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# **THE FIRST-TIME MANAGER**

*Sixth Edition*

**LOREN B. BELKER  
JIM MCCORMICK  
GARY S. TOPCHIK**

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To all managers who aspire to advance  
their skills for the benefit of themselves  
and those they lead.

## Preface to the Sixth Edition

**MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO THIS BOOK WAS WHEN** AMACOM Books approached me about updating it. Upon reading this classic, I arrived at four conclusions. The first was that this book is a fantastic resource that has clearly helped countless new managers. The second was that it would be impossible for people to read this book and not improve their ability to manage well, regardless of how long they have been managing. The third was that I would have thoroughly enjoyed sitting down with Loren Belker and Gary Topchik because both our philosophies of management and our general approaches to life are so well aligned. My final conclusion was that improving this extraordinary resource would be a daunting challenge. I felt as though I was being asked to polish an already brilliant gem.

Having never had the opportunity to meet Loren or Gary led me to feel an even greater obligation to bring their work forward respectfully, add some new insights, and not diminish the value they have provided by their writings. To paraphrase Sir Isaac Newton, if I have provided value “it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Respectfully,  
Jim McCormick



# Acknowledgments

**I WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE MANAGERS** I have encountered and observed throughout my career. Their skills have ranged from extraordinary to horrendous, though I have learned from all of them. To the team members I have had the privilege to lead I say thank you. You have all been sources of enjoyment and learning. To the aspiring managers I have had the opportunity to teach, I applaud you for your thirst for knowledge. Thank you to my editor, Christina Parisi, for entrusting me with the legacy that is this book. And finally, I thank my agent, Maryann Karinch, who knows my skills better than I.

—JM

# Introduction

**BY OPENING THIS BOOK**, you have set yourself apart and made the clear statement that you desire to improve your management ability. This book was created for you and to assist you in that effort.

Just as you cannot lead a parade if no one is following, you cannot manage if you don't have a team to lead. Engrained in this book is the belief that a well-led team will always achieve results that are superior to those of an individual. Consistent with that conviction, this book has been written by a team. Three of us have taken up the challenge—at different times and in our own ways—of seeking to provide you with the best guidance we can muster for a new manager. The results of this joint effort are better because of our collaboration. The same will be true for you if you take to heart the insights you will discover in this book.

Summarizing thousands of words and hundreds of pieces of advice is nearly impossible. If forced to summarize, we believe the advice in this book centers around two overarching messages: be thoughtful in your actions and always conduct yourself with class. You will never regret either.

## **PART ONE**

# **So You're Going to Manage People**



Welcome to the exciting and challenging role of manager. Being successful is about valuing, understanding, and guiding the most complex of all systems—people. You will find it more of an art than a science and potentially more rewarding than anything you have ever done.

# 1

## **The Road to Management**

**THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS** that individuals become managers.

Unfortunately, many companies don't go through a very thorough process in choosing those who will be moved into a managerial position. Often the judgment is based solely on how well the person is performing in his or her current position. The best individual contributor doesn't always make the best manager, although many companies still make the choice on that basis. The theory is that successful past performance is the best indicator of future success. However, management skills are very different from the skills one needs to succeed as an individual contributor.

So the fact that an employee is a good performer, even though he or she demonstrates a pattern of success, doesn't necessarily mean the person will be a successful manager. Being a manager requires skills beyond those of being an excellent technician. Managers need to focus on people, not just tasks. They need to rely on others, not just be self-reliant. Managers are also team-oriented and have a broad focus, whereas nonmanagers succeed by having a narrow focus and being detail-oriented. In many ways, transitioning from the role of an individual contributor to a manager is similar to the difference between being a technician and being an artist. The manager is an artist because management is often nuanced and subjective. It involves a different mindset.

### **Management Is Not for Everyone**

Some companies have management-training programs. These programs vary from excellent to horrible. Too often, the program is given to people who already have been in managerial positions for a number of years. Even experienced managers periodically should be given refresher courses in management style and techniques. If a training program has any merit, however, it should be given to individuals who are being considered for management positions. The training program will not only help them avoid mistakes, it also gives trainees the opportunity to see whether they will be comfortable leading others. A management training program that helps potential managers decide that they are not suited for management has done both the prospective managers and the organization they are a part of a great favor.

