

# Moving into Management



**R.C.I. Miller**

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**Ronald C. I. Miller**

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For Douglas, Stuart and Karen

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# Introduction

A 'manager' does not always carry that word in his or her job title but all those who have responsibility for the work of others are managers, although they may be known as supervisors, foremen, overseers, leading hands, headmistresses, editors, chief clerks, section leaders, buyers, nursing sisters or by scores of other titles – even Prime Minister. There are also many people who have dual jobs in which they do productive work some of the time and organize others for the remainder. The most obvious case is the player-manager in football, whose job title makes clear his two roles, both important and both calling for different skills. Yet in Britain today, it is estimated that four out of every five people who have some managerial responsibilities in their job never receive any training in management skills other than by casual observation of their colleagues.

Most promotions into first-line management posts, either full or part-time, come from the ranks of the group the new manager is then asked to supervise. Individuals will often be selected on the grounds that they are the best in their group, which is likely to mean that they are good operatives, salesmen or craftsmen. In many cases they become competent supervisors because they have the basic ability to do most things well but there are too many instances when a firm gains a poor supervisor and loses a good worker. An alarming proportion of British companies still seem unable to

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understand that management is a skill to be learned just like any other. No one in their right mind would give a multi-thousand-pound piece of equipment to an untrained person to operate, yet the most valuable resource of all – the work-force – is often handed over to someone untrained in management. In extreme cases, the person may not even have wanted the supervisory job!

Fortunately, most newly promoted managers succeed in muddling through until they learn by experience but it can be a slow and costly way to learn. At the end of the day, their level of ability will be dictated by what they can learn from others around them but that can mean that they simply go on making the same mistakes their predecessors have made, failing to respond to change and never raising their sights. Mediocrity rules, OK?

The curious public view of management is that many people see it as something that anyone can do, yet few criticize the provision of comprehensive craft training, which often takes years to complete. Such training continues, even though many jobs have been deskilled by the introduction of new technology and retraining is also widely available for those whose jobs and equipment have changed. But all too often, people refuse to accept the need to invest in management training by developing those who will work with people rather than inanimate objects.

Acquiring management skills can be particularly difficult for the person who has a craft skill and who decides to set up his own business. Sooner or later he will employ someone who has to be motivated and led. Problems can then quickly arise and, even though the owner can be expected to use his common sense, inevitably there will be an element of trial and error with needless mistakes being made.

For those who are not self-employed, however, the picture is not much brighter. Most British companies do not offer management training, the excuse usually being that the firm cannot manage without the new supervisor for even a one-week, basic skills course although, somehow, they manage to

cope without that person during his annual holiday entitlement of maybe four weeks and whenever illness takes him away from his desk. It does, therefore, seem illogical and false economy to skimp on even elementary training.

It was my own good fortune to be employed by companies that offered basic training when I took on my first supervisory roles. My university degree led to my being offered a job in the first place but in no way did it teach me about people and I still had much to learn. Now halfway through my career, I have worked as a management consultant and as an adviser with one of the former Industrial Training Boards as well as having spent some years 'at the sharp end', managing men and women in manufacturing industry. This has brought me into close contact with people at many levels of management, in scores of different firms, and I have tutored many courses and seminars, which have covered a wide range of management subjects. The result is that I am convinced beyond all doubt that managers who are given the chance to attend a short course within a few weeks or months of taking up their first managerial posts have a much more balanced and thoughtful approach to their responsibilities than those who have been less fortunate. It would be unfair to imply that anyone who has not been so trained is incompetent – many are excellent managers – but the benefits of some formal training are usually obvious.

On the courses I run, written notes are always distributed but these only cover the outline of the points discussed and I am constantly asked to recommend further reading. I have never found a complete answer to this request as, although there are very many management books published, most of them are either too detailed for people at the start of their career or they try to cover so much ground that they are superficial on any one subject. With a few notable exceptions, management books are as dry as dust and distinctly off-putting. I have often been asked why I do not gather my notes into book form and add a few other topics to give a reference book which new managers could use in order to

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gain a working knowledge of a particular subject. So I hope that this book will offer a straightforward explanation of various management skills for the typical, first-line manager, and will enable him or her to gain a basic appreciation of the subject. In-depth knowledge will have to be sought elsewhere – through books, courses or other qualified sources. I trust these pages will help to raise management standards through an understanding of previously unfamiliar subjects. If this book finds a home in the top drawers of some of their desks and is well thumb-marked, it will have served its modest purpose.

Men and women are managers and manageresses respectively but the English language is cumbersome when a singular subject is discussed and the intention is to refer to a man or a woman. I try where possible in this book, to make it clear that I am referring to both sexes but, occasionally, to avoid unwieldy sentences, only the male is mentioned. I trust no offence will be caused to my many female friends who are in management.

# 1

## Bridging the Gap

In the vast majority of companies, whatever the size or area of industry and commerce, first-level managers are found by promoting people from within, and they have straightaway to step out of their peer group and learn how to manage those who were once their colleagues. This is the biggest step any manager ever takes, when he or she is picked out from a group and put in charge of it. To borrow from Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, it is a small step for management but a giant leap for the new manager.

This job change brings its own specific problems. The new manager will soon discover that he is no longer judged by the work he produces but by his ability to get results through the work of others. It is a transition that can sometimes be a very difficult one to make and, before the skills of management are learned, the necessary change of attitude must be made. This can be especially difficult for those who have highly valued technical skills. Even though they may be ambitious and know that career progress usually comes through going into management, many decline the move, because they are unwilling to abandon hard-won crafts and skills. For those who do decide to step on to the management ladder, an understanding by them and by the firm of the problems that lie ahead and a readiness to allow a transitional period can make life easier for everyone. What must be avoided is the situation typified by one young man who, when asked about

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his new supervisory role, said 'Becoming a manager was a waste of my electronics training.' His manager complained in turn that the man did not manage his department because 'He couldn't resist the temptation to get involved in a juicy problem at the expense of leading his team.' A sad but not uncommon tale.

