Recommendations for the First Time Manager

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................................ 3
Problem Definition .......................................................................................................................... 4
Analysis of Problem ........................................................................................................................ 4
  Managing Others’ Perceptions .................................................................................................... 4
  Gaining Respect and Commitment from Direct Reports ............................................................ 5
  Reframing Roles and Responsibilities ...................................................................................... 6
  Exercising Authority ................................................................................................................. 7
  Determining Extent of Personal Relationships ......................................................................... 8
Recommendations ........................................................................................................................... 9
  Managing Others’ Perceptions ................................................................................................. 10
  Gaining Respect and Commitment from Direct Reports ......................................................... 11
  Reframing Roles and Responsibilities ...................................................................................... 12
  Exercising Authority ................................................................................................................. 13
  Determining Extent of Personal Relationships ......................................................................... 15
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 18
Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 19
Appendix 1 – Glossary .................................................................................................................. 21
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transition from individual contributor to first line manager can be difficult. The successful individual contributor rarely learns the skills necessary to be a successful first time manager until they have been promoted. However, if a New Young Manager (NYM) knows what to expect and can adjust quickly; they will be more likely to make a successful transition.

In the first year of their new assignment, NYMs commonly make mistakes when attempting to manage others’ perceptions, gain respect and commitment from direct reports, frame new roles and responsibilities, exercise authority, and determine the extent of personal relationships. When managing others’ perceptions they forget that perceptions become reality and first impressions are critical. Attempts to exercise authority and achieve objectives can prevent them from gaining the respect of their direct reports. Many NYMs misunderstand their roles and responsibilities and those of their subordinates. They are also likely to lose existing personal relationships while attempting to establish fair process.

These mistakes can be avoided if the NYM takes the time to learn the skills required for successful management. Seeking feedback, fostering a moderate level of team cohesiveness, and demonstrating leadership skills can help an NYM manage others’ perceptions. A manager that creates a culture of inquiry, actively involves more experienced team members, and sets clear goals and objectives will be more likely to gain respect and commitment from direct reports. Self knowledge, communication, and feedback are critical to framing roles and responsibilities. NYMs who establish expert and referent power, avoid micromanaging, and empower employees are more successful at establishing authority. Finally, fair process goes a long way toward maintaining personal relationships without alienating other team members.
PROBLEM DEFINITION
In this paper we explore the challenges involved in making the transition from successful individual contributor to first-line manager. We will analyze several aspects of this transition, including managing perceptions, gaining respect, reframing responsibilities, exercising authority, and managing personal relationships. Successfully navigating each of these areas depends on exercising critical management skills such as decision making, motivation, teamwork, and leadership. Finally, we provide a set of recommendations for those making the transition from successful individual contributor to first-line management.

ANALYSIS OF PROBLEM
There are many differences between the skills needed to be a successful individual contributor and those needed to be a successful first line manager. To make a successful transition into management, the New Young Manager (NYM) must know what to expect and what skills to develop. The following are areas of concern to NYMs - managing perceptions, gaining respect, reframing responsibilities, exercising authority, and managing personal relationships. This section will explore how these areas affect the skills needed to be a successful first line manager: decision making & motivation, teamwork, and leadership.

Managing Others’ Perceptions
Managing perceptions is of utmost importance to an NYM because “what people observe or assess as your ability to be a leader and your effectiveness becomes their perception, which in turn becomes reality” (Russell 1). As an NYM, there are many potential perception issues including perceptions that preferential treatment is being given to friends, that the NYM is not qualified and/or competent, and that the NYM does not respect older employees. Managers
often assume they know how they are perceived and act based off of that. This is due to the “false-consensus bias,” which suggests that people overestimate the likelihood that others will see things the same way they do (Cannon and Witherspoon 125).

