

# COACHING NEW MANAGERS TO SUCCESS

BY TRACY REZNIK

Successful development of a functional individual contributor into a manager of others takes coaching.

**P**ROMOTION! When an individual contributor performs consistently at a high level, the reward may likely be a bump up the corporate ladder. It's a professional transition that, in theory, should come as great news. Unfortunately, what's intended as a positive move can feel like it has negative consequences for new managers (and those around them) if they're not prepared for the transition and helped through it.

New managers are often surprised to find that they're not immediately good at their new roles – after all, wasn't it great performance in a past role that earned the promotion in the first place? Successful development of a functional individual contributor into a manager of others takes coaching. Specifically, coaching can help a new manager learn to let go of the past, gain confidence in new skills, and move forward with the role that lies ahead.

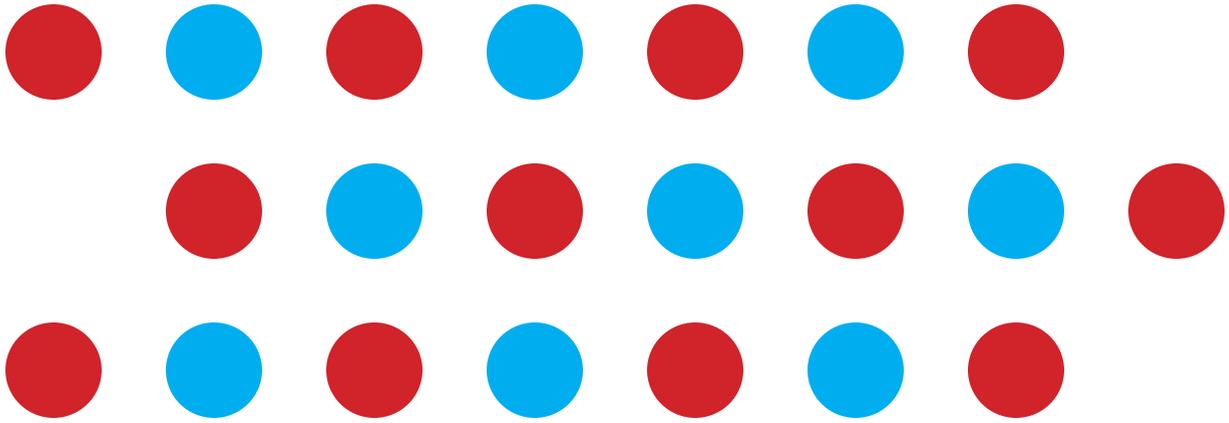
## GRASPING THE MAGNITUDE OF CHANGE

Although new managers may conceptually understand that they are now in the management ranks, psychological studies of new managers have shown that often they mentally reject the transition, holding onto tasks and behaviors from their old role. What's more, points out Linda Hill, author of *Becoming a Manager*, “the distinction between individual contributor and first-line manager is often blurred, for first-time managers often still perform some technical work.” It can be hard for a recently promoted manager to fully realize

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just how different the new role is and how their own work style must evolve.

Senior managers or mentors can serve a vital role as coaches during the time surrounding a promotion and afterward to help new managers accept and adjust to the change.

#### TRANSITIONS APPROACH: LEAVING THE PAST BEHIND

To embrace a new reality, you must first let the old reality go. William Bridges, author of *The Transition Theory*, defines transition as “the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation.” According to Bridges, “the starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending that you will have to make to leave the old situation behind. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place.”

One of the most daunting tasks new managers must accomplish is giving up their identities as individual contributors. Unless new managers can move on from one role into another, they’re bound to end up feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, perhaps attempting simply to heap new responsibilities on top of old ones.

Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel, authors of *The Leadership Pipeline*, point out that first-time managers may have a natural tendency to “overpower their direct reports with their expertise” and may sometimes “[compete] with direct reports on assignments and sometimes complete assignments themselves when they’re frustrated by how their people approach it.” Not only is that an overwhelming amount of work for the manager – often creating time management problems in a person who’s not used to having them – but it’s likely to cause friction with the direct reports.

In the “transitions” coaching model, a mentor helps the new manager identify with each of three stages of transition: Endings, Neutral, and Beginnings. In the Endings phase, coaching encourages the introspection necessary to achieve closure and to say goodbye. The Neutral phase – where many new managers can end up feeling stuck – is characterized as a state of confusion. Because this is often a



period of low productivity, coaches should aim to help new managers minimize the amount of time in this phase and, while there, tap into the creative ideas that may emerge about the future. Once the new manager is ready to move forward, it's the Beginnings phase, signifying acceptance of the new role and the accompanying new identity.

#### FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH: EVERYONE PLAYS A PART

A good coach or mentor can help a new manager take a big-picture perspective and see how the manager functions as one part of a group or family.

If the transition is a little rocky and the new manager is having trouble letting go of old responsibilities, the “family-centered” coaching model may be helpful. A good coach or mentor can help a new manager take a big-picture perspective and see how the manager functions as one part of a group or family. A new manager might be encouraged to look at the entire process or organization and all the necessary roles to be filled. From this perspective, it's easier to see how each individual fills a different need within the overall process.

In *The Psychology of Executive Coaching*, author Bruce Peltier recommends walking the new manager through this thought process by asking the following questions: “What roles do various people play? What would happen if they stopped playing them? How do these roles serve to keep things the same?”