Unfortunately, far too many organizations still use the "sink or swim" method of management training. All employees who move into supervisory positions must figure it out on their own. This method assumes that everyone intuitively knows how to manage. They don't. Managing people is crucial to the success of any organization; but in too many cases, it is left to chance. Anyone who has worked for any length of time has observed situations where a promotion didn't work out and the person asked

for the old job back. The well-known saying, “Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it” comes to mind. In many companies, the opportunities for promotion are limited if you don’t go into management. As a result, some people go into management who shouldn’t be there—and they wouldn’t want to be in management if other opportunities existed for salary increases and promotion.

A series of management seminars was conducted for one company that used an enlightened approach to the problem of moving the wrong people into management. Everyone under potential consideration for a first-line management position was invited to attend an all-day seminar on what is involved in the management of people. Included were some simple but typical management problems. When these candidates were invited to attend, they were told by the company, “If after attending this seminar you decide that the management of people is not something you want to do, just say so. That decision will in no way affect other nonmanagement promotion possibilities or future salary decisions in your current position.”

Approximately five hundred people attended these seminars, and approximately twenty percent decided they did not want to move into management. After getting a brief taste of management, approximately one hundred people knew they would not make good managers, but they were still valuable employees. Far too many people accept management promotions because they feel (often rightly so) that they will be dead-ended if they reject the promotion.

### **The Omnipotent One**

Some people believe that if you want something done right, you’d better do it yourself. People with this attitude rarely make good leaders or managers because they have difficulty delegating responsibility. Everyone has seen these people: They delegate only those trivial tasks that anyone could perform, and anything meaningful they keep for themselves. As a result, they work evenings and weekends and take a briefcase home as well. There is nothing wrong with working overtime. Most people occasionally must devote some extra time to the job, but those who follow this pattern as a way of life are poor managers. They have so little faith in their team members that they trust them with only trivial tasks. What they are really saying is that they don’t know how to properly train their people.

There is often a staff turnover problem in a team with this kind of manager. The employees are usually more qualified than the “omnipotent one” believes and they soon tire of handling only trivia.

You probably know of an omnipotent one in your own organization. It is a problem if you’re working for one, because you’ll have a difficult time being promoted. Caught up in your impossible situation, you’re not given anything important to do. As a result, you never get a chance to demonstrate your abilities. Omnipotent ones seldom give out recommendations for promotion. They are convinced that the reason they must do all the work is that their staff doesn’t accept responsibility. They can never admit that it is because they refuse to delegate. The trap of becoming an omnipotent one is being emphasized because you don’t want to allow yourself to fall into this mode of behavior.

One other unvarying trait of omnipotent ones is that they seldom take their

vacations all at once. They take only a couple days off at a time because they are certain the company can't function longer than that without them. Before going on vacation, they will leave specific instructions as to what work is to be saved until their return. In some situations, they'll leave a phone number where they can be reached in an emergency. Of course, they define what the emergency might be. The omnipotent one even complains to family and friends, "I can't even get away from the problems at work for a few days without being bothered." What omnipotent ones don't say is that this is exactly the way they want it because it makes them feel important. For some omnipotent managers, their retirement years are demolished because retirement means an end to their dedication to the job, their perceived indispensability, and possibly their reason for living.

### **The Chosen Few**

Sometimes, people are chosen to head a function because they're related to or have an "in" with the boss. Consider yourself fortunate if you do not work for this type of company. Even if you *are* related to the boss, it's very difficult to assume additional responsibility under these circumstances. You doubtless have the authority, but today's businesses aren't dictatorships and people won't perform well for you just because you've been anointed by upper management. So, if you're the boss's son or daughter or friend, you really need to prove yourself. You'll get surface respect or positional respect, but let's face it—it's what people really think of you, not what they say to you, that matters—and that affects how they perform.

In the best organizations, you're not chosen for a managerial position because of your technical knowledge, but because someone has seen the spark of leadership in you. That is the spark you must start developing. Leadership is difficult to define. A leader is a person others look to for direction, someone whose judgment is respected because it is usually sound. As you exercise your judgment and develop the capacity to make sound decisions, it becomes a self-perpetuating characteristic. Your faith in your own decision-making power is fortified. That feeds your self-confidence, and with more self-confidence, you become less reluctant to make difficult decisions.

Leaders are people who can see into the future and visualize the results of their decision making. Leaders can also set aside matters of personality and make decisions based on fact. This doesn't mean you ignore the human element—you never ignore it—but you always deal with the facts themselves, not with people's emotional perception of those facts.

People are chosen to be managers for a variety of reasons. If you're chosen for sound reasons, acceptance by your new staff will, for the most part, be much easier to gain.