When making the transition from successful individual contributor to first time manager it is important not to underestimate the power of the first impression. It is a fact that it will be more difficult for someone who dresses and acts unprofessionally to gain the respect of their direct reports. Many NYMs choose to dress more professionally upon assuming the role of manager. It is easier to be perceived as a leader if they dress professionally and avoid slang.

Gaining Respect and Commitment from Direct Reports
Many new managers expect that their successes as individual contributors will automatically lead to respect from their new direct reports. However, this is not the case. NYMs should expect to gain the respect of direct reports all over again. This is especially the case if direct reports used to be peers. For example, former peers may consider themselves to be more worthy of the promotion. These people can be resentful and difficult to manage. In some cases they may bypass the new manager and go directly to senior management with issues.

Freshly promoted NYMs commonly think they must appear to know everything and therefore avoid asking for input and advice from the experts on their teams. Engaging in this behavior will lead to poor decision making. As individual contributors, these managers were likely to be responsible for only one area. As a manager, responsibilities are broader and may include several areas. If the NYMs do not ask for input from their teams, they run the risk of alienating direct reports who have more years of experience - especially older employees. Another reason to include input from the team in the decision making process is that considering
multiple alternatives has been proven to lead to better decisions. Transparent decision making processes improve the NYM’s perceived fairness, which in turn builds commitment from direct reports.

If direct reports are not committed, they will not be motivated and will not take initiative. Most new managers rely too much on formal authority and do not take the time to make sure employees are committed to the team’s goals. Successful individual contributors are also usually very demanding of themselves and others, as they have a high need for achievement. When these successful individual contributors become managers, they continue to be very demanding of themselves and their teams. As a result, they may drive their teams too hard.

**Reframing Roles and Responsibilities**

Making the transition from successful individual contributor to manager includes assuming a new role and new responsibilities. It also includes defining roles and responsibilities for direct reports. Many new young managers struggle with these new roles and responsibilities as they figure out how to lead and motivate their teams, make decisions, and delegate.

Successful individual contributors may already consider themselves leaders, yet struggle with the transition to leadership in the role of manager. First time managers usually do not realize that their direct reports are looking to them for leadership and guidance. These new young managers go into their first management assignments without realizing how many employees are difficult or mediocre. As successful individual contributors, they rarely went to their managers with problems and issues; most are surprised to find out how many of their direct reports ask for and need guidance and advice.
Defining roles and responsibilities can have an effect on motivation. Many new young managers are unprepared for the realization that they have a large impact on the happiness and success of their employees. Clear roles and responsibilities help employees understand what they are accountable for and motivate them to take ownership and pride in the results. Meanwhile, the manager’s role is also easier because evaluation criteria become more objective. In turn, this makes it easier to provide recognition for good work or reasoning for a layoff.

Roles and responsibilities in decision making must be clear to avoid frustration. The first time a new young manager has to take the heat for a decision made by direct reports can come as a shock. However, this does not mean the manager must make all of the decisions. At times, employees will have to make decisions, but communication and decision making guidelines can go a long way to avoid negative repercussions of controversial decisions.

Most new young managers have difficulty delegating work to their direct reports. The result is that the new young manager ends up very frustrated and busy with way too much work to do while direct reports become bored and frustrated with way too little work to do. These new young managers do not trust their teams to complete work assignments without micromanaging. When the NYMs micromanage, the employees may start to feel that they are not trusted and will soon cease to work well with the manager and/or each other. Therefore, the ability to successfully delegate responsibilities can be the difference between success and failure in the role of a manager.

**Exercising Authority**

Managing power and authority is a daunting challenge for any young worker that has just moved from being a peer to a manager. The first couple of weeks are the most difficult and also
the most important for new managers who are attempting to establish power and authority over their groups. If this is not established as one of the norms of their groups, it will be very difficult to establish later. Legitimate power and coercive power (glossary for definitions of power types) are established immediately and effortlessly, as is the power to reward. However, the real challenge lies in establishing referent and expert power. Controlling employees via “hard authority” is a decision making error that many new managers make.

