Crossing the Leadership Chasm

Making the Transition from Individual Contributor to Leader

By Amy Fenollosa and Joe McCafferty

Why is the transition from individual contributor to manager such a challenging process? While it may seem obvious that glowing performance reviews, customer accolades, peer respect and management recognition are the keys to selecting an ascending management star, the reality is that what makes someone thrive as an individual contributor is not always relevant to what will make them succeed as a manager. The skills that people demonstrate to earn a promotion rarely include leading, delegating, or motivating. According to a recent survey of direct reports, 49% said that their frontline managers are not effective at "people management".[i]

Research has confirmed that new managers need help—a recent study revealed that 48% of managers surveyed continued to function as individual contributors rather than managers. 27% were vacillating in the transition from individual contributor to leader, while only 25% had fully transitioned into their management role.[ii] The people who are expected to guide, motivate and lead employees are floundering themselves, and the cascading effect is palpable: visit an office where there is a weak manager and you'll see uninspired, unmotivated and underperforming team members.

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Supporting the growth and development of first-time managers can yield tremendous results: Effective managers can boost employee performance by 37% and discretionary effort by 28%.[iii] Yet newly minted managers are often abandoned once they are promoted; they're expected to learn through experience and to independently navigate their way from individual contributor to leader. Without a formal development program, new managers are reluctant to ask for help. They assume they were promoted for their strengths and want to showcase them, rather than exposing vulnerability by admitting that they're unsure of how to manage a team of people. When they do solicit help, only about half will turn to their direct managers for it. [iv]

Research indicates that it can take 3-5 years to fully transition into a management position[v] but by providing the tools to support the transition, we can help facilitate the process and decrease the ramp up time. Our research of recently promoted managers identifies five specific challenges that new managers struggle with, including:

- Managing the Transition from Peer to Leader
- Managing Time and Prioritizing Work
- Communicating Transparently
- Delegating and Allocating Work
- Establishing Mentor Relationships

Managing the Transition from Peer to Leader

New managers who have "worked their way up the ranks" routinely find themselves feeling like outsiders among their friends on the team. They often have to bridge the gap between promoting an agenda that has been set by senior leadership and acknowledging the criticisms of their friends and former co-workers. Managing relationships is an important challenge for these individuals to master as they transition from individual contributors to leaders.

One of the important lessons that new leaders learn is that a change in their position or title often drives a change in their relationships at work. Suddenly the new manager finds herself in the potentially awkward position of managing her friends. In addition to the challenges of managing performance issues and negotiating salaries with former colleagues, the new manager may feel isolated. It is no longer appropriate to engage with former peers in discussions regarding other team members, or to complain about new policies. New managers should recognize the importance of separating personal associations from work associations, particularly in the case where a reporting relationship has changed.

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One strategy that can prove helpful for new leaders is to reach out to their new peer group. By developing camaraderie with other managers, new leaders realize that they are not alone and can share ideas and solutions to the myriad of challenges leaders face.

In addition, to managing the new dynamic of peer relationships, a new leader must represent the viewpoints of management to her team, and do her best to help team members understand why new and sometimes unpopular decisions are important to the organization. Leaders must understand and believe in the organization's mission and vision in order to motivate and inspire a team to work toward it. By recognizing the unique contributions of each team member, and the organizational impact that the team goals will have, a new manager will be better equipped to explain how the team fits into the big picture and why their efforts are essential.

Prioritizing Work

As individual contributors, we are typically asked to complete a set of tasks within a specified timeframe. Success as an individual contributor comes from our ability to complete the tasks on our To-Do lists in a way that meets or exceeds expectations from both time and quality perspectives. As leaders, we must develop our ability to determine which tasks should actually be on the list of things to do in the first place. Balancing priorities is a significant challenge for leaders at all levels, and for those new to the job, it can be a bit daunting.

New leaders must learn to adapt to managing through situations where the work seems almost endless and the demands for time well exceed a 40 or 50 hour work week. In this type of environment, it is important for a leader to begin to develop a clearly articulated set of priorities for his team and evaluate all new tasks against these goals. Establishing a clear set of priorities provides context for decision making for both the leader and his team, and helps ensure the team is making progress toward a goal. Without a clear process for prioritizing their work, leaders will be quickly overwhelmed by the volume of requests that come across their desks and find themselves running in multiple directions and frustrated by their inability to keep up.

We recommend leaders set priorities weekly and adjust their schedule and tasks appropriately. By reviewing key goals on a weekly basis, a leader can make sure that he is staying focused on the things that are truly important and not just jumping from one crisis to another. In addition, this approach allows leaders to communicate priorities clearly to their team and helps provide context for the thousands of issues that the team will face every day. By providing a clear sense of priority, the leader has empowered the team to react and respond appropriately to the requests for their time.

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Communicating Transparently

To be effective, leaders need to develop strong communications skills, both for helping their team understand new assignments and for representing their team's achievements to senior management. One of the best communications assets a leader has is a set of clearly articulated goals.