## 2

### Starting Out

**YOUR FIRST WEEK** on the job as a manager will be unusual, to say the least. If you're a student of human behavior, you'll observe some surprising developments.

#### Settling In

Don't believe that everyone is happy about your promotion. Some of your coworkers will feel *they* should have been chosen. They may be jealous of your new position and secretly hope you fail.

Others, the office "yes people," will immediately start playing up to you. As the chosen one, you can be their ticket to success. Their objective isn't all bad, but their approach is unfortunate.

Some coworkers will put you to the test early. They may ask you questions to see if you know the answers. If you don't, they'll want to see if you'll admit it or if you'll try to bluff your way through it. Some may ask you questions you cannot possibly know the answers to, just for the sheer delight of embarrassing you.

Most—you hope the majority—will adopt a wait-and-see attitude. They're not going to condemn or praise you until they see how you perform. This attitude is healthy and all you really have a right to expect.

Initially you will be measured against your predecessor in the position. If that person's performance was miserable, yours will look great by comparison even if you're mediocre. If you follow a highly capable performer, your adjustment will be tougher. Before you begin thinking it's best to follow a miserable performer, consider the load of tough problems you'd be inheriting from your inept predecessor, which is why he's no longer there. It will be difficult but potentially quite rewarding, if you're up to the challenge. The highly capable predecessor is probably gone because she was promoted. In either case, you have a big job ahead of you.

One of your first decisions should be to refrain from immediately instituting changes in the method of operation. (In some situations, top management may have instructed you to go in and make certain immediate changes because of the seriousness of the situation. In such cases, however, it is usually announced that changes will be forthcoming.) Above all, be patient. Keep in mind that most people find change threatening. Sudden change often results in a fear response that will work against you.

When you do need to make changes, whether soon after your promotion or later, be as forthcoming as possible in explaining what will be taking place and why. This does not mean that you disclose every detail. Determining what to disclose and what to keep to yourself is part of the judgment you need to have as a manager. But the more forthcoming you can be, the more you will help your team get past the resistance to

change that is a normal part of human nature.

In all settings, but particularly when implementing changes, answer questions as honestly as possible. If you are new to the position, don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if you don't. Your people don't expect you to know everything. They may just be probing to see if they can trust you. Trying to fabricate an answer to a question you don't know the answer to is always a bad idea, and will very likely cost you credibility and trust.

If you make changes immediately, you'll be resented. In addition to being disquieting to your team, your actions can be construed as being arrogant and an insult to your predecessor. Many young new leaders make their own lives more difficult by assuming they have to use all their newfound power immediately. The key word should be *restraint*. It is vital to remember that you're the one who is on trial with your subordinates, not they with you.

This is a good time to make an important point about your own attitude. Many new managers communicate rather well upward to their superiors, but poorly downward to their direct reports, but they will have more to say about your future than your superiors. You are going to be judged by how well your team functions, so the people who now work for you are the most important in your business life. Believe it or not, they're more important even than the president of your company. This bit of knowledge has always seemed obvious, yet many new managers spend almost all their time planning their upward communication and give only a passing glance to the people who really control their future.

### **Using Your New Authority**

If there is one area that many new managers blunder into, it is the use of authority. This is particularly true of new managers navigating their way through a self-directed "sink or swim" method of on-the-job training. This is the flawed belief that because you now have the authority of management, you have to start using it—and you must use and display it in a big way. This may be the biggest mistake that new managers make.

View the authority of the new position as you would a limited inventory. The fewer times you draw on the inventory, the greater is the supply that remains for when it is *really* needed.

The newly appointed manager who starts acting like "the boss" and begins issuing orders and other directives is off to a bad start. While you may not hear the remarks directly, the typical comments made behind the back of such a misguided manager might be, "Boy, is she drunk with power," or "This job has really gone to his head," or "He sure is fond of himself since he was promoted." You don't need this kind of problem.

If you don't draw down your inventory of authority too often, the authority you may have to use in an emergency is more effective because it is infrequently displayed. The people you lead know that you are the manager. They know that the requests you make carry the authority of your position. The vast majority of the time, it is unnecessary to use that authority.

There is a term in the creative arts called *understatement*. For the most part, it



means that what is left unsaid may be as important as what is said. This is true with the use of authority. A direction given as a request is a managerial type of understatement. If the response is not forthcoming, you can always clarify or add a bit of authority. On the other hand, if you use all your authority to achieve a task, and then discover by the reaction that you have used too much, the damage is done. It is difficult, if not impossible, to de-escalate the overuse of authority.

