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Abi O'Neill



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Introduction

“Leadership is a performing art. Your instrument is you. Like great musicians and great athletes, you will get better if you see yourself as a developing leader, watch other leaders, practice, and remain open to good coaching.”

Stewart Friedman¹

The role of a manager is indeed an interesting one. From an outsider’s perspective, it can seem so pragmatic: there is work to be done, so let’s just do it. The fascinating part is just how a manager goes about it and that is largely what underpins this book.

When I first started teaching management in 1991, management was concerned with the four functions of Planning, Leading, Organising and Controlling, with sometimes a fifth function of Staffing. Management thinking has moved some distance since then. The concept of leadership was hardly on the radar for first-time managers. It was largely about power and influence and appeared to be a kind of lofty notion — seemingly out of reach and only something to aspire to.

I now believe that leadership is integral to being a successful manager, and so in this book, leadership is not always separated from management. Good managers are usually also good leaders. The word “leader” is rarely part of anyone’s title so I use the term manager, as well as leader, throughout the book.

The intention of this book is to present typical experiences and challenges of managers with some tips on what works and what does not. It is designed to help you explore what is important for you personally to take on board for your role as manager. It will assist you to learn more about yourself and others and identify how you can work best with the people around you — your direct reports, peers, boss and others. It is also intended as a means of learning management techniques, frameworks and models to draw from when implementing your strategies in working with others. Your own insights will also continue to emerge.

Although leadership can be learnt, there is no single recipe or formula that will work for everyone. Therefore, learning and development is a continuous process whereby we can each develop and apply our own individual style.

As you read, I urge you to keep an open mind to considering new ways of thinking, doing and being. Be conscious of your assumptions and endeavour to put yourself in others’ shoes occasionally so you may see things from different perspectives. There are many ways to look at the same thing. As the saying goes, “what you see depends on where you stand”.



The book is written in a conversational style rather than a step-by-step outline of the “what” and “how” of management. It is based on over 30 years of my experience of being a manager in a variety of organisations, research, teaching and presenting on management and leadership courses/programmes, and, more recently, coaching and consulting. My approach is to encourage the adoption of your own personal style rather than merely using mechanical steps to “getting things done”. I do hope it will boost your interest and success in a satisfying and fruitful management and leadership role.

Originally I set out to write a book with only new managers in mind; however, when undertaking research for the book, and taking into consideration my own work experiences with different leaders in organisations, I believe that the book will be useful for managers at all levels of an organisation.

For the purposes of this book, the role of manager implies having direct reports or working closely with others (eg in a team or across the organisation). Managers who are specialists and have other responsibilities may find this book useful too as will anyone who works closely with people or needs to develop effective working relationships.

Abi O'Neill, February 2011.

Reference

- (1) Friedman, S D, 2008, *Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, p 187.

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CHAPTER 1

TAKING ON THE ROLE OF MANAGER

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“A good manager is best when people barely know that he exists. Not so good when people obey and acclaim him. Worse when they despise him.”

(Lao Tzu¹)

¶1-000 Introduction

It is not surprising that many people, when entering a new role as manager with direct reports, are proud and excited about it. After all, it is quite an accomplishment to be promoted or appointed to this position of responsibility. It will prove to be both challenging and rewarding.

You will likely be wondering if you will be a good manager and whether others in the organisation will take an interest in you. Those who report to you will be watching to see how you behave. They obviously have a stake in how you will work with them. Some of your direct reports may in fact have once been your peers! Your peers and seniors will also be interested in your first steps.

¶1-050 Accepting the role

It is probable that you have already been successful in your previous role. In a large organisation, success in one role almost inevitably promotes you to a new and different role. This is often the way people move up within the organisation. What made you successful in your previous role though will often be quite different to what you now require in this management role.

Take, for example, Bill who is a Specialist Engineer in a large car manufacturing company. He is highly regarded for his technical expertise, has been with the organisation for five years, is reliable, competent, dedicated and largely works alone. He enjoys his work, has little need for interaction with others and has never expressed any interest in becoming a manager.

Bill has just been asked to take on the role of a manager. If he wants to progress through the organisation, taking on the more senior role is what he must do.

Many organisations have a natural flow of progression, which usually includes managing a team. In some organisations, it is not possible to move up the ladder and become more senior in the organisation without taking on a management role that involves managing people.