Junior level leaders often have limited exposure to senior leaders, and find it difficult to clearly articulate the value they provide to the organization. Having a clear set of priorities provides a straightforward way to represent the value of your team and can provide the basis for describing the team's work to a more senior level executive who has limited time. By proactively stating how the work of the team contributes to a series of goals, a leader will develop her ability to articulate and drive an agenda.

Developing the habit of relating decisions and work assignments to a short set of clear goals can also help provide team members with the rationale for any decisions made. This transparency provides the context for decisions, helps team members understand the group's priorities on a deeper level, and empowers them to make more effective decisions on their own. Having a short list of clearly articulated goals can help provide the context for decision-making to the entire team.

Delegation and Allocating Work

New leaders are often overwhelmed by the amount of work piling up on their desks. While their bosses encourage them to delegate more, new leaders often feel it is easier to do the work than delegate it. As individual contributors, we are evaluated based on the quality and quantity of the work we produce ourselves. However, once in the leadership position, that evaluation scale changes: we are no longer solely responsible for our own work but rather we are responsible for the quality and quantity of the work produced by our team.

New leaders may feel that they can get things done faster and better by themselves, however, they must begin to look out for the development of their team members. Every time a leader takes personal responsibility for completing a task, she misses an opportunity to develop skills among her team members. By not helping someone else learn the new task, the leader has limited her team member's development opportunity and continued a behavior pattern that sets her up as the only person on the team accountable for getting work done.

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The "I'll just do it myself" approach creates a team environment in which the leader is the bottleneck on all work, and limits the team's output to the amount of work she is able to produce personally. To develop their skill at delegating, new leaders must develop their interpersonal flexibility and their ability to develop others.

It is important for leaders to be flexible with their supervisory approach for several reasons. A flexible leader encourages team members to try new and novel approaches to tasks, which allows them to develop a sense of independence and ownership of their work. This independence helps the team improve its function by not having to rely solely on the leader for direction.

While encouraging independence can help a team's overall effectiveness, not all team members will be able to complete all assignments without support. Effective leaders understand that different assignments require different amounts of support, and flex their own approach to ensure that team members have the appropriate amount of help and guidance when needed.

Developing team members is an important second consideration when delegating. Employees are motivated when they feel their leader is trying to help them improve. Effective leaders think about the developmental goals of their employees and work to assign tasks that will help them achieve those goals. Of course this is not always possible, but engaging in an open discussion of developmental goals will help both the leader and her employees work together to improve performance and ensure that tasks are being assigned in a way that helps move both the team member and the team forward.

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Establishing Mentor Relationships

Our research indicates that mentoring relationships are critically important to the ongoing development of leaders throughout their careers. There are several benefits of having strong mentoring relationships with one or more seasoned professionals including:

- An objective point of view on issues that may arise on the job
- The wisdom of a more experienced professional who can provide support on critical decision
- Sound advice on career direction and new opportunities as they arise
- Access to the network of relationships a mentor can provide

Although formal mentoring programs are difficult to successfully implement, informal mentoring has proven to be extremely beneficial to both the mentors and mentees.

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When individuals seek out their own mentors and work to develop these relationships, the benefits are innumerable. Many successful senior executives have credited the mentors they had early in their careers with putting them on the road to their ultimate success. Encouraging new leaders to continuously seek out mentors who can help them develop the skills needed for success is one step in the process. Facilitating the development of these connections is another. By establishing casual networking opportunities: management brown-bag lunches, happy hours, or discussion groups, an organization can provide junior and senior managers with the chance to meet and get to know one another in a non-threatening environment. The most successful mentor relationships develop organically, so encouraging communication among different levels of management may result in rewarding mentoring opportunities.

Conclusion

The transition from individual contributor to leader often represents a significant challenge and a watershed moment in an individual's development. The skills and abilities that make for a great individual contributor are important attributes for a leader, but they are not sufficient to ensure ongoing success. To be effective, new leaders must embrace the development opportunities represented by their new positions and work hard to develop the interpersonal relationships and disciplines that will set them apart as an up and coming star among their peers. Crossing the chasm into leadership is a daunting endeavor, but with sufficient support, soon the new leaders will be mentoring the next generation of recently promoted managers.

i.   Learning and Development Roundtable ® *Teleconference Materials* Boosting the Effectiveness of Frontline Management. Aug. 2007.
ii.   Davis, John L., "Transition to Manager: Why most are stuck" ConceptReserve 2008.
iii. Learning and Development Roundtable® *Teleconference Materials* Boosting the Effectiveness of Frontline Management. Aug. 2007.
iv.   Hill, Linda A, "Becoming the Boss" Harvard Business Review, Jan. 2007.
v.   Hill, Linda A, Becoming a Manager, How new managers master the challenges of leadership, HBS Press, 2003

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