

Nine Ways to Make Top Performers Effective Managers

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Top-performing individuals don't instantly become top-performing managers. To succeed, new managers require time, training and guidance.

It's a common scenario: A managerial position becomes available and is filled by a top performer with minimal or no previous management experience. Yet it makes sense. Shouldn't a top performer be able to easily make the transition to manager? Shouldn't that person be able to guide others to his or her same level of productivity? The answer is a 100 percent, absolute maybe.

While top performers likely have solid domain skills, coupled with a strong motivation to succeed, there's a good chance they have not been afforded sufficient opportunity to develop effective management techniques. For some, these skills can be learned on the job. For others, the consequences of a poor managerial fit can be significant in terms of lost productivity and morale for the new manager and his or her direct reports.

Therefore, prior to promoting a top performer with minimal or no managerial experience, assess the candidate's strengths and forward-looking potential in nine core areas of effective management.

This analysis can ensure consistently smooth management transitions and keep a company operating at peak performance as it identifies whether a top performer is ready to lead now, is better-suited for some limited managerial experiences and additional training, or perhaps has a skill set and disposition that will only thrive in an individual contributor role. Consider: Can the new manager execute these nine core skills?

Move from tactical to strategic. Is the employee ready to let go of his or her day-to-day responsibilities and play a more conceptual or strategic role? Some managers believe they need to understand every last detail of what their employees are working on.

Commonly referred to as "micro-managing," this type of behavior can make otherwise content employees burn out and leave a company. For a top performer who excels at the tactical level, managing others to achieve the same level of success may not seem as fulfilling.

Is the employee prepared for this potential shock? Many top performers are capable of the transition from tactical to strategic thinking, provided they have access to the right resources, such as a mentor or applicable management training courses.



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Defend the team. Is the employee ready to defend his or her new direct reports and support them in public? Is the employee ready to be a leader? Leaders absorb rather than deflect criticism. Leaders push praise downward to their employees and proactively look for ways to portray their direct reports in a positive light.

In short, leaders have a deep understanding of the phrase, “praise in public, condemn in private.” Lots of top performers have healthy, competitive egos. Don’t assume that deflecting praise and supporting direct reports is a natural instinct for new managers.

Build trusting relationships. Can the employee develop a strong, trusting relationship that engenders compassion and prudent responses to change? As a cautionary tale, “Jerry” really enjoyed working for a manager until the reasons behind some recent absences came into question.

Jerry’s son was in and out of the hospital, and thus, he needed to unexpectedly miss some work during a two-week period. Rather than show compassion and understanding, Jerry’s manager accused him of interviewing. The manager’s paranoia quickly became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Jerry decided it wasn’t worth working for someone who so quickly questioned his integrity. Jerry’s example illustrates the risk associated with promoting a top performer before understanding his or her ability to trust and respect others.

Delegate. Does the employee know how to assign work and shepherd that work through to completion? Consider the following scenario:

Manager: “[Employee], I need you to do X. I need this done because of Y. I’d really like to have this work completed by Z. Do you have any questions? Was this clear?”

Employee: “Got it.”

Manager: “Great. Please let me know if you need any additional help.”

This seems simple. Employees like to understand what work is expected of them, why the work is important, and when the work should be completed. Once the assignment is given, managers can use a variety of actions to stay on top of progress, including daily check-ins, one-on-one meetings and regular staff meetings. This example is deceptively easy; yet, in the frantic pace of business, this type of clear, concise, two-way communication often is lost.

Teach and mentor. In the event that assignments require additional help or instruction, does the top performer embrace the idea of teaching and mentoring? Does he or she have the patience to answer employees’ questions respectfully, in detail, more than once? Managers who return employee questions with an impatient or arrogant tone will eventually find they have fewer questions to answer, as employees will be more reluctant to expose their weaknesses or challenge ideas.

Managers who answer employee questions in an unassuming, non-condescending manner will be able to foster and sustain open communication channels that are vital for employee development and team productivity.

Admit mistakes. Does the employee know how to apologize or acknowledge a mistake? For example, a new manager arrogantly corrects an employee in a cross-functional meeting and subsequently learns the employee’s assertion was accurate. Does the manager have the self-awareness and willingness to admit the mistake not only to the employee but also to the other meeting participants? This is necessary to help restore cross-functional trust in the employee who the manager publicly and erroneously contradicted. These corrective steps will be appreciated by most employees. On the other hand, if the manager doesn’t take these steps, he or she will quickly lose the team’s respect.

Leverage others’ strengths. Is the employee threatened by colleagues who have greater subject matter expertise? For a newly promoted manager, there is an increased likelihood that certain employees will know more about a specific domain. For example, a

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new vice president of brand marketing may be asked to manage the product marketing group, as well. Is this vice president willing to roll up his or her sleeves and learn about that group on a tactical level?

Rather than hide from knowledge they don't have, the best managers ask the right questions to understand their employees' day-to-day responsibilities. By doing so, effective managers can engage subject matter experts to provide a well-articulated recommendation and then implement, adjust or reject that proposal based upon their sense of how it fits into the broader company strategy.

Manage each employee. Can the new manager alter his or her managerial approach by direct report? Does the prospective manager have a one-size-fits-all management style, or does he or she recognize that individuals may need to be managed differently? Employees with young children are likely to request time to attend school events or unexpectedly miss work due to a child's illness.

Younger, single employees may be hungry to prove themselves by offering to own too much work. Can the potential manager recognize the employees' motivational differences and alter his or her managerial style accordingly? The best managers hold everyone on the team accountable for expected behaviors and results, while also understanding and capitalizing on the individual motivations of each team member.

Take time to manage. Has the company given the new manager the time needed to actually manage? If a top performer has moved from individual contributor to managing a group of five or seven people, for example, there is undoubtedly a need to scale back on tactical, role-based activities to find the pulse of his or her new team.

A managerial role requires building a rapport, delegating responsibilities and architecting a team's broader long-term strategy. When promoted, many top performers will initially carve out more work time per day to ambitiously try to handle their legacy tasks and their newly acquired role. This early push

is not sustainable. The new manager, and the company, will need to understand and be receptive to the fact that his or her individual responsibilities should now account for no more than 50 percent of work time, and likely much less.

Each of these nine components of effective management requires organization commitment and an adjustment period in order to achieve a smooth transition, best fit and continued productivity for new managers and their employees. However, there often is more accountability for the organization regarding this ninth and final point.

Are top performers expected to manage effectively and maintain their previous workloads? Or are they given the time they need to manage their new direct reports? Providing employees with a manager's title without supplying enough time for them to actually manage is a fruitless exercise.

The Case for Careful Selection

There are potential consequences of not incorporating these nine dimensions into the managerial selection process. Ineffective managers can alienate other departments, or worse, their employees, which can lead to significantly reduced group productivity and increased attrition. As merit budgets tighten and companies try to do more with less, the cascading effects of a toxic manager pose an even greater threat to organizational success.

Top-performing individuals don't necessarily become top-performing managers. To succeed, new managers require time, training and guidance. Management consultants may never reach full agreement on the components of effective management, but these nine core skills comprise a practical evaluation of a top performer's readiness to manage and a company's readiness to prepare employees for this next step. **TM**

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