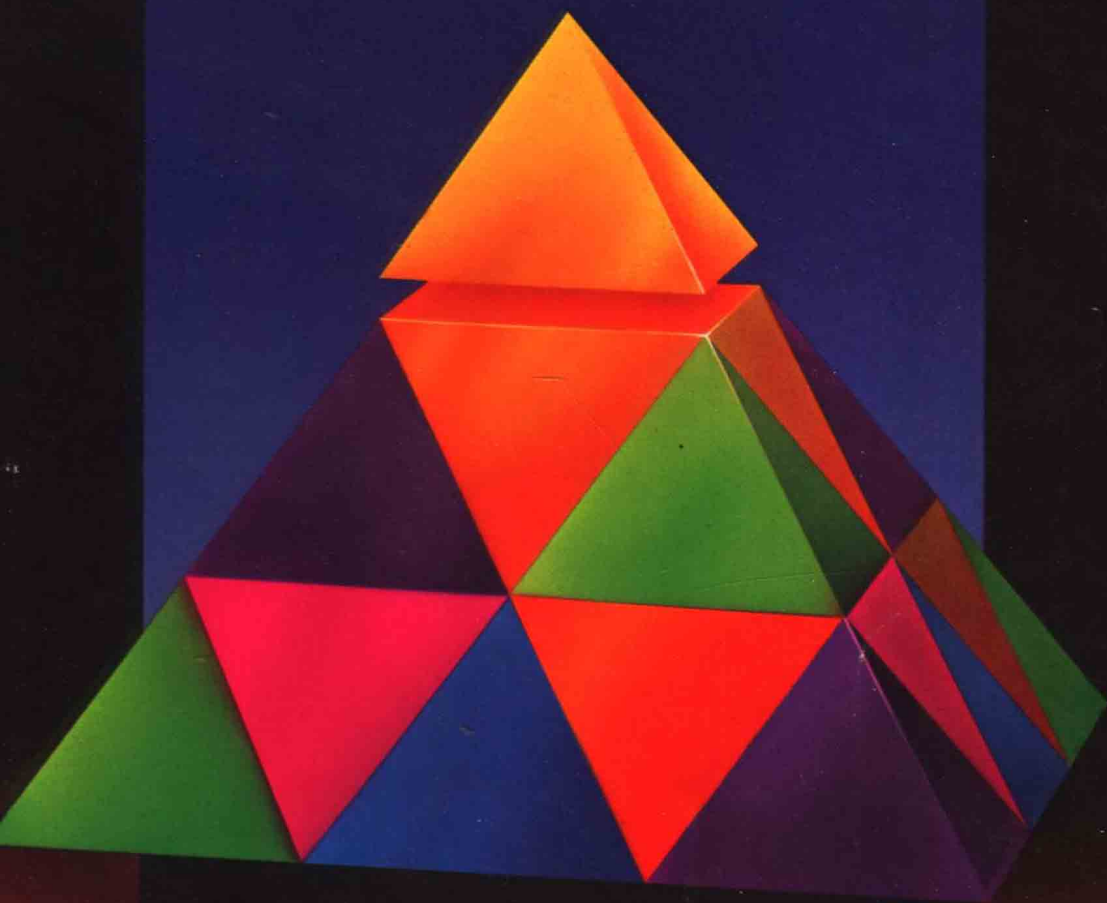


♦ MASTERING ♦ MANAGEMENT

A
Guide for the
Technical Professional



Roberta Bhasin

♦ MASTERING ♦ MANAGEMENT

A

Miller Freeman Publications, Inc.

San Francisco, Atlanta, Boston

Copyright ©1989 by Miller Freeman Publications, Inc.
500 Howard Street, San Francisco, California 94105
International Standard Book Number: 0-87930-211-9
Library of Congress Catalog number: 89-60067

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Printed in the United States of America.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Loving thanks to my husband, A. Kumar Bhasin, a technical professional turned leader who challenged me to put my pen where my mouth was in the beginning, and who continues to provide valued counsel and support.

Thanks also to Ken Smith, executive editor of *Pulp and Paper* magazine, who is responsible for my never having received a rejection slip.

And finally, thank you to friends, coworkers, and colleagues who have provided inspiration or topics for "Career Development" columns.

Roberta Bhasin
Lakewood, Colorado
November 1988

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Introduction

This book is written for technical professionals—people who have chosen careers in disciplines that require special schooling or skills. Technical professionals are engineers, educators, accountants, chemists, public relations or advertising specialists, lawyers, health care specialists, and myriad others who can measure what they do on the job against detailed, standardized bodies of knowledge or criteria.

Particularly when they work for large organizations, technical professionals begin to notice that after about five to seven years their advancements and salary increases have slowed down. They begin to bump up against a ceiling beyond which they may not be able to go—unless they consider trading their specialist's stripes for those of management.

This phenomenon has been not only demonstrated but quantified in many fields. For example, the National Society of Professional Engineers has identified nine levels in an engineering career. Management skills become more and more dominant the higher the level. In its annual industry survey of salaries, benefits, and job satisfaction, *Pulp & Paper* magazine has found consistently that:

- Respondents' median incomes correspond directly with their level of supervisory responsibility.
- Respondents with the highest median incomes are those whose main work is administration, with corporate management topping the list.
- The median income of respondents with general business degrees equals that of nearly half the respondents who are highly experienced technical professionals (in this case, chemical, electrical, and mechanical engineers).

It is clear that most technical professionals who want to get ahead

will at some point be asking themselves whether or not they are cut out for managerial work. For some, that point may occur before they reach the fork in the road. Others may have been managers for a year or so, only to find themselves facing unexpected problems and situations that make them long for the “good old days” when all they had to worry about were technical problems—not people, politics, or predicaments for which there are no standard solutions.