In short, do not assume that you need to use the authority of your position. Perhaps the greatest by-product of this softer approach is that you are not building a negative image that may be nearly impossible to erase later.

### **Having the Personal Touch**

Sometime during the first sixty days on the job, you should plan on having a personal conversation with each of the people in your area of responsibility. Don't do this the first week or so. Give your people a chance to get used to the idea that you're there. If you try to do it immediately, you risk overwhelming or intimidating your team members. When it comes time to talk, ask them into your office for an unhurried discussion about anything that is on their minds. Do no more talking than necessary. This first discussion is not designed for outward communication with your team members; it is designed to open lines of communication from them to you. (Have you ever noticed that the more you allow the other person to talk, the higher you'll be rated as a brilliant conversationalist?)

Although the employee's personal concerns are important, it is preferable to restrict the discussion to work-related topics. Sometimes it is difficult to define these limits because problems at home may be troubling the employee more than anything else, but at all times you must avoid getting into a situation where you're giving personal advice. Just because you've been selected as the boss, it doesn't make you an expert on all the personal problems confronting your people. Listen to them; often that's what they need more than anything else—someone to listen to them.

### **Getting to Know Them**

Now let's get back to your conversation with your team members. The purpose is to give them the opportunity to open the lines of communication with you. Show a genuine interest in their concerns and learn what their ambitions are within the company. Ask questions that will get them to expand on their points of view. You can't fake genuine interest in others; you're doing this because you care about the employees' well-being. Such attention is advantageous to both sides. If you can help employees achieve their goals, they'll be more productive. What is more important is their belief that they're making progress toward their goals.

So your goal in these early conversations is to let your team members know you care about them as individuals and you're there to help them achieve their goals. Let them know you want to help them solve whatever problems they may be having with the job. Establish a comfort zone in which they can deal with you. Make them feel that it is perfectly natural for them to discuss small problems with you. By discussing small problems and small irritants, you can probably avoid most of the larger problems.

You'll discover in your first few months as a manager that your technical abilities are not nearly as important as your human abilities. The majority of your problems are going to revolve around the human and not the technical aspects of the job. Unless your responsibilities are technically complex, you'll discover that if you have outstanding human skills, you can overlook your minor technical deficiencies. Conversely, even if you are the most technically competent manager in the office, without human skills you'll have great difficulty.

### **Having Friends in the Department**

One of the problems many new executives confront is handling friendships with people in the department who now become their employees. This is a difficult situation to which there is no perfect answer. One of the most common questions new managers ask is, "Can I still be friends with the people who used to be my coworkers and who are now my employees?"

It is obvious that you shouldn't have to give up your friendships simply because you've received a promotion. However, you don't want your friendships to hurt your performance or the performance of your friends.

It is a mistake to allow your friendships to interfere with your method of operation. A direct report who is truly a friend will understand the dilemma in which you find yourself.

You must be certain that coworkers who were your friends before you became their supervisor receive the same treatment as everyone else. And that doesn't just mean not favoring them over other workers. They also must not be treated worse merely to prove to the others how unbiased you are.

Although it is certainly true that you can be friends with people, you cannot expect to be friends with them in the same way in the context of work. As a new manager, you will need to establish some expectations of how you will work with all of your team members, whether they are friends or not. You need to hold all individuals to the same standards of performance, behavior, and accountability. Also keep in mind that what might look like friendship to you can often look like favoritism to others.

There is a temptation to use your old friend in the department as a confidant, but you don't want to give the impression that you are playing favorites. In fact, you must not play favorites. If you do need a confidant, it is preferable to use a manager in another department or section of the organization.

### **Structuring Your Organization**

With time, you will want to consider whether you can improve the structure of your organization. Unless you are particularly familiar with your team members and their roles, it is best not to do this too soon. Restructurings tend to be very stressful for all involved. It is best to do them less often and well. While you can always correct a mistake in structuring your organization, it is best not to make the mistake to start with.

As you look at the reporting relationships within your team, you will need to pay particular attention to how many people are reporting directly to you. This number is

referred to as your span of control. In recent decades, information technology has allowed organizations to have fewer but broader layers. This *flattening* of organizational structures has had many positive results. Executed well, it has allowed for more efficient communication and improved decision-making. As with anything, there needs to be balance when creating a flatter structure.