Moving into the new role as manager is quite a step to take and some people still believe that you are either a born leader or you're not. Fortunately, even if *you* think you're not, it is possible to learn how to be successful in the role if you go about it the right way. An important point to make here is that the degree of success you have in your role as manager will be influenced radically by the attitude you have towards it.

¶1-100 No manager is perfect

It's OK to make mistakes. Thomas Edison, in his search for a light bulb that worked, reported over 10,000 light bulb experiments that failed before he succeeded. When you find that you have made a mistake, extract what you can learn from the experience and move on. From school we are conditioned to believe that making a mistake or getting things wrong is bad or failing is unacceptable.

There is an old story from the early days of the IBM organisation in the United States which involved its then successful and famous president, Tom Watson. He reacted in an unexpected way to an expensive major blunder by a middle-ranking executive in the company. The executive expected to be fired, but to his amazement (after asking the question), Watson said, "No, of course I'm not going to fire you. You have just had a very, very expensive learning experience. What we are going to do now is use that learning experience. If I fired you, I would have wasted that money."

"Would you like me to give you a formula for . . . success? It's quite simple really, double your rate of failure . . . You're thinking of failure as the enemy of success. But it isn't at all . . . You can be discouraged by failure — or you can learn from it. So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because remember, that's where you'll find success. On the far side of failure." Thomas J Watson.

You were presumably appointed to the position on the basis of your achievements and competence. This is comforting in itself. You should also take comfort in knowing that you cannot possibly know everything! In saying that, I do find that many new managers feel that they should have all the answers. It may sound counterintuitive, but it can be quite refreshing to be candid about not knowing everything. It can even be a great way to establish your honesty and integrity. Peter Drucker, the famous management guru, once said that “managers in the 21st century cannot expect to have all the answers but they must be able to ask good questions.” Using good questions is a powerful coaching tool (coaching will be covered in Chapter 9).

The endearing part of being candid is that it demonstrates that you are still human. It also shows that you are not arrogant, which is very important. Arrogance is arguably the biggest career derailler and a sure way to become unpopular. Nobody likes a “know-all” or an abrasive personality.

When a manager is asked something of importance that they don't know the answer to, it is perfectly acceptable for them to say “let's find out” or say that they will find out and come back to the person (which they *must* make a point of doing). Honesty and the ability to follow through are essential ingredients when building trust with team members.

¶1-150 Getting started

“Start as you mean to go on.”

Anon.

Those who report to you will be curious about your style and what you will be like to work with. They will be wondering how demanding you will be or how easy you will be to get along with. How you work with them in the first few weeks following your appointment will be important because they will notice such things as what you pay attention to, how you make decisions, how and when you communicate and whether (or how) you demonstrate respect. It will take some time for you to acclimatise to the position. You will usually be wearing two hats, requiring you to do the actual “tasks” that will form part of your role, in addition to you establishing yourself as a “team leader”.

On your first day in your role, you should make it a priority to talk to everyone in the team and, if possible, others who will be directly impacted by your appointment. If you are new to the organisation or department you will probably find it easier to simply be natural rather than trying too hard to be anything else. First impressions count. Showing an interest in what people do, and how they are going, will be a positive start to your appointment.

It is likely that you will be very busy in the first few weeks. People often comment on how different being a manager is to what they expected. There are even more demands than anticipated. There will be meetings to convene, others to attend, people to see and work to be done. Many say it feels like everything is coming at them at once, like a tsunami. You need to be aware that you will require different skills to what you have used previously and there will be gaps in your capability. It is so common for people to be appointed or promoted to the role of manager and thrown in at the deep end where they find themselves managing without support.

You will need to manage your time. Organise a one-on-one meeting with each member of the team as soon as you can. It may not be possible to spend much time with each individual at first, so think about convening your first team meeting. Find out what they have all been told about your appointment in advance. Are you in a position to present a plan or vision with goals for the future and how they can be achieved? Can you link your team's work to these goals? Consider how your words and actions may affect them.

Prepare well for this meeting and try to establish a time and location suitable to the team members. An agenda might address expectations, updates, explanations, roles, goals and plans. Make sure you allow plenty of time for questions and interaction. The way you conduct your meetings will say quite a bit about you and so using your best interpersonal skills is wise. Your team will notice how organised, how positive and how open-minded you are (or are not). More importantly, they will pick up how interested you are in them. Be open to listening to their ideas and suggestions, regardless of whether you agree with them or not.

