SO NOW YOU’RE A NEW MANAGER: THE BASIC SKILLS

It's the job you wanted. But you didn't expect to be OVERWHELMED!

Reframe the issue this way: you've been a successful individual performer and contributor (that's one of the reasons you got promoted), but now you've got to manage more than yourself. You’re responsible for a whole team.

Once more: where do you start?

First, force yourself to say GOODBYE--to the way your work world used to work. You're not going to get credit for finishing your own high-profile projects any more. You're going to be rewarded for developing talented staff and their performance. And everything you learned about managing your own time schedule is going to be up for grabs. Now you've got to manage multiple time schedules--your own and your team's. You're no longer the boss's servant and slave. Now you're his/her partner. Now you've got to focus on your division or your company’s strategy and customers.

When you get stressed, you're liable to go back to those old friends. Don't get trapped. Keep saying goodbye until your old friends are really gone!

That's a lot of "goodbyes." So what are you going to say "hello" to? What do you need to do to ensure your success as a manager? For the first few months, concentrate in laser-like fashion on just these four issues:

- Delegation--get things done through other people (not yourself).
- Feedback--empower your people with constructive input.
- Get your boss’s support--he's the one with the resources you'll need.
- Focus on the big picture--it's all about strategy and customers.

By now, it should be obvious you've got a lot of learning to do. Soooo...to give you a leg up on your new job, I'll break out each of these issues--and also suggest some free resources for you.

(I owe a special indebtedness for the framework of this white paper to Carol Walker's article: Saving Your Rookie Managers from Themselves. Harvard Business Review, April 2002.)

GET THINGS DONE WITH DELEGATION

Having difficulty delegating to your team members? Join the crowd.

Delegating is often a real bugaboo. "If I delegate this job to Jean, she'll get the credit for it. Will my boss recognize my role in this?" That's the issue of visibility playing out. If you're dealing with visibility, remember your boss is evaluating your performance from a different perspective now. And if you've made your boss your partner, she knows what's going on--or she will if you tell her and keep her updated.

"Control fears" can also get in the way. "If I delegate this job to Mark, he won't be able to do as good as me." So, you do it yourself.

What's the result of these fears? A lot longer hours at work, stress--and a frustration level as high as a kite.

When your boss sees what's going on, hopefully he'll talk to you about your problem, reassure you that he's your partner and try to coach you on delegating. Often, that doesn't help--the rookie manager still refuses to delegate.
When a rookie manager won't delegate, some bosses take the best available route--they just keep delegating to their new manager until suicide or delegation are the only two options remaining. I'll confess. I've been a partner in this ruthless process--largely because it works when nothing else will. (But, cool it about your job fears! It takes a lot for a boss to remove you. That would be a blot on his record as much as yours. And when it comes to firing someone, 99% of managers are gutless. They'll just get you another job. In any event, you'll get plenty of space to learn--and a lot of help (if you ask.)

**Keys to delegating:**

- **Assess readiness:** has the person had success or training in the task? If yes, abdicate, hand them the job, and just check in regularly. If the person has no training or success in the task, take them by the paw, sit by them, and spoon feed. Or get somebody else to do it for you.

- **Here's the check list for delegating:** Define the task, clarify the objective, explain the "why" (why is this task important, where does it fit in the overall picture), make certain needed resources are available, and set timelines. If the task is large, you may want to break it down into smaller chunks with different objectives and timelines.

- **Check on progress regularly:** When you're learning to delegate and learning about your people, regularly check in on a team member's progress. Over the long haul, it'll be a time saver. You'll catch your own delegation errors and your subordinate's problems much earlier.

The toughest task for a new manager is delegation. To delegate is to give away power. Nail that sucker early in your career. It'll save you a lot of grief.

**EMPOWER YOUR PEOPLE WITH FEEDBACK**

Ever gotten really constructive developmental feedback? Most of my clients say absolutely not. And they work for some of the top companies in America. That's one of the reasons they hired me! Giving feedback is phenomenally difficult for most managers.

There are a lot of reasons why you don't get useful feedback. Your boss fears it'll blow up in his face. Your boss probably never got useful feedback either. Your boss thinks you can learn without his feedback. Your boss doesn't have the necessary language or process to give feedback. Bottom line: your boss doesn't know how to give constructive feedback. (This is a big reason why bosses complain about GenYers. GenYers are asking for feedback--something their bosses can't give them. So blame the GenYers--they're the only available scapegoat.)