Micromanaging is also a problem in establishing power and authority. In addition to the issues discussed in the previous section, NYMs have a tendency to try to jump into the group’s projects or take on work themselves, rather than delegating to their direct reports. Equally important as each team member accomplishing their specific tasks is the manager doing his job, which is to manage performance.

One aspect that is particularly important for a manager regarding power and authority in terms of leadership is empowering direct reports. As theory Y advocates, one common theme of good managers is that they have the ability to make their employees feel powerful, rather than feeling powerful themselves by providing direction. This can further be evidenced in the example of Johnsonville, in which the CEO enabled huge increases in productivity, profitability, and quality by empowering his employees and virtually eliminating his own job.

**Determining Extent of Personal Relationships**

Managing personal relationships after a promotion to manager can be very difficult. Of the many problems involved, determining the extent of personal relationships with direct reports is a common concern of the NYM. After being promoted to managers of their groups, the personal relationships between NYMs and their ex-peers change. If this becomes a change for
the worse, it will be very difficult for the NYM to make decisions, motivate the team, encourage teamwork, and be an effective leader.

The most important aspect of decision making and motivation is instilling a feeling of equity and fairness in the group. Before being promoted to manager of the group, the NYM most certainly had closer relationships with some people in the group and was more distant with others. The challenge here is maintaining the changing relationships, while making sure that everyone in the group feels that, at least in a professional work setting, they are all being treated equally.

To encourage effective teamwork, the NYM must keep the group unified. There is likely to be a division within the group between those that respect the decision to promote the NYM to manager and those that do not. This division must be eradicated before the group will be able to work together effectively.

The biggest challenge in this role for the NYM is going to be getting ex-peers to follow direction. This problem may be the result of close friends feeling like they are exempt from having to do what they are told because they are friends with the NYM. There may also be older employees that feel like they should not have to follow orders because they have more experience than the NYM.

**Recommendations**

To successfully manage the transition from a successful individual contributor to an NYM, the newly promoted individual should understand that management is less about authority and control, and more about interdependency and commitment. The successful NYM is not
controlling individuals, but leading a team. The NYM should follow the subsequent advice on how to manage perceptions, gain respect, frame roles and responsibilities, exercise authority, and manage personal relationships as outlined below.

**Managing Others’ Perceptions**

To determine how they are truly perceived by their employees, NYMs must seek a great deal of feedback. This feedback should be sought in a variety of different methods: informal conversations with employees, more formal one-on-ones, and also in anonymous reviews of their effectiveness as managers. NYMs must be aware of good feedback providing techniques and possibly act as a third party would. Acting like a third party allows them to ask the right questions to ensure the feedback is specific, actionable, and related to their actual performance rather than to themselves as people. It is also important to make sure that positive feedback is sought so NYMs knows what they are doing well. However, this must be sought in a manner that avoids leading the employees to think the NYM is simply seeking compliments.

Fostering a moderate level of team cohesiveness is often a difficult job as a manager. However, it is one of the best methods to manage the perceptions employees have of their manager and will also make the NYM’s job much easier if successful. The first goal here is to get everyone on the team on the same page and trying to accomplish the same goal. It should be ensured that the team really gets to know each other well, and especially gets to know the NYM well as a manager rather than a peer. However, the NYM must keep an eye on the cohesiveness of the group because if nobody will argue with the other members, the group will become ineffective. The team must utilize an inquiry style rather than an advocacy style for working together and making decisions. The NYM can enable the team to utilize this inquiry style in a
variety of methods, but two proven methods are the “Point-Counterpoint” technique and the “Intellectual Watchdog” technique (see glossary of terms). Establishing this good working relationship of the group allows them to get to know each other and the NYM in their new roles. Their opinions of the NYM will then be based upon fact, not perceptions.

