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The Young and the Clueless

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Kerry A. Bunker, Kathy E. Kram, Sharon Ting

The Idea in Brief

Hell-bent on sabotaging your company? Then promote your brightest young professionals into your most demanding roles--especially when they threaten to leave unless you fast-track them. Nonsense, you say? Hardly.

Promoting talented young managers too quickly prevents them from developing key **emotional competencies**--such as negotiating with peers, regulating negative emotions during crises, and building support for change--skills that come only with time and experience.

Worse, many "young and clueless" managers lack patience, openness, and empathy--qualities more vital than raw intellect at top leadership levels, where business issues grow more complex and stakes are notoriously high.

Aggressive and insensitive, fast-tracked managers may pooh-pooh relationships with peers and subordinates--not realizing they *need* those connections to conquer problems. Issues become crises, defeating managers. Your company, customers, and employees all pay the price.

The solution? **Delay promotions** so managers can mature emotionally. This isn't easy. You must balance confrontation and support, patience and urgency--and risk losing your finest. But premature promoting carries far greater risks.

The Idea in Practice

1. Deepen 360-degree feedback. Provide broad and deep feedback to help managers see themselves as others do--a must for building self-awareness. Give them verbatim written responses to open-ended questions from a wide variety of peers and subordinates, not just you. Managers may discount your views as biased or uninformed. Allow time for reflection and follow-up conversations.

Though his business acumen was unmatched in his company, a brilliant 42-year-old VP neglected peer relationships, earning a reputation as detached. Corporate wondered if he could inspire staff to support important new strategies. After an in-depth 360-degree review, he began strengthening interpersonal connections.

2. Interrupt the ascent. To help managers learn to move others' hearts and minds, give them special assignments outside their typical career path. They'll *have* to master negotiation and influence skills, rather than relying on rank for authority.

A quick-tempered regional sales director wasn't ready for promotion to VP. Her boss persuaded her to lead a year-long team investigating cross-selling opportunities. She learned to use persuasion to win other division managers' support, building solid relationships. Now a VP, she's perceived as a well-connected manager who can negotiate on her team's behalf.

3. Act on your commitment. If you've warned managers that promotion depends on emotional competencies, follow through. These competencies are *not* optional.

A conflict-averse senior VP managed his own group well but avoided collaborative situations, where the potential for conflict increased. Exploring external alliances, the firm considered collaboration vital. The CEO demoted him, temporarily pulling him from the succession plan. Assigned to a cross-functional team project, he learned to handle disputes and build consensus. He's back on track.

4. Institutionalize personal development. Make it clear that success at your company hinges on emotional competence.

One CEO articulated corporate values emphasizing continual learning, including asking for help. He created incentives encouraging such behaviors and built emotional-skills requirements into the firm's succession planning. Known for learning and growing, the firm attracts and retains talented young executives.

5. Cultivate informal networks. Encourage managers to forge mentoring relationships outside the usual hierarchy. They'll encounter diverse leadership styles and viewpoints, gain opportunities for reflection--and mature emotionally.

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Further Reading

Articles

Best of HBR on Leadership: Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

HBR OnPoint Collection

December 2001

This collection takes a closer look at the importance of **emotional intelligence** (EI)--that potent blend of self-management and relationship skills that even the most technically brilliant top-level manager needs to do his most crucial work: getting things done through others.

Three articles show how managers can improve their EI: In "What Makes a Leader?", Daniel Goleman sets the stage by defining the five EI components. In "Leadership That Gets Results,"

he explains how to mix and match those components as organizational circumstances dictate. In "Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance," Goleman and his coauthors reveal how managers can project the positive energy that inspires others to excel.

Why Entrepreneurs Don't Scale

Harvard Business Review

December 2002

by John Hamm

One of the biggest "aha's" smart, ambitious young managers experience is realizing that the talents that worked so well for them as individual contributors aren't nearly as valuable in the realm of management. Hamm sheds light on this phenomenon by examining the **transition process** by which entrepreneurs shift from launching a new business to managing a growing concern.

Like "young and clueless" managers, entrepreneurs initially succeed by their ability to execute tough tasks and their single-mindedness. But when their company is up and running, the capacity to delegate and to inspire others, along with other emotional competencies, becomes far more crucial. Hamm offers insights that can help *your* bright new managers make this vital transformation.

A Better Way to Deliver Bad News

Harvard Business Review

September 2002

by Jean-François Manzoni

This article focuses on the **feedback process** so essential to shaping brash young managers' emotional maturation. In particular, Manzoni describes a common pitfall many executives stumble into while correcting errant managers: initiating the conversation without considering alternative explanations for problem behavior, assuming a win-lose outcome, and rigidly maintaining irrelevant assumptions.

The culprit behind this pitfall? Two biases: 1) *The fundamental attribution error*. We attribute problem behavior to character ("Jeremy's not delegating because he's too controlling") versus circumstances (maybe he is delegating, but his subordinates have some other ax to grind). 2) *The false consensus effect*. We assume that others see situations as we do, and fail to revise our assumptions during feedback sessions. Manzoni describes a more open-minded, flexible--and productive--way to deliver corrective feedback.

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