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First-Time Managers: Who Really Has What It Takes?

[By Patrick Sweeney]

You've seen team members work hard and get results. You've watched individuals go above and beyond what's expected, and they show real potential for continued growth. So, naturally, their dedication will be rewarded with promotions to management roles.

But if they have no previous leadership experience, how do you know these first-time managers will have what it takes?

While there are many books, articles, and seminars on what makes an effective manager, studies show that most people in managerial positions had little or no management experience or training before taking on their current roles. In addition, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 50% to 55% of workers who moved up to supervisory, managerial, or executive positions came from other roles inside the same firm.

"In many organizations, there's no transition plan," said Eileen Krantz, vice president of organizational development at Caliper, a management consulting firm based in Princeton, NJ. "One day a person can go from being on the team to being in charge of the team, and there was never a planned approach to how this changeover would take place."

As organizations are becoming leaner and flatter, moving into a leadership role is no longer a gradual process. Supervising others is a new responsibility—and a major challenge. A company's productivity and ability to retain committed employees depend largely upon the skill of its managers, and when people are promoted to management for the first time, it can be extremely overwhelming.

To Promote, or Not to Promote?

Employees who may have been outstanding individual contributors do not always become top managers. Moreover, a person's current job duties could be entirely different from his or her new management responsibilities. Therefore, the very same skills that make someone appear to be an attractive candidate for advancement become less important once the person is promoted and must then manage others.

As John Hancock's field sales office in Atlanta, GA, increased its staff size from eight internal wholesalers in 2001 to its current staff of 22 internal wholesalers, the organization decided in 2005 to create two new management positions to help internal sales director Amy Addison with overseeing the team so that she could focus on bigger issues such as strategic planning. Rather than choosing her top salespeople, Addison looked at those individuals who showed the most management potential.

"I didn't choose two of my best," explained Addison. "In the past, I think a lot of us have taken [our] best performers and put them into management. First of all, my top performers didn't want to go into management, but in doing the reviews and some of the career conversations, there were two individuals who absolutely contained the skill set. They showed excellent potential and leadership ability, and I ended up choosing them."

Being Too Tough vs. Not Being Tough Enough

Even after finding the right people to fill management positions, a company can still run into problems if employees are not given clear descriptions of what their new jobs entail. As first-time managers often have misperceptions of what it means to be a manager, they may struggle to reconcile their initial expectations with a manager's real responsibilities. And the most common mistakes of new managers tend to fall into two categories: being too tough and not being tough enough.

Managers who are "too tough" in their approaches to supervising others rely on their authority to get things done. Ask these new managers what their roles involve, and they may start off by describing management's rights and privileges rather than its duties. Or they might simply say that being a manager means being "the boss."

"Some people might feel because they're in the position, they've been anointed manager," said Krantz. "They might say, 'I'm going to tell people what to do, and if they just do it the way I've always done it, they're going to be fine.' But it doesn't always work out that way."

When Addison chose an internal wholesaler for one of the new management positions, she thought his optimistic attitude would motivate the rest of the team. However,



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once in the position, the new manager set a different tone.

"I thought this manager was going to be more laid-back than what he ended up being," said Addison. "He ended up coming across a bit heavy-handed, saying to team members, 'You guys have got to step it up' or 'We've got to get to this point, or else you all might be looking for jobs.' I'm not sure where that management style came from."

On the other hand, there are managers who are "not tough enough" because they simply may not feel comfortable taking charge in the way that they are now expected to.

"When someone moves from peer to manager, the rules change," explained John Carlson, president and CEO of Bridgton Hospital. "They are no longer buddy-buddy. They are in a position where they have to hold people responsible. And sometimes they either don't know how to do that or don't want to do that."

First-Time Manager Solutions

So what can an organization do to make sure people are set up to succeed?

First, make sure you pick people who are competent and have what it takes to do the job.

But how can you do that quickly and simply? By administering a validated personality assessment, you can determine if candidates have the attributes necessary for success. Are they able to assert themselves? Rebound from difficulty? Think on their feet? Research has shown that the personality dynamics of successful managers differ from those of successful individual contributors—and, for that matter, from those of successful leaders as well. Understanding these differences can be critical in planning a career path for individuals within your organization.

Another indicator of success is past performance. However, it is important to not just look at traditional measures of an individual's skills and abilities but also see things from the expanded viewpoint of team orientation and leadership qualities.

In the past, has the candidate helped, coached, or mentored other people? Spent time with coworkers who were having difficulty to help them improve? In short, has he or she contributed to the success of others? If the answer is "no," beware of promoting someone who is unlikely to meet your expectations in a managerial role.

Second, clearly communicate your expectations for the new role.

Common Pitfalls for First-Time Managers:

- Throwing their weight around too quickly.
- Not knowing how to listen to others.
- Being a "buddy" rather than a boss.
- Letting friendships get in the way of managing performance.
- Not knowing how to delegate assignments.
- Saving the most interesting work for themselves.
- Not knowing when to let someone go.
- Not keeping the team or boss informed.
- Concentrating on problems rather than opportunities.
- Not working with other managers.
- Being defensive to criticism.
- Judging workers rather than behavior.

Will the candidate be required to start up a new unit? Maintain and grow an already high-performing operation? Turn around a failing group?

You need to have clearly defined criteria for success, in terms of both the right behaviors and the right results. Also, be sure to provide a definite "breakaway point" from the previous position so the person can hit the ground running in his or her new role.

Third, provide management-orientation, training, and career-development programs before raising even outstanding individual contributors to management level in order to help them move more smoothly into their new positions.

Training can also be a way of reinforcing the candidate's buy-in to your company's goals, as well as enabling new managers to develop the competencies required for their expanded roles. Personality assessments used during the selection process can also help you tailor training programs to address specific areas for developmental improvement that may have been uncovered.

And finally, make sure your culture rewards managers.

What are the behaviors needed for success in a management role at your company? How do you measure those behaviors? And do you reward those behaviors? If so, how? If not, why not? You need to make your expectations known and then reward strong performance before a first-time manager—or any manager—can be successful.

By taking the steps required to set an employee up for success, you will deliver a clear message. Companies that show their employees that their long-term development is a shared goal have a definite advantage in attracting the best applicants and keeping their top talent motivated, challenged, and loyal.



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About the Author:

Patrick Sweeney is the executive vice president of Caliper, where he oversees branding, marketing, and corporate communications for the international management consulting firm.

Headquartered in Princeton, with a dozen offices around the world, Caliper consults with executives on hiring, employee development, team building, and

organizational performance. Throughout the past four decades, Caliper has assessed the potential of more than 2 million individuals for Johnson & Johnson, Avis, and some of the fastest-growing smaller companies around the world.

Along with Caliper's president and CEO, Herb Greenberg, Ph.D., Patrick is the co-author of the recent *New York Times* bestseller *Succeed on Your Own Terms*, as well as *How to Hire & Develop Your Next Top Performer*,

both published by McGraw-Hill. Herb and Patrick also co-host a nationally syndicated weekly radio show called *Winning in Business*, which features in-depth interviews with outstanding business leaders.

A former speechwriter for New Jersey Governor Brendan Byrne, Patrick has been the editor of a city magazine and a writer for a public television program, and he has written feature articles for *The New York Times*.

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