

Succeeding As a First-time Manager

By BNET Editorial

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You got the promotion: congratulations! You're now a manager and will probably be responsible for managing a team of up to 15 people, either in your present company, or in a new organization. This is obviously an exciting challenge for you, though you may feel somewhat daunted at the prospect, especially if you were previously a member of the team you will now be managing.

However, provided you focus on a few specific strategies, there is no reason why such fears shouldn't be easily overcome. Your new role will provide you with an excellent opportunity to stretch your wings and fulfill your potential. This checklist is intended to give you these basic strategies and help to smooth the path forward into this new phase of your working life.

What You Need to Know

I'm worried that my new job may be beyond me. How can I combat these feelings?

Most people encounter worries of this type when they're faced with a new opportunity: it's quite natural. To increase your chances of success, however, you need to get them under control. To get through this confidence crisis, remind yourself that you would never have got this job had the company not recognized your many skills and talents in the first place! Also make time to look after your health: make sure you get plenty of sleep and exercise, so you are prepared mentally and physically for your new challenges.

Will my home life be affected by a promotion at work?

It's highly likely, yes. Moving into any new job can be stressful, and this is increased when you take on new or more challenging tasks. To combat this, prepare for it by facing up to the fact that your life may be more demanding than ever before. Talk this over with your family and friends at an early stage; it will be an enormous help if they are ready to lend their support while you come to grips with your new role, and also to temporarily keep responsibilities at home to a minimum to let you focus.

Will I need to change my persona at work?

No, not essentially, but you may need to adjust your focus and the way you think about your job. A lot of management is about standing back from the detail and seeing the "big picture" of what is

happening, so that you can make strategic decisions about how to act. Rather than getting involved in the nitty-gritty of individual tasks (as you may have done as a team member), try to cultivate an objective overview. If you can learn to see the big picture instead of the minutia, this will naturally lead to you behaving in a way that suits the circumstances.

What to Do

Research and Assess Your New Job

Start by gathering as much information as possible. If you're moving to a new employer, find out everything you can about the company you'll be working for, the department or section you'll be in, the job itself, and anything else that might be helpful. Don't prejudge what you're going to find, and don't be bound by what you've done before, or by how any of your previous employers operated. It's also a good idea to find out something about your predecessor: why he or she left, what style of management they preferred, how people responded to that, what may need to be changed, and so on. (If you're staying in the same company, you may know this already, but it's worth doing some extra research.) From the information you've gathered, try to form at least a tentative plan in advance—it's much harder to do this once you're in the position. What do you want to achieve? What new skills might you need to develop to match the new demands? Reflect as honestly as you can on your strengths and weaknesses: how might you use your unique qualities and experiences to the greatest advantage, and compensate for your limitations?

Engage with Your Team

Once you start in your new position, make this your first priority. What is the function of your department, team, or unit? What is being accomplished, where are there shortfalls, what customer expectations need to be met? Get all your team members together as soon as possible to introduce yourself, and then arrange meetings with each of them individually. While keeping these meetings as friendly and informal as possible, remember that you are the manager. Allow a generous amount of time and plan some kind of framework for the discussion. Listen carefully to what people have to say, and get information about them as individuals. Most importantly, ask each person the question: what can I do to help you perform your job more effectively?

Implement Some “Quick Wins”

Now is the time to plan a few goals that you can accomplish quickly and easily, which will help you to feel more at home and in control. Achieving these also eases the pressure you feel to perform and create a positive first impression, and helps to kickstart the relationship-building process. Quick

wins might include things like getting to grips with systems or communication styles if you're new to the company (for example, the internal e-mail system); setting up a meeting with your new manager within your first few days, introducing yourself to key partners both inside and outside of the business (such as customers or suppliers), or even taking your team to lunch.

Clarify the Expectations Others Have of You

You may be fortunate enough to have been given a detailed job description, but there are probably still large gaps in your understanding of the tasks and priorities you are responsible for, what is or isn't acceptable in the new environment, and on what criteria you will be judged by your boss, peers, staff, customers, and others. Don't be afraid to ask a lot of questions to clarify these issues, and then be very honest with yourself. Can you meet these standards? If not, what might you need to do? Who could help, and what might the price be?

Resist the Urge to “Make a Clean Sweep”

While you will no doubt be eager to get going and to make your mark, it is important that you tread delicately—at least initially. Don't assume that your new team will welcome your style or your ideas with open arms, even if your predecessor was unpopular. They need to feel they can trust you and that you respect and value what they've been doing previously, before you can count on their support and cooperation. Above all, don't depart too dramatically and quickly from established practice.

Show Your Commitment to Individual Development

From your initial meetings with your team, you will have an idea of their individual aspirations and hopes are for their jobs and careers. Follow up by setting a code of management practice that you make clear to all team members, and then follow it rigorously. This code might include commitments to assess training needs, to hold regular team meetings and one on one sessions, to set specific goals, and to evaluate performance against these goals.

Reinforce this code by the way you yourself behave toward team members. Make a point of appreciating extra time and effort that people put in, listen closely to what they say, and be generous in your praise of their good qualities and achievements. Thus, by demonstrating to your team that you as their manager are committed to supporting them, you will gain their trust and acceptance, and the performance of the whole team will be greatly enhanced.

Lead By Example

An effective manager needs to be a role model, so it is imperative that you set an example for how you want your team members to behave. Lead by involving people in establishing group objectives, setting standards, and achieving deadlines, and demonstrate your own strong personal commitment to achieving the team's goals. Set an example too by maintaining high standards in your appearance and general behavior, and by establishing warm, friendly relationships.

Take Stock Regularly

At the end of your first week, identify issues that need attention and make a plan for the following week. Get into the habit each week of scheduling some time for review and planning. Don't let your mistakes lead to self-doubt: everyone makes them, and good managers learn from them, while bad ones repeat them. The pattern of behavior you set in your first three months will be extremely hard to change later.

What to Avoid

You Over-Promise and Risk Underdelivering

When you are new to a company or role, it is all too easy to make all types of promises to others as you try to settle in and make a good impression. Do remember, however, that you will be judged on whether or not those promises are fulfilled, so be careful when you make promises. Under-promising and over-delivering are much better than the other way around.

You Form Alliances Based on First Impressions

While we often rely on first impressions, they may very well turn out to be inaccurate. Your understanding of people and circumstances may change substantially as you learn more about them, and it's important that you don't cement yourself into new relationships that later turn out to be inappropriate, or which may even alienate other, potentially more useful, allies.

You Appear to Maintain Friendships with Select Team Members

Although it's important to create cordial relationships with those who report to you, it's also important to distance yourself a little from your staff, so that you can remain objective and unbiased in your actions. This can be difficult, especially when you have previously been a member of the team yourself, but if you don't, you run the danger of being seen as a manager who has "favorites" and of allowing your personal feelings to affect your judgment. Over time, this will damage your team's morale and you also run the risk of losing your authority. It may take some time to perfect, but try to keep a balance: explain your position to particular friends, be seen to maintain a professional relationship at work, and keep purely social interaction for outside the office.

You Allow Yourself to Be Trapped Into Accepting the Status Quo

Be aware that when people talk about "the way things are done around here," it often means they are resistant to change. Assess the situation by becoming thoroughly familiar with your team and your job and then, if change is needed, take steps to initiate it, remembering, of course, to be sensitive in the way you do it.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

HR Guide: www.hr-guide.com

HR Village: www.hrvillage.com