**Let's break the pattern.**

Here are three simple rules for giving feedback.

1. **Don't blame.** Dwelling on the past is a waste of time--and harmful. There's an important principle that you might have learned in elementary psych: *Reinforced responses recur.* So if you keep talking about a failure, that failure may very well recur because you're rewarding it by talking about it. Weird, eh! But that's how the brain works. The other principle is that
performance ignored tends to disappear. Pay little to no attention to past failures. Enough said?

2. **What's going well?** Get your employee's insight into what's going well on his projects. Don't misunderstand me here. I'm not suggesting that you do this to make a person feel good before you shoot them. Find out what he's doing and what made it successful. Then the same lessons can apply in the future. Guess what! It'll take time to learn to look for what's going well. We're just not programmed that way. But don't even go down the next road before you've worked over what's going well and why.

3. **What needs to go better?** Don't be in a hurry to answer that question for your team member. But use my exact words otherwise one of you will be liable to veer of into the usual s--t. Dig the answer out of her if possible. When this question is answered thoughtfully, often all you have to do is a bit of joint problem solving. On occasion, however, you'll want to give some concrete, specific suggestions--in brief format.

Admittedly, I haven't detailed the process of feedback for you, much less written protocols or scripts (check my website for a white paper on giving feedback). But, observing these three rules will go a long way toward mastering the skill of feedback and developing talent--talent for which you're going to be rewarded as a new manager.

(Superb resource: Linda Richardson, *Sales Coaching.* Her feedback and coaching process will apply to any setting, not just sales.)

**GET YOUR BOSS’S SUPPORT**

When you switch from individual performer to manager, you're also automatically switching roles with your boss. You're now his/her partner--a different relationship than the past. What that also implies is that you need to manage your boss to get her support, insight and resources.

When I tell you to manage your boss, I do not mean to defer obsequiously, become a sycophant--or a suck-up. I mean that you're really partners. She will be giving you responsibilities and making you accountable. And, in effect, you will be building a collaborative relationship and making your boss accountable. Support implies exactly that.

As a new manager there are two issues for getting your boss's support.

**Build the work relationship.**

In the first month (or as soon as possible) begin with a series of conversations to establish your relationship. Here are the specific topics for that conversation: clarify how she wants to set goals, solve problems, make decisions, ensure follow-through, best collaborate, manage conflicts and keep lines of communication open. You'll want to set up these conversations and work through the agenda with her--using plenty of concrete examples. It may take several sessions, but that's alright because you're just getting to know each other in this new relationship. Surprise! Bosses really appreciate having that kind of an open conversation. Over the long term it will save them a lot of time and energy.

**Build the "new-manager" relationship.**
As you engage in those conversations, it's also time to deal specifically with your new role and responsibilities as manager.

So regularly (weekly?), update her, tell her what's going well and why, and tell her what's not going well, bring your insights and tentative resolutions, and ask her to problem solve with you. Then, decide what you'll need from her as a result of the conversation, and assume her cooperation. In sales an "assumed close" simply asks for the business assuming that the questions have been resolved and that the sale has been made. Same stuff with your manager!

Whatever you do, don't keep your boss in the dark. Seek your boss's support, insight and resources. She has power, influence, contacts, strategic knowledge and resources you'll need. Nearly all bosses will make that available to their committed managers. Not only is your boss your primary personal resource, but it's your boss who will grease the wheels of bureaucracy and set you up for recognition--and another promotion.

Think of it all this way: your boss promoted you because she trusted you, and because she was pretty sure (based on plenty of feedback from others) that you'd do a good job for her. Here's the basic rule: your success is your boss's success. If you fail, she fails too. So you can be very certain that if your boss promoted you, she wants you to succeed.

(Easily the best resource is Kotter and Gabarro, Managing Your Boss. (Updated, January 2005), Harvard Business Review. The hundreds of other articles flow out of the Harvard Classic. Download it from your local library online--or pay $6.50 for a Harvard download.)

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

New managers have a real knack for getting mired in project demands and overlooking organizational initiatives. After all, your previous success was tied to incremental activities. Now you're being told to focus on the big picture.

Why is big-picture focus important?

The job of management is to focus on the company's business within the marketplace--that's the big picture. Now your thinking has to include the marketplace, the competition, the trends taking place in your industry, the kinds of new skills needed to increase productivity, new technology breakthroughs and new business or marketing strategies to compete successfully.