Less experienced managers sometimes make the mistake of an excessive span of control. It is easy to do. Nearly everyone would like to report directly to you. It gives them better access to the decision-maker and brings with it a certain status within the organization. The problem is that you can only effectively manage a limited number of direct reports. When managers allow an excessive number of people to report to them directly, it becomes a free-for-all. They can find a line at their door every morning and an e-mail inbox full of messages. They then spend their entire day trying to respond to all the needs and questions of their direct reports. They are rarely successful getting through all the requests for guidance and decisions, then start the next day behind and rarely have time for any long-term thinking and planning. An excessively broad span of control is a setup for failure.

So, what span of control will work for you? There are a number of variables you need to take into account. One is the physical location of your direct reports. You can handle a little broader span of control if they are located in the same facility as you. The ability to meet with them in person will ease communication. Another factor is the level of experience; a direct report who is a proven performer is not likely to require as much of your time. A new employee or one who has recently been moved into a new position or given additional responsibilities will probably require more of your time, at least for a while.

A good rule of thumb is not to have more direct reports than you can meet with once a week. By meet, this means actual one-on-one face time. The meeting may be in person or a video call, but it needs to be a face-to-face, one-on-one meeting—not a staff meeting. Given that you have a lot to do in addition to meeting with your direct reports, five is a good maximum number. This allows you to have one of your one-on-one meetings each day of the workweek.

Be careful about letting these meetings slip—they are a vital part of your being able to manage well and efficiently. If your direct reports know they'll get face time with you every week, they will be able to save up items they need to discuss until that meeting. It is much more efficient to address issues in this setting than when passing in the hall, on a phone call from the airport, or by trading text messages or e-mails.

If your employees cannot count on having a regular opportunity to communicate directly with you, they will be more inclined to track you down whenever anything comes up that they think requires your attention. The negative results are twofold: a lot more ad hoc contacts that do not facilitate thoughtful decision-making and more issues being brought to you than necessary. If you can abide by weekly meetings with your direct reports and train them to hold as many issues as possible until those meetings, you will be surprised and pleased to see how many things they learn to resolve themselves that they otherwise would bring to you.

### **Managing Your Mood**

People who report to you are very aware of what kind of mood you're in, especially if you tend to have significant mood swings. Temper tantrums have no place in the work habits of a mature manager—and maturity has nothing to do with age. Letting your irritation show occasionally can be effective, as long as it is sincere and not manipulative.

All of us, from time to time, fall under the spell of moods that reflect situations outside the office that are troubling us. Many books on management tell us we must leave our problems at the door, or at home, and not bring them into the office. That attitude is naïve, because few people can completely shut off a personal problem and keep it from affecting how they perform on the job.

There is little doubt, however, that you can minimize the impact a problem has on your work. The first step is to admit that something is irritating you and that it may affect your relationship with your colleagues. If you can do that, you can probably avoid making other people victims of your personal problem. If an outside problem is gnawing at you and you need to deal with an employee in a critical situation, there is nothing wrong with saying to the employee, "Look, I'm really not in the greatest mood today. If I seem a little irritated, I hope you'll forgive me." This kind of candor is refreshing to a subordinate. And it is far better to disclose that you are distracted than to risk a team member thinking he or she is the cause of your distant behavior.

Never think for a moment that others don't have the ability to judge your moods. By showing dramatic changes of mood, you become less effective. In addition, your direct reports will know when to expect these changes and what the telltale signs are, and they will avoid dealing with you when you're on the bottom swing of such a mood. They'll wait until you're on the high end of the spectrum.

### **Managing Your Feelings**

You should work hard at being even-tempered. But it is not a good idea to be the kind of manager who is never bothered by anything—a person who never seems to feel great joy, great sorrow, or great anything. People will not identify with you if they believe you disguise all your feelings.

Keeping your cool at all times, however, is another matter. There are good reasons for keeping your cool. If you can always remain calm, even in troubled situations, you're more likely to think clearly and be in a better position to handle tough problems. But you can show feelings—without losing your cool—so that people won't think you're a management robot.

To be an outstanding manager of people, you must care about people. That doesn't mean taking a missionary or social worker approach toward them, but if you enjoy their company and respect their feelings, you'll be much more effective in your job than the supervisor who is mostly task-oriented.

This, indeed, is one of the problems companies bring on themselves when they assume that the most efficient worker in an area is the one who should be promoted to management. That worker may be efficient because he or she is task-oriented. Moving these kinds of workers into areas where they supervise others doesn't automatically make them people-oriented.