This approach turns the focus away from the individual manager and what he or she may be doing to inadvertently slow things down or cause problems, and more on what's required to ensure the successful workings of the group as a whole. When a new manager sees that some pieces are no longer his or hers to fulfill, he or she can better let them go. Likewise, a new manager who sees clearly how the manager role is essential to the overall process is better able to embrace it. The emphasis is on the context, rather than the person, thus taking some of the personal anxiety out of the equation while the new manager finds his or her footing.

By helping new managers focus on the big picture and on the present as opposed to the past, coaches or mentors help them concentrate efforts on managing larger processes versus small details. New managers often find that focusing on process over content is a hard skill to grasp. It takes practice.

## MASTERING A NEW SET OF SKILLS

This realization – getting work done through others – is often the most difficult aspect of the transition from worker to management.

Almost no one masters the art of delegation before they are in a position of management.

Whereas individual contributors perform specific tasks and duties, managers must supervise others performing the work instead of taking part in the work themselves. This realization – getting work done through others – is often the most difficult aspect of the transition from worker to management.

This new identity – that of the manager supervising others – can be uncomfortable. Gone (or at least handed over to others) are the tasks at which they previously excelled. This can shake the confidence of a new manager used to being able to control every detail. Self-esteem can suffer as their previous job responsibilities are lost to the new challenges of managing the employees doing the work. It's easy to see how a new manager might jump to a certain conclusion: "I'm just not cut out for this."

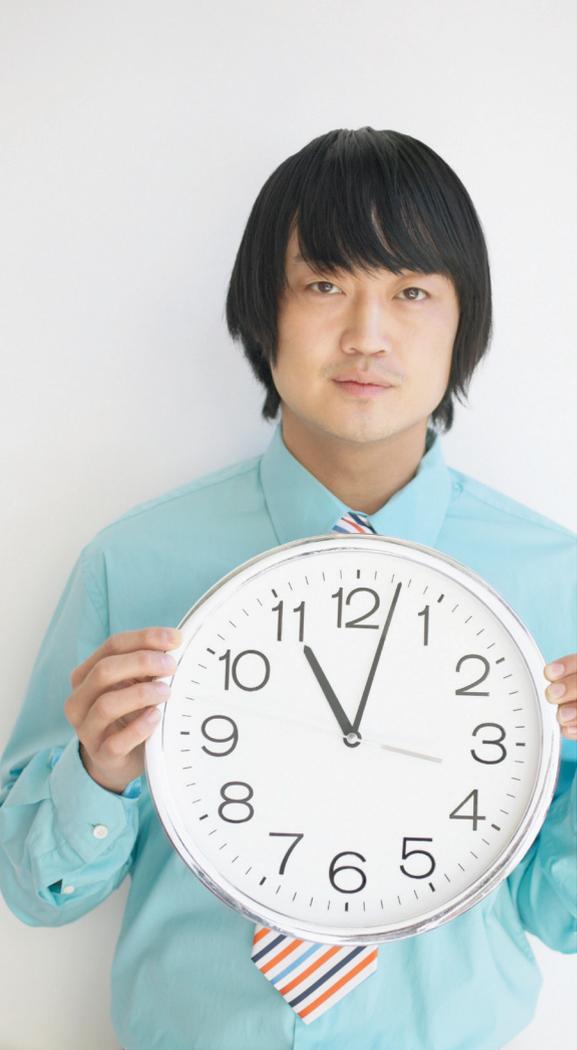
Coaches are invaluable at this step of the process, because they can give new managers this very important perspective: Almost no one masters the art of delegation before they are in a position of management. Backing away from the functional role and beginning to supervise employees is something that's learned on the job. That is, the new manager is right where he or she needs to be, shaky confidence and all. It's normal.

New managers may not like the feeling of delegating work that not only was theirs to begin with, but which they liked and felt comfortable doing. Coaches can help them to think of delegation as just a way of sharing the responsibility – which is still theirs, in part – by allowing others to complete assignments. William Oncken, Jr. and Donald Wass wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that one of the benefits of giving up detailed control of the functional work is the time and ability to grow and develop their direct reports, thus providing a whole new benefit to the organization.

## THE COACHING NETWORK

In addition to whatever formal mentoring or coaching relationship might exist, a network of role models can be a godsend in times of transition. In her research on new managers, Hill found that "managers who had a more extensive and varied network, and who were willing to ask for help, found it easier to cope with the many first-year challenges." A new manager naturally emulates the leadership styles, attitudes, and behaviors of those in the network. Interactions with past and current bosses, and especially new peers at the management level, can teach new managers how to adapt to the management lifestyle.

Hill also recommends new managers be given opportunities to work collaboratively with other managers through task forces or other projects, as it helps them see many styles at work and ultimately develop their own managerial identity. Such interactions also help new managers know that they're not alone – they can share their frustrations, as well as tips for handling them.



## WORKING BETTER, SOONER

As Loren Belker advises in *The First-Time Manager*, “Advancement into management is a form of change. You need to know what is involved and what qualities are required so you can make that change with grace and style.” With supportive mentors and a network of coaches cheering them on, new managers can get through that change with far greater success and fewer stall-outs. That means productivity will be ramped up faster and your stellar employee will once again be in a place of confidence – now with even greater opportunity for leadership.

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