Proving to their employees that they are good leaders is the optimal way for NYMs to keep their employees from perceiving them to be a bad leader. This may be especially difficult with the employees that feel that the NYM is too inexperienced to be a manager. However, it can certainly be accomplished via many standard leadership concepts, along with a few less standard tactics such as managing the context, utilizing the persuasive role of high expectations, and maximizing individual differences (especially being aware of generational differences with older workers). The most important concept is to allow the employees to be successful (which all of the previously mentioned tactics do). If the employees are more successful after the NYM assumes the position of leadership, it will be difficult to not associate some of that with the manager. As a secondary tool, it can be useful for NYMs to use appearance to demonstrate that they are leaders. This can include dressing more formally than they previously did.

**Gaining Respect and Commitment from Direct Reports**

New young managers should recognize that it will take time to gain the respect and commitment of their direct reports. Organizational authority does not automatically lead to respect and commitment from employees. To gain respect and commitment, the new manager should create a culture of inquiry, involve older and/or more experienced employees, set clear goals and objectives, and then get out of the way.
Perhaps the most important thing a new manager can do is to be honest and open about not knowing everything. New young managers should ask a lot of questions. They should endeavor to understand the perspectives of their employees, how they work, and what they do. Beyond asking, an NYM should use active listening techniques such as rephrasing and repeating back what the employee said to ensure clear communication. Active listening will also show the employee that their manager cares what they have to say and values their input.

Older and more experienced employees may be resentful of the new manager’s role. They may believe that they should have been the manager instead. New managers should actively include these older and more experienced employees. To accomplish this, new young managers can give additional responsibilities to these experienced employees such as mentoring new team members. The new young manager can also solicit the opinions of the experienced employees on the team when making decisions in the employee’s area of expertise. Simply letting these employees know that their views are valued is also helpful.

To gain respect from direct reports, it is critical that the new young manager not micromanage. The NYM should make their expectations clear. Employees should then be held accountable for meeting those expectations – not for how they got the work done. This technique allows new young managers with high expectations to avoid micromanaging, but still get the results they desire.

**Reframing Roles and Responsibilities**

New young managers must clearly define roles and responsibilities with their own managers. In turn, the NYMs must then clearly define the roles and responsibilities of their
direct reports. First time managers should use self-knowledge, communication, and feedback to help them define and maintain roles and responsibilities.

It is important for new young managers to have self-knowledge. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses will help them define their roles and responsibilities. First time managers should also take the time to make a list of the reasons they want to be a manager. This list will come in handy in later months when they are stressed and frustrated by the challenges of their roles. Referring back to this list will help new young managers re-center and remember why they want this job.

New young managers should meet with their own managers in the first weeks on the job to understand their manager’s expectations. In this meeting, new young managers should clarify what their bosses see as their roles and responsibilities as an NYM. Early, clear, and open communication between new young managers and their bosses will help to avoid both frustration and confusion later. Additionally, there will be no surprises at review time.

The same communication should occur between new young managers and their direct reports. New young managers should make a list of their employees’ strengths and weaknesses to help them assign roles and responsibilities. Taking the time to find out what the team is capable of based on past experiences will also help a new manager find the right roles and responsibilities for each individual.

**Exercising Authority**

One of the biggest areas of apprehension for a new manager is in establishing power over the group to be managed. In order to avoid trying to control employees via “hard authority,” managers must establish expert and referent power. These types of power lead to the employees
being committed to the manager, not just following instructions because they have to. To establish expert power, the manager has to show the employees that he or she has not only management skills and expertise, but also in the general tasks of the workgroup. This should not be difficult in the particular situation outlined in this analysis, as the manager already has experience with this workgroup. The main challenge then lies in establishing management skills and expertise. To establish referent power, the manager has to get to know the employees well in terms of their new relationship. At the same time, show that the NYM is there to help them with whatever they need and to allow them to grow in their careers. This can be done via holding one-on-one conversations, empowering the employees, placing employees in positions that match their personal skills, etc.