The human relations aspect of the managerial job is especially challenging to technical professionals. The observation of one engineer sums it up succinctly: “Managing would be a great job if it weren’t for the people.” Technical professionals, after all, are generally trained to work alone, and rare is the technical curriculum that includes a course on “How to Be the Boss.” When technical professionals do work with others, it is as part of a team where they fill a specialized niche rather than a leadership role. They’re used to doing the work themselves. It is not easy for them to give up that control for the vagaries of “management” and “getting things done through others.”

This book is designed to help with that difficult transition. Based on my “Career Development” columns, which have appeared in *Pulp & Paper* for a number of years, the book offers practical considerations for “doers” who are or want to become “managers.” Many of the topics discussed can be found in general management texts, but this book has been developed with the technical professional in mind. Some of the topics are rarely discussed, and therefore all the more knotty for the technical professional who wants to be a good manager.

The chapters are arranged chronologically—from the first few days and weeks on the job, through the day-to-day management of people and situations, and finally to the point of mastery—where a technical professional as leader is ready to advance his or her career another step or two.

Part I recognizes that technical professionals are successful specialists, who have the needed intellectual and analytical abilities to do good managerial work. They know it’s essential to base important decisions on hard data. They tend to be objective, and to take pride in what they do. But past technical success may not help with the basics of management—especially those demanded of someone new in the job. Planning, problem solving, goal setting, communicating, and how to handle the “new job, new department” and new relationship situations are among the issues addressed here.

Part II helps the technical professional as leader with questions like these: "How well do you work with others? How effective are you at negotiating for space, equipment, staff? How well do you handle routine supervision— performance appraisals, personnel development? What would you do if you had to fire someone?"

Part III explores common and uncommon managerial situations. Among them are dealing with anger in the workplace, managing creativity, spotting and getting good people, and correcting hiring mistakes.

Part IV offers advice to the technical professional as leader on how to manage an advancing career. It describes basics such as internal and external moves, how to determine whether it's time for a job change or just a vacation, and how to write a résumé.

No book can guarantee success. But the technical professional who reads this one will encounter fewer surprises along the way—and that can make all the difference.

Part I

SO YOU'RE THE BOSS NOW

You always wanted to be the boss, and now you are. But if you're like most technical professionals, no one ever taught you how.

You weren't prepared for how much time you have to spend, especially at first, listening to your people; or how quickly the paperwork can pile up; or how difficult it seems to make changes in your operation—even small ones. You weren't prepared for that uncomfortable and sometimes nerveracking position of having to rely on others to help you satisfy your own boss.

After you've gotten your feet under your desk, it's likely you'll be concerned with making plans, tracking them, and making decisions—all basic managerial skills you have used as a technical professional, but which may require different twists in your new role.

New Job, New Department: Getting Your Feet Under Your Desk

It does not matter what anyone says—first impressions are important, especially when you're the new boss. Be sure to get off on the right foot with your subordinates. Their initial perceptions of you, and your concern for them and their work, can make all the difference in your future relations with them.

Even though you will probably be given some kind of orientation as a new employee, you can acquaint yourself with the *formal* organization before you arrive on the scene. This will help you assess the *informal* organization—the social relationships through which much information flows and a lot of actual work is done—more quickly when you get there. You will have to integrate your goals and objectives to succeed in the new situation. The faster you are able to do this, the better.

Ask your own boss for an organization chart and the most recent of regular progress reports or project records to study before you start your new job. Determine the rationale behind the current organization and how long it has been set up this way.

Ask to have your new office arranged to your specifications before you arrive, if at all possible. This will signal your intent to put a personal stamp on your job and department.

Once you arrive, listen and observe—again, formally and informally.

On your first day, make it a point to go to each of your subordinate's offices. Call him or her by name, and chat for a few minutes. Mention a project or item you know this person is working on, and

express interest in learning more about it. Explain that you are planning a department meeting in a few days, after you have had a chance to meet individually with him or her and each of your other staff members to help you "get your feet under your desk."

Set up individual meetings as soon as possible. Ask questions such as, "Tell me about your job." "What major problems did you face last year, and how did you solve them?" "What are your goals for this year?" The answers will not only give you a wealth of facts, but will help you assess the quality, depth of understanding, and skills of your people.

Next, meet with your staff as a group. Announce your plans for basic administrative procedures, such as regular staff meetings, reports, and other things you want to do in the day-to-day work of your department. Since your people are probably expecting you to make changes, try to resolve as much uncertainty about their nature and extent as you can at this point. If you plan to make changes, say so. If you don't, say that too. By answering questions about change now, you'll head off productivity dips, which usually accompany second-guessing.

If your staff is large and its members supervise others, you'll want to meet with those people. One approach is to hold a series of informal luncheons at which you solicit employees' opinions as to how you should proceed, what your priorities should be, what roadblocks they're facing. If a luncheon is inappropriate, do this at one of *their* regular meetings.

Throughout these sessions, formal and informal, listen for the politics of the organization. Don't comment on the circumstances of your predecessor's departure, and don't pass public judgment on how well the department has been run. You'll get your people's opinions on that soon enough. Listen to their comments and suggestions to recognize hidden agendas and potential problem areas, as well as facts.

During the first week or two, adapt to the norms of the organization. If the dress around the shop is casual and you're partial to three-piece suits, you're going to have to make a change if you want people to feel comfortable around you. Other norms might involve forms of address, communication links, and simple things like lunch and break routines.

If you decide to reorganize, get your own boss's approval first and do it quickly—again, in the interest of productivity. One way to ac-