
Crossing the Bridge: Going From Non-management to Management

Merge Gupta-Sunderji

“I can’t believe it”, said Carl, dropping into the chair across from Sarita’s desk. Sarita gave him a questioning look. “Getting what I need from the accounting department is nearly impossible”, he said in response to her unasked question. “It’s always been a problem, but I figured that when Juanita took over as manager last year, things would improve. Instead, they’ve gone from bad to worse! Juanita was a top-notch senior technical rep, and a pleasure to deal with, so I figured she would have straightened out the department by now!” “I know what you mean,” commiserated Sarita. “Her employees aren’t happy either. They think she’s a worse manager than their last one!”

You’ve no doubt seen this scenario play out at least once, if not several times, in your organization. Individuals with superior product knowledge, strong technical strengths, or exceptional analytical skills get promoted into management, and then, despite their previous track records and future high expectations, turn out to be dreadful managers. Regrettably, these individuals have not realized that when they moved from non-management to management roles, a fundamental occupational change occurred. No one told them that the skills that made them successful in the past were no longer the skills that would make them successful in the future.

Moving into management is an immensely rewarding step to take in your career. Usually, such a move is accompanied by a promotion, so there are the obvious financial benefits. But there are many qualitative advantages as well – the ability to make a positive difference in the organization, the opportunity to help develop others, and the respect that often comes with the role, to list just a few. However, if you don’t recognize that you are fundamentally changing what you do, then you are setting yourself up to fail. Don’t fall into the trap of

thinking that the skills and behaviours that have made you successful in the past will make you successful in the future. When you move from non-management to management roles, there are seven aspects of occupational change that you should take into account in order to set yourself up for success.

First, recognize that you are now responsible for managing other people’s time. In the past, you were accountable for your own time. Even then, many aspects of your time were influenced by factors outside your control. In your role as a manager, this effect is compounded. Each one of your staff’s ability to manage time is influenced by a series of factors, and you have accountability for the entire range. This can be overwhelming, and can make you feel like you are losing control. Be aware of it, and take conscious steps to systematically understand and prioritize the various responsibilities of your department.

Second, understand that satisfaction becomes more vicarious and intangible. In the past, you could take a project from start to finish, and enjoy the satisfaction that came from seeing the end-product of your efforts. Perhaps you were even recognized either privately or publicly for your efforts. Now, you must get your satisfaction from watching other people (your team members) take projects from start to finish. And rather than receiving the recognition, your role is to offer it to others. As a manager, your satisfaction must now come from a sense of accomplishment in seeing someone else grow and develop, or from surviving a business crisis with a minimum number of casualties. Sometimes, you’ll simply have to settle for the fulfillment that comes from getting a job done with the least amount of hassle.

Third, your key resources are no longer your technical knowledge, or your specialized equipment, or even your top-notch



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analytical skills. Your key resources are your people! And sadly, the unfortunate truth is that your people won’t always do things the way you’d like! Yet, your personal evaluation will be influenced by how individual members of your team perform. This paradox can be very frustrating, but it is a reality of the management role. Consider this: for all practical purposes, you are married to your team! While that may sound like a radical statement, reflect on it a little bit further. In a marriage, at least in the short-term, you can’t just walk away from your partner – you have to invest time and energy into working problems out. Eventually, you may choose to get a divorce, but even that process takes a while to accomplish. It’s similar with members of your team. Even though you may not like what individual team members do, or how they behave, you cannot just walk away – you have to invest time and energy in working through problems and reaching solutions. Eventually, you may be able to remove a team member from the group, but it’s usually not a quick nor easy process. Which leads right into the fourth characteristic of this occupational change.

Primarily because your key resources are

your people, your problems as a manager become more long-term and ongoing. People-issues don't often have quick and easy solutions. Instead, it can take weeks or months of effort to see even the smallest positive change. There will be days when you will feel like you are on a treadmill. Even the most experienced managers will tell you that developing your people is an endless and tiring process. However, they will also tell you that the process can be enormously satisfying.

The fifth aspect to remember is what some authors refer to as the push-pull reality of management. As a manager, you will be "pushed" into roles that you may either not be comfortable with, or may not even have the skills to do. For example, you may need to have a discussion with an employee about tardiness at work, or even worse, personal hygiene. Even for the most experienced managers, this is not an easy discussion, and if you're a new manager, it's a giant step outside your comfort zone. And very likely, you've never received training on how to conduct such a discussion. Yet, in your role as a manager, you will be "pushed" into these sorts of activities. At the same time, you will be "pulled" back into procedures that you were comfortable and experienced in doing. For example, your replacement in your old job will call you and ask you to come over and help with some aspect of your previous responsibilities. Because you want to help, and because the tasks come easily to you, you will be "pulled" back into that role. This push-pull creates stress, and as a manager, you need to recognize it as a reality. You can't eliminate it, but if you acknowledge it, then you can act positively to overcome it. You can seek out a mentor to help you learn how to have that difficult discussion with an employee, and you can consciously work on encouraging your successor in your old job to become independent and self-sufficient.

Sixth, accept that, in your role as manager, you will need to be a "buffer". Unless you have been promoted to the President or CEO role in your organization, you will still be reporting to somebody else. Your manager will have expectations of you, and so will your staff. Many new managers experience the feeling of being "caught in the middle". Again, it is a reality of the

world that you now operate in, and you must acknowledge and work with it. Don't fight it, it will only frustrate you. Instead, actively work on developing your listening and communication skills. See yourself as a conduit or a pipeline: someone who facilitates the movement of information in both directions.

And finally, realize that there is a significant and major shift in job perception. As a manager, you are cast into a new role that comes with different expectations and perceptions. For one, you are most likely paid more than members of your team, and receive different (and probably improved) benefits. Many of your benefits will be perceived as "perks" in your role, and these perceptions can come with unexpected consequences. You will have access to information and resources that your staff will not, and sometimes that will make your people feel vulnerable. Appreciate that as a manager there is a status separation, whether perceived or real, between your role and those of your staff. Respect that, and work to

open the lines of communication as much as you can.

Watch carefully the next time you see a fly buzzing against a closed window pane. The fly is determined, and it will endlessly try to get out through the closed window because it can see where it wants to go — after all, its paradise is just there, on the other side of the glass. It believes that if it just tries harder, it will get through. But unfortunately, single-minded effort and resolute will is not enough. Eventually, the fly will die trying. The irony is that there is probably a door or another window on the other side of the room that is open, and could give the fly its flight to freedom. But the fly doesn't know any better; it is stuck on the belief that the approach it has taken in the past will work for it in the future. If you are a first-time manager, don't be the fly. Don't assume that the skills that made you successful in the past will make you successful in the future. Your success will come from your ability to learn a new mix of skills. Let me know how you do. ■



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