

Confessions of A New Manager

By [Elizabeth Black](#)

I'm scared. I wouldn't say this to just anyone, and I sure won't let my boss know, but I am not really sure how to be successful in my new role. Yes, I have an MBA and yes, I have read all the latest management books, listened to webcasts and kept up with the advice blogs, but truth be told, I am stymied. Do I pattern myself after my boss who appears cool, calm and collected, never letting anything get to him, or do I call up my empathy skills and let my feelings show? Let me explain my dilemma further by telling you a little about my situation.

I have been hired to be the team manager of a team of business analysts in an insurance company. I have experience as a business analyst from three years of prior experience in another company, and my next career move was into management. I have seven direct reports, some of whom are recent hires and others who are old enough to be my father and who have been with this company for 10+ years. I was interviewed by the three business analysts with the most experience, and since I got the job, I have to believe that they were supportive of my candidacy. During the interviews, I tried to be friendly and outgoing, and they did laugh at my jokes. Now, though, they are watching me to see how I will lead, whom I will favor, and how I will take criticism. So far, I am just taking one day at a time, but I know that I have to set some concrete direction for my team soon.

My boss has been a VP with the company for five years, having started as a college intern and risen through the ranks after spending time in each of the lines of business. He is a "tough love" kind of guy, and he tells me to get tough with my team right off the bat so that they know who's the boss. He tells me this is how he has been successful. In my job interview with him, he didn't want to know a lot about me or my interests; he was more interested in my work experience and my knowledge of the insurance industry.

I figure that I need to focus on a game plan for the next 90 days. I think I can buy this much time to figure out the lay of the land and how I want to manage this team. I know what our departmental goals are, and I know my revenue and profitability targets. I think I'll begin by reading the HR files and performance reviews for my team. In the meantime, I better figure out how to put my game face on so that no one suspects that I lie awake at night wondering if I have any clue about how to be a good manager, let alone a great one.

How would you advise this new manager?

While much of good management behavior is learned behavior, there are a few standard, obvious things a new manager should focus upon first. For example...

Get consensus on the mission and vision for the team.

Although the “vision thing” is sometimes laughed at, it really is important. Just as a coach would not send his players into a game without ensuring that everyone knew the goals of the game and the rules by which it is played, a good manager must get consensus upon the goals of the team and its mission—the reason it exists in this company. People genuinely want their leaders to set direction and lead, and they want to be a part of articulating what the vision and mission should be. The leader has the final say, of course, but the best teams are those that have an opportunity to set their direction and to articulate their roles in achieving the vision and mission.

Here are some questions our new manager can use during a team meeting to get a team vision and mission:

1. Why does this team exist? (What is our mission in this company?)
2. What do we want to strive for by the end of this year? (What is our vision, at a point in time?)
3. How will we get there? (What are the specific goals we must achieve, who will be accountable for ensuring that each goal is achieved, and how will we measure our achievement of each goal?)

Doing this exercise should make crystal clear the direction and goals that each business analyst should be working toward. This will give each team member a way to measure his activity—is it contributing to their goals and mission—and a way to measure his results.

Reading HR files is one perspective

While reading each person’s performance reviews will provide some information to our new manager, he must remember that the review has been written by someone else and it should not be the only barometer by which he judges his new direct reports.

Another useful step in the first 90 days is to meet with each individual direct report, understand what he or she is working on, coach them on doing things that help achieve the departmental goals and vision, and develop, jointly with each person, specific, measurable goals for a specific period of time. Provide them with the upfront direction, and they should be able to work toward the departmental and company goals.

The new manager should also provide feedback to his team, individually and often. The feedback should be specific and it should be about the individual’s performance. Positive feedback—telling someone when he has done a good job and what, specifically was good about it—is often the easiest but most overlooked kind of feedback. Corrective feedback—telling someone that they have made a mistake or are not performing—is more difficult and most often avoided. Every manager should be ready, willing and able to help his direct reports be successful, and that often means helping them correct mistakes and do things differently. How the new manager approaches each person will be

critical. A “tough love” stance may not work with everyone; it could backfire. On the other hand, being “too soft” won’t work either. The best solution is to have a one-on-one meeting with the person, explain what he is doing wrong, ask for comments on why he is doing the task this way, explain the consequences of this behavior and jointly determine how to change it or what to do differently—leaving emotion out of the equation as much as possible.

Ask the Customers

One of the best ways our new manager can get feedback on his team would be to ask their customers—either internal or external customers. If the manager lets the customers know his expectations of his team and gains an understanding of the customers’ expectations, he can solicit feedback on the performance of each individual over time. After all, the customer ought to be the focal point of all activity, and the new manager can’t be satisfied with managing to his expectations, exclusively, especially if they are not congruent with the customers’ expectations.

If our new manager’s 90-day plan includes some or all of these actions, he will be well on his way to becoming a good manager. Becoming great takes patience, practice and perseverance. Then, his game face will not simply be a façade.

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