Start with introductions, with you going first. This first meeting need not be a model for future meetings — explain what you hope to achieve from this and that future meetings will probably vary. It would be useful to ask team members to explain their roles. Use your judgment to decide how much time you spend on this introduction exercise from your knowledge of how long the team members have known each other and worked together. This is a good way of garnering a shared understanding of what everyone in the team does. This might sound obvious but people seldom discuss their actual role and responsibilities in a team situation — especially if they have been working together for some time. It may invoke some surprises and update their comprehension of any task or role changes, assumptions made, and knowledge of their colleagues' current workloads. With this exercise you will be acquiring a sense of their relationships with each other within the team. It is also an opportunity for the team to learn more about how they perceive their roles.

You will also gain useful knowledge of the individual personalities within the team and what they emphasise or regard as important. In turn, this will be a strong indicator of the team culture. If you have come from outside the organisation, you will gain enormous insights from this. It may also be somewhat surprising — cultures vary significantly from one organisation and one team to another.

¶1-200 Building confidence

Following their appointment, many people struggle with a lack of confidence or feelings of entitlement in their management role. There are multiple reasons for not feeling confident or “eligible” to hold the position of manager. Some of the possible reasons for feeling this way may be that:

- someone else has been there longer than you
- someone else appears to have more “people skills” than you
- someone else has more specialist expertise than you, and
- you are generally not feeling up to the role.

From your perspective, these may be totally legitimate reasons; however, there clearly *is* a reason for you to have the role. The decision-maker(s) have seen fit for *you* to be in the role.

In a coaching session with a new manager called Chris, he said to me “I felt bad about competing with some of the team for this role and now I’m their boss. I’m worried that they won’t accept me.”

The fact that you are sensitive to how others will be impacted and how they might react is a good sign and bodes well for you in your new role. If it comes across that you do genuinely care and can provide support to others, you are more likely to be supported by your team. This will take time to establish. Your behaviour and approach towards other members of the team is critical.

Confidence will build in time as you establish yourself and your relationships, build up your managerial and leadership competencies, and develop your own style that suits you as well as the people around you.

¶1-250 New and different skills

A major challenge in the new role is letting go of the things you enjoyed in your previous role. We know that it is common for the appointment of a manager to be the result of doing good work. You enjoyed the role of being able to contribute by using your technical or professional skills and being the expert. The skills you require now though in your role of manager are usually quite different to that previous role.

The skills of a manager of others largely involve getting the work done through members of the team or your individual direct reports. This often means delegating work (delegating will be addressed in a later chapter). This way of working will be quite a shift and the new manager may take some time to realise that they not only will not have the time to include the tasks that they once enjoyed, but they probably now need to reallocate most or all of them to others. This has been referred to as “Passage One”.²

In addition, the manager “must believe that making time for others, planning, coaching, and the like are necessary tasks and are their responsibility.”³ As managers progress through the ranks of an organisation, the roles generally change substantially, with new skill requirements and time allocation.

¶1-300 Managing your time

In many of the programs I have run with new managers, a common concern is time management. They don't feel that they have enough time to do everything they need to and can burn out by working long hours. The managers typically continue to do much of the work they were doing in their previous role and overlook the need to step back and take a more strategic or “big picture” view of the role. Transitioning to a more senior role where work is reallocated is a considerable responsibility and takes time to ascertain as well as institute. Additionally there is often:

- a lack of awareness of the need for this
- a reluctance to let go of favourite tasks, and
- a lack of confidence (and trust) when delegating.

An awareness and willingness to accept the responsibility of allocating work is crucial and involves careful analysis along with individual discussions with each member of the team. This can be a time-consuming and complex task in itself. The old adage of “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.” illustrates that time spent up-front pays dividends and is extremely productive in setting the team up for the long term.

Time is now a different commodity — one that partly belongs to the direct reports as they will be doing much of the work. In your new management role, they are entitled to chunks of your time and this requires support from you. Rather than viewing their questions or requests for time as an interruption, these must be regarded as an obligation and a large component of your work. It is quite a shift in mindset to regard their work as your responsibility.

Determining task allocation and assigning responsibilities may provide an opportunity for the new manager to retain (at least in part) some of the enjoyable work requiring their expertise. Managers must also take care in this process to be fair and equitable. Keep in mind that you are leading a team and the consequences of any sign of being uneven-handed will be resented.

