

Training the rookie manager

New managers bring with them unique challenges. With the right blend of formal and informal training and feedback, however, the talent pool within an organization can flourish

By Jeremy Miller



First-time managers display a lot of enthusiasm, determination, self-discipline, and of course those key skills that earned them the promotion in the first place. Yet they also face an overwhelming variety of challenges that they haven't been trained for or exposed to. The challenge of transitioning from a solo performer to a new manager is like moving from single life to life as a parent; the focus shifts from an individual's needs to the needs of others, and it's a much steeper learning curve than anyone ever imagines.

To be successful in their new role, first-time managers must be able to communicate, delegate, mentor, motivate, and solve problems on a team level — abilities that they probably had neither the opportunity nor the need to develop fully in their previous positions. When it comes to being effective leaders, first-time managers can only be as good as the support and training

that an organization gives them.

Without adequate training, it's easy to make mistakes; some micro-manage, some run into interpersonal problems, and some fail to delegate. To help fledgling leaders avoid such pitfalls, first-time managers should undergo a focused training program tailored to each individual. No classroom program can comprehensively cover all of the skills a first-time manager must develop. An effective approach is to develop a program to meet the individual's unique needs.

Where to start

What steps does your new manager need to take to reach maximum potential? Start with an assessment of the individual that combines past performance and upcoming responsibilities. The goal of the assessment is to gather insights into the individual's strengths, weaknesses, behavioural tendencies, preferred work style, leadership skills and knowledge of the position. The assessment shouldn't be conducted in seclusion. Involve the new manager throughout the process. The direct feedback and sharing this responsibility will help the manager take ownership of the development, and act as a valuable teaching tool.

During the assessment, clearly define the expectations of the new role for the new manager. Often when first-time managers are promoted, they are not only hindered by lack of experience and training, but the lack of definition in their role and responsibilities. Work with new managers to get a quick start, even before their first day, to help them find out as much as they can about the position, its history, the predecessor, and the predecessor's failures and successes. Sharing experiences will help to equip a first-time manager with the lessons of the past, and encourage a smooth transition.

New managers must learn to reshape the expectations of their staff, and work with the style and expectations set by the predecessor. It's a huge job to fill the shoes of a top-performing manager who has been promoted or has left the organization. Leverage the assessment to identify how new managers will carve out their own style, successes and relationships with their staff. A fresh face provides the opportunity to bring in new perspectives and ideas; don't let the past limit the potential development of a new manager.

How to act

Setting goals gives the development of a manager focus, and allows the manager and the executive team to track and measure results. Draw up an action plan that combines both corporate and personal goals that can be readily incorporated into tangible drivers and metrics for the new manager.

The action plan is the key for on-the-job training to handle the many skills a first-time manager must develop. Different skills such as delegating, coaching and setting team objectives are all key areas that should be incorporated. In the action plan, incorporate plenty of opportunities for practice. Role-playing, simulations and applying skills on the job are all vital learning techniques.

Coach for success

Coaching can help new managers develop a personal style, recognize and clarify the actual issues they face on a day-to-day basis, and focus on real-life examples. Therefore, it's useful to provide new managers with an experienced manager or an executive, preferably outside of the manager's direct hierarchy, who can mentor them through the growth process. Coaching works best when meetings occur regularly; schedule the meetings on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to ensure consistency and adequate knowledge transfer. The meetings should combine regular feedback and review of the manager's action plan. The coach will help focus the new manager, provide motivation and immediate feedback to the day-to-day realities of the position.

Be aware of environments that reinforce bad habits. For example, if coaches come to meetings late or cancel meetings because they are too busy, it sends a negative message about the importance of punctuality and the value placed on professional development. Audit these steps during the training period to ensure the desired outcome is achieved.

Reinforce learning

Combine coaching with opportunities to reinforce learning. A few weeks or months after instruction on a specific topic, such as delegating, set a time to review the lessons and their practical uses. This can take the form of a roundtable discussion, an additional practice session or a set of questions that quiz the manager on what they have learned. Constant feedback is key at all stages.

Don't let learning opportunities slip by. Evaluate how situations are handled immediately. Use a crisis as an opportunity to discuss how the situation was handled, what was successful and how it could be improved in the future. Real-time feedback is extremely powerful to develop the skills of a focused manager, and it gives the individual the necessary encouragement and feedback to develop skills without learning through too much trial and error.

Formal training

Combining your internal management development program with external training programs is an excellent option to extend your new manager's learning experience. There are a variety of training options that can be mixed and matched, depending on the manager's needs and the company's resources. Classroom and e-learning courses can give an introduction to various management styles, strategies and topics, and help further enhance foundational skills.

It typically takes new managers 6 to 18 months to learn and appreciate all of the parts of their new roles. First-time managers require a patient management team and mentors to survive the trial of the first few months and excel into the future. It's normal for first-time managers to feel stressed, confused and exhausted during the transition. A focused development program will ensure the performance of the new manager while further expanding your company's talent pool and performance.

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