To avoid micromanaging their groups, NYMs must first clearly define their own roles. In general terms, the manager’s job is to focus on task, process, and context as well as managing the performance of their direct reports. The NYMs must then further specify their specific roles based upon their individual situations. Once these are determined, the managers must determine the role of their individual direct reports. This will aid in coming to an understanding of each employees’ specific skills and talents, which will hopefully lead to valuing the employees’ experience and knowledge. Once the manager comes to this understanding, it is necessary to communicate expectations to the group and to hold them accountable. This will lead to better performance (the Pygmalion Effect), which results in a virtuous circle of the manager’s expectations and the employees’ performance constantly improving.

In order to empower employees, NYMs must first trust their direct reports as discussed in the previous section. The next step is then getting the employees to want responsibility. This is
particularly important, as responsibility cannot most effectively be given – it is taken. Getting the employees to want this can be accomplished by motivating the group via group meetings, one-on-ones, development plans, setting goals, etc. Another tool is for the NYM to establish, with the help of the group, the current state and a proposed future goal state that will improve the performance of the group and the individuals. This will help to flush out areas of responsibility that need to be taken over by the group.

It will be hard for the manager to let go of power, but it is important that this is done. The first reason for this is that the employees are generally closer to most processes and will be able to figure out ways to improve them if given the responsibility. The reason that they generally do not take care of this themselves is that they figure it is the responsibility of the manager. The second reason is that when the manager makes an effort to empower employees, they realize that the NYM has an interest in improving the situation at work and in helping them develop. If NYMs can get their employees to realize that one of their main goals is to be an advocate for and to help their employees (this should be true), and not just look out for themselves, the employees will become committed to and will trust and follow the managers. This establishes the power and authority that the NYMs are seeking.

**Determining Extent of Personal Relationships**  
It is the opinion of the authors that the best strategy for a manager regarding his or her relationships with direct reports is to keep employees at arms’ length. Certainly, NYMs must get to know their employees well, but managing personal relationships with all of them is too difficult and too troublesome a task, as is obvious for the reasons stated in the prior analysis of the problem. However, existing friendships should be maintained. One cannot simply cut off
relationships with people due to promotions, as this would make it extremely difficult to be friends with anyone. It is also acceptable if new friendships develop, as it is healthy to have friendships in life, and work is a natural place for them to develop. The main point, and the general key to managing relationships, is to not try to be best friends with everyone. If friendships exist, maintain them. If friendships are developing, let them develop. Otherwise, keep relationships on a professional level.

In order for all of a manager’s employees to feel that they are being treated in an equitable and fair manner, they have to all feel that they are being treated the same. The first strategy that should be employed by NYMs to ensure that the employees feel they are being treated fairly is to create a list of potential problems that may arise in the group due to the variety of different relationships. This will allow the NYM to proactively figure out how to deal with issues rather than having to deal with them reactively. The second is for NYMs to make sure they have two modes – a work mode and a friend mode. If NYMs do not have the ability to do this, they cannot simultaneously be an effective manager and a good friend. An effective manager cannot be everyone’s buddy, and nobody wants a friend that is going to try to manage them. The last strategy for the NYM is to make sure they have a very objective and fact based method for raises, bonuses, and work assignments. Questions will always come up if these rewards were distributed fairly if the NYM is personal friends with some of the employees and not others. The only way for NYMs to protect themselves and their employees, and to keep everything as fair as possible, is to be able to back up all of their decisions regarding these rewards with facts.
In order to eliminate any divisions in the group due to the NYM’s promotion, most of the challenge obviously lies in dealing with the employees that dislike the NYM’s promotion to manager of the group. First, they must determine who is upset by this, and why. This will mostly be determined through honest and candid one-on-one conversations with the unhappy employees and via conversations with their coworkers. There are many reasons that the NYM’s people could have for disliking the promotion of the NYM. The two most likely will be those who wanted the manager job, and those who feel the NYM is not experienced enough. To deal with those that feel they deserved the NYM’s job, the NYM must make them feel valued. Publicly praising them for their contributions can do a lot for helping them to feel valued. Another method for the NYM is to make sure the help of the employees is enlisted to aid in learning the job and to rely on the expertise of these more experienced employees. To deal with employees that are unhappy with the NYM’s promotion because they feel he or she is inexperienced, the NYM has to learn everything they can about their job as quickly as possible. The only way for these people to get over this problem is for the NYM to demonstrate their aptitude and knowledge.

