department.* Research tells us that unless we actively look beyond our comfort zone, we will recruit a work force that is very much like ourselves in ethnicity, age, and ideas. Work with your HR department to broaden recruiting sources.

• *Foster collaboration and teamwork in your department.* Make sure that your employees understand that you expect and reward positive, cooperative teamwork. Make sure that conflicts are managed constructively and that different points of view are listened to respectfully.

• *Learn about other cultures.* The global focus of work today ensures that many managers will have opportunities to interact with workers from other countries. Business practices and etiquette differs dramatically from country to country. Check with your HR representative or other managers who have had experience working with individuals from other countries to ensure that you are prepared if this kind of opportunity comes your way.

Achieving success as a manager
You’ll experience many changes as you grow into your new role. Expect to experience some growing pains along the way as you adapt to them and ease into this new position of leadership and responsibility. Your organization’s HR representative can be a powerful ally and resource. You may want to speak with this person before a crisis or problem presents itself.

It may take as long as a year for you to feel comfortable in your new role. You will know you have made a successful transition to management when you and
your employees are performing confidently and competently -- and when your department and company are working in harmony to reach shared goals.

Written with the help of Elizabeth Bakken, B.A., M.A. Ms. Bakken has a certificate in organizational development and an extensive background in the fields of human resource development and career coaching. She writes a column, CareerWise, on executive career issues for the Rochester Business Journal.

© 2001, 2006 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.