It is vital, however, for a firm to seek out new management talent from within the ranks of its work-force and to choose someone with management potential but also whose technical credibility will earn the respect of the troops. That is why the first step is so difficult, because the higher up the managerial pyramid one goes, the greater is the need for management ability, with reduced importance being placed on technical know-how. At the coal face, knowing how to shovel coal is an essential qualification for the new supervisor but it hardly matters if the Chairman of the Coal Board does not know much about that task. He has other staff who handle that side of things while he gets on with policy matters.

It should be remembered that becoming an effective manager means practising old skills less often (if at all) and learning new ones (which the following chapters outline). Accepting promotion is more than donning a white coat on a Monday morning and expecting everyone to call you 'Sir'. It is also more than just learning from mistakes or doing what the previous incumbent did – experience can be a hard and unforgiving teacher and why should you meekly copy every mistake made by every manager who sat in that chair before you?

The new manager's 'old' skills probably took years to acquire and may have included a lengthy apprenticeship plus college attendance, yet some firms will regard it as an extravagance to send him off on a short, one-week course to ensure he gets off to a correct start with a clear understanding of the basics of management. Courses do not provide a total solution and support and guidance within the firm are still needed as is a willingness by the newcomer to seek out and discover some of the essential management skills for him or

herself. Without the benefit of a training course however, the new manager has extra work to do in order to bring himself up to the standards considered necessary for success, although this is, of course, not beyond the ability of anyone who has the will to succeed.

However many books you read or courses you attend on management subjects, they will nearly always concentrate on skills, but of equal importance is the psychology of management and the need to cope with the pressures of being the man or woman 'in the middle'. An interest in human nature and people is essential as someone who is too task-orientated will seldom make a good manager. The essential attribute of sensitivity towards one's fellow human beings is something that cannot be taught but even those who have the germ of that quality will need to develop it if they hope to survive. An awareness of the need to take on board the psychological as well as the more mechanical skills can only help on the road towards being a successful manager.

Be aware that, when you take up your new appointment as a manager, your relations with others in the firm – up, down and sideways – will inevitably change. Your former peers will be unsure how to treat you – you are no longer 'one of the lads' (or 'girls') but 'one of *them*'. No more can you expect as of right to hear the stories that circulate on the grapevine – your old colleagues will not have quite the same trust in your discretion. No more can you gripe at decisions made by *them* – you are now part of the management team and, like it or not, you have an obligation to support management policies even if you disagree with some points just as strongly as you did before you were promoted. No more can you blame some other department for your problems – as a manager, it is up to you to learn to cooperate with them and that means understanding their difficulties as never before. With some of your colleagues and staff, the change in your role will need no explanation; with others, a few quiet, tactful words may be needed, remembering that employees are all individuals and your

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approach may need to differ to accommodate a range of personalities.

You have the unenviable task of having to operate from both sides of the fence at the same time yet avoid being labelled a fence-sitter! There will be times when it is well-nigh impossible but this must not be apparent to the outside observer. At all times, if you want to be recognized as a manager, you will have to represent the management viewpoint however hard that may be. Your job is to translate policies into workable instructions without creating alienation. Senior staff may not appreciate its existence but you, in first-line management, will know it only too well. By all means, you must fight your corner for your people but you have to learn the difference between blind allegiance and loyalty. Just as you have to learn to persuade your staff to achieve the impossible against unrealistic demands, you also have to persuade your seniors to understand the difficulties of implementing some policy.

It is also important to remember that management is not a set of unrelated techniques. Rather, it is a complex task that requires the manager to use and balance a wide range of different skills that change from moment to moment. No manager can wake in the morning and say to him or herself 'I'm going to motivate my lot today.' Life is not so simple and, if motivation is what is desired, it will come out of well-chosen words and actions that fill the day, as instructions and information are given to people at all levels.

Good management employs the same skills and understanding in all fields – office, factory, hospital, school, shop and government. Management is about handling people and although this book uses industrial examples quite often, that is because most of us know something about industry whereas the world of medicine or publishing may be less familiar. Wherever people have responsibility for the work of others, however, they must learn to manage and the adaptation of the examples to your own environment should not prove an impossible hurdle to clear.



## What am I Supposed to Do?

The first question any new manager must ask is 'What are the duties and responsibilities of the post?' Too often the answer will be 'Oh, just the same as they were under Bill (or Mary). You've got twenty people and your job is to get the work out.' Some firms will have a well-written job description for management posts and, in such cases, the new incumbent will be presented with a copy. This will give the main purpose or objective of the post and, probably, also state the limits of its authority as well as the principal components of the job. In practice, job descriptions can become out-of-date and the company may have overlooked the need for regular review, so changes may be needed. Where there is no job description, or if the existing one is blatantly out of date, the new manager must begin to think, from day one, of producing his or her own within a reasonable period of time. Without it, there are no guidelines that the job-holder can follow and no way in which success or failure can be gauged against clear standards. No football team would want to take the field without goalposts in place as, without them, neither success nor failure could be registered. Lack of an agreed job description means much the same to the manager who tries to do his or her job in the dark.

Right at the start, the new manager must ask the questions: Why is this job necessary? What am I expected to achieve? The job certainly is *not* acting as a middle-man who merely passes instructions and processes bits of paper. Neither is it acting like the little Dutch boy who plugged holes in the dyke. While these activities will feature in the daily round some of the time, management is about much more than that. Planning ahead and taking action to head off problems will be essential if the firm is to prosper and every manager must think of his or her personal contribution being along these lines.