To deal with the problem of any employees that may be hesitant to follow orders, NYMs must firmly establish the norms of their groups at the first chance possible. If an NYM’s group is allowed to not follow the NYM’s instructions a few times, it will become a group norm that this is acceptable and will be very difficult to change. If, however, the NYM firmly enforces that directions must be followed right off the bat, this will become the group norm, and in general, should cease to be a problem.
CONCLUSION

Based on these recommendations, we can provide what we feel are the most important steps to action for anyone about to become an NYM: get training to educate oneself, dress and speak appropriately, set clear goals and objectives, have self awareness, and be willing to change and adapt. Getting training and education is imperative for NYMs, as they will learn a lot about the skills necessary to be a successful leader, rather than individual contributor. Dressing and speaking appropriately allows the NYM to appear like an authority figure, as it is hard to follow the authority of someone that looks and acts immaturely. Setting clear goals and objectives will allow NYMs to evaluate themselves and their employees, and provide motivation to strive to be better. Having a good sense of self-awareness allows NYMs to play to their own strengths and sidestep or resolve weaknesses. If NYMs don’t have a good sense of self-awareness, they may be using the wrong management style for their job and their personality. Lastly, NYMs should be willing to change and adapt. They have to be flexible to effectively deal with different and changing personalities in their work groups, changing business environments, and a changing world in general. Above all, NYMs must remember that management expects them to “do more than just make sure their group runs smoothly.” The NYM is not “just keeping the operation in working order” but “making changes that will make the team perform better.” (Hill, 55)

Following our recommendations and concluding steps to action will help NYMs meet their manager’s expectations by enabling them to make the transition from successful individual contributor to a very successful new young manager.
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APPENDIX 1 – GLOSSARY

**Coercive Power** – Coercive power means the application of negative influences onto employees. It might refer to the ability to demote or to withhold other rewards. It’s the desire for valued rewards or the fear of having them withheld that ensures the obedience of those under power. Coercive power tends to be the least effective form of power as it builds resentment and resistance within the targets of coercive power.

**Expert Power** – Expert power is an individual’s power deriving from the skills or expertise of the person and the organization’s needs for those skills and expertise. Unlike the others, this type of power is usually highly specific and limited to the particular area in which the expert is trained and qualified.

**Intellectual Watchdog Technique** - A team divides into two subgroups. The first develops a proposal and presents to the second group. The second group develops a detailed critique and recommendations. The first team then revises its proposal. This critique-revision cycle continues until agreement is achieved between the two teams on a common final set of recommendations.

**Legitimate Power** – Legitimate power refers to power of an individual because of the relative position and duties of the holder of the position within an organization. Legitimate power is formal authority delegated to the holder of the position.

**Point-Counterpoint Technique** – A team divides into two subgroups. The first develops a proposal and presents to the second group. Then the second group generates one or more alternative plans of action. Finally, the two groups come together to debate the options and seek agreement on a common final set of recommendations.

**Referent Power** – Referent power means the power or ability of individuals to persuade and influence others. It’s based on the charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder. Here the person under power desires to identify with these personal qualities, and gains satisfaction from being an accepted follower.

**Reward Power** – Reward power depends upon the ability of the power wielder to confer valued material rewards; it refers to the degree to which the individual can give others a reward of some kind such as benefits, time off, desired gifts, promotions or increases in pay or responsibility.