The approach to re-thinking the use of time is a critical factor in the new role as it is integral to your success. If a manager doesn't enjoy spending time and working with people, but rather prefers being the specialist or the expert, then they are less likely to be successful in the role as manager. Giving them your time is the biggest gift you can give, but it can come at a personal price, as shown in the following example.

When Lina started work at an organisation she was given some advice from a senior manager. He told her (in reference to managing her portfolio) to “begin as you intend to go on”. She said he had quickly labelled her as having the personality temperament of someone who would strive to be a high-achiever. His concern was that, in the context of the autonomy she would have in the current flat management structure of the organisation, she was likely to take on too much when trying to respond to all of the competing demands. Years later she told me about this advice and said that with hindsight, the senior manager had been correct. She had worked under pressure for a number of years, and as a consequence, now felt burnt out.

As we discussed this further, Lina happily announced that she had learnt a new word: “No”, and that this was a rather liberating experience! She realised that she had worked excessively long hours to achieve, to satisfy multiple demands, and to prove herself within the organisation. In the absence of having someone manage her she had needed to learn to manage herself. She had been caught in a vortex and has since learnt to let go and reallocate or delegate tasks.

I found Lina to be intelligent, competent, outgoing and vivacious. She has the kind of intensity and determination that will help her to go far. She already has. I have no doubt that she will find an important role to fill. What Lina now also needs is to take time out for herself and to consider what she really wants.

A common problem here is that our enthusiasm, endurance and willingness to achieve can result in us doing ourselves a disservice in the long run.

As you start out, it is worth considering Lina's story as a lesson on how we can become absorbed into the role and push ourselves in a way that is detrimental to our own wellbeing. We need to manage ourselves as well as others.

¶1-350 Manage your expectations

The early stages of a new management role can be somewhat daunting. Stories I commonly hear about relate to the expectations new managers have of the level of control and freedom they have in their new role. That is, control of the team and freedom from demands. This is mostly a myth and the surprising part of their role as a manager is to support the team to enhance *their* performance in achieving their goals. There is often less freedom than in the prior role and more emphasis on results and creating a positive culture.

What I have highlighted in this chapter is the connection between being a good boss and enjoying working with people. This will prove to be an important feature in your success as a manager. If your preference is to work alone and not connect with people, then it may be a barrier to having productive relationships with them. In certain fields there are exceptions to this, particularly in areas of science, research and (possibly) engineering, where both the manager of specialists and his or her direct reports are able to work autonomously in their field. This sort of environment would be one where their specific expertise enables them to be independent and regular interaction is not required.

The rewards you reap as you gain confidence in your role will be tremendous. Try not to fall into the trap of feeling you must know everything. If you cannot or do not wish to go to your own manager for advice or support, seek a mentor whom you can trust either within or outside of the organisation. This won't necessarily be a formal arrangement — it might simply mean catching up with someone you respect from time to time and using them as a sounding board and to compare notes with.

¶1-400 References and comments

- (1) Lao Tzu was a Chinese Taoist Philosopher, 600 BC–531 BC.
- (2) Charan, R, Drotter, S J and Noel, J L, 2001, *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-powered Company*, Jossey-Bass Inc (a Wiley Company), California, p 7, Fig 1.
- (3) Charan, R, Drotter, S J and Noel, J L, 2001, *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-powered Company*, Jossey-Bass Inc (a Wiley Company), California.

CHAPTER 2

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

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“To an extent, leadership is like beauty: it’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it.”

(Warren Bennis¹)

¶2-000 Introduction to management and leadership

Much has been written and debated in regards to the differences between management and leadership. This chapter will provide some background to the history, theories and some differences between management and leadership for you to consider in your own role. The plethora of early approaches presented over the last century and a half have included characteristics and traits theory, behavioural styles, and situational and contingency approaches. There are thousands of books on management and leadership with much to explore if you are interested in pursuing this further.

As mentioned earlier, my personal view is that good managers are also good leaders and so that is the premise of this book. Here we are referring to leaders in organisations as opposed to sports or political leaders (I do not see too many examples of commendable leadership in politics these days; however, that is not to say that it does not exist). As you read through this book, I urge you to reflect on your own role and style and to ask yourself what resonates with you, what you are drawn to and what you aspire to be.