As an individual performer, nearly 100% of your time has been tactical--making a contribution to a short term project. New managers will probably spend 10% of their time on big-picture items. The majority of senior executives focus almost completely upon talent development and strategic thinking. What's frustrating to many lower level managers is that thinking is not a tangible task or concrete activity that can be accomplished quickly. As Carol Walker puts it, making time to think, plan and set goals may seem almost self-indulgent. But the further you go up the ladder the more the tactical and strategic percentages will flip-flop--to as much as 10% tactical and 90% strategic.

Developing a big-picture focus.
The key to a big-picture focus is to write out strategies and distinguish them from activities which are merely tactics (your individual activities) and specific measures of accomplishment. So you might find yourself focusing on such questions as:

- what new technology will be required for our success next year?
- what additional skills will we need to build into our staff?
- what organizational processes will we need to modernize?

Critical soft skills may be overlooked because they are so difficult to measure. But the fact of the matter is that critical soft skills built upon technology advancement often are key to an organization's success. For example, note the superbly trained customer service employees that swarm around customers in an Apple Store. They've got both technology and soft skills.

Again and again, managers lose out in their career because they lack big-picture focus. In my work with executives one of the most common agendas I’m given is to support a director level employee who’s learning to think strategically. Years ago, the EVP of Research and Development at the Pillsbury Company told me that if I could enable his people to think strategically, I could have a job for life. That big-picture focus needs to begin with the new manager.


**KEEP ON THE LEARNING CURVE**

In a conversation on Science Friday (NPR), Ira Flatow, the host, asked Lei Bao, a prof of physics at Ohio State, whether people can learn to learn. "I think so," said Prof Bao, in typical scholarly caution. "At least they can improve their learning."

As a new manager needing a toolkit full of new tools, knowing how to learn will be an imperative to for your success. Take heart. The real answer to Flatow's question is a very definite yes. You can learn how to learn.

Among the large number of studies on learning research, three stand out. We know what it takes to build an expert from research completed by Anders Ericsson on "deliberate practice." Numerous studies by Marian Diamond and others have found that on-going enrichment is key to development and learning. As one client, a senior executive at a leading consumer products company, put it to me, "getting yanked around is good for you." Finally, since memory is key to learning, thanks to Doug Fields at the NIH, we now know how to make memory stick.

Continuous learning is fundamental.

I’ve emphasized four key competencies for new managers in previous blogs: delegation, feedback, boss support and big-picture thinking. That’s a lot of learning for the quickest of us. A study at American Express found that an ordinary competency--not especially complicated--takes twenty days of work to embed it into your toolkit. Each of the four basic competencies have a number of skills within them. So like most managers, you’ll be developing and fine-tuning these skills for some time.

Rules for smart learning.
• identify your best ways for learning new skills, and follow them.
• build a network of capable mentors--your network is your mentor.
• the more you learn, the easier you learn, the faster you learn, and the more fun it is.
• chunk your skills into very small components so that success will come easier for you.
• successful "small wins" by chunking can be very motivational.

I've built a highly-profitable, long term business on one development principle--a mantra--for myself and my clients: *Leverage your strengths, and shore up your strategically weaknesses.* Don't spend all of your time on just your strengths--or just your weaknesses. My mantra will be key to your long-term success.

**MANAGEMENT 101**

Delegating, feedback, big-picture thinking, managing your boss and learning--all sounds like Management 101. And you're right. The most basic competencies of managing are what trip up new managers. These basics should never be taken for granted because they are the basics. It's pretty obvious to most businesspeople that a large number of managers fail to develop these skills. The list of new manager skills is quite extensive, but I've tried to limit the focus to the most basic skills and emphasize the value of these four.

In a recent op-ed column, [Tom Friedman](http://www.nytimes.com) of the New York Times, summed up the key lessons that Stan Greenberg, one of the top pollsters, had learned from a study of such great leaders as Nelson Mandela. He found that the great leaders all crash. But they learn from their crashes, adjust, persist and go on to succeed. That's a perfect description of what happens to all achievers, including new managers. That could be scary, but need not be. It's reality. Taking on a new role inevitably results in a crash, some huge, some small. But those who pick themselves up and go back to their tasks will inevitably succeed. And, candidly, managing professionals is one of the great experiences of business life!