



# Cultivating Managerial Capability:

Helping New Managers  
Make the Transition

A large, abstract graphic element occupies the bottom half of the page. It features a teal circle on the left and a green circle on the right, separated by a thin white gap. The background behind these circles is a light gray gradient.

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## Cultivating Managerial Capability

Research suggests that almost **40% of new managers fail** within the first 18 months, vividly demonstrating how many of the newly-promoted are ill-prepared to lead other employees.<sup>1</sup> New managers may have earned early-career success by personally executing tasks related to their particular areas of technical expertise. In their new roles, however, they need to orchestrate the work of others in order to execute on a larger scale. Success requires managers to adopt an attitude appropriate to their new role, which, in turn, will enable them to effectively guide the work of their team members.

Success requires managers to adopt a new attitude.

### ***Developing the Managerial Mindset***

The need for managers to transform their attitudes springs from the radical difference between their new role and the one that they held previously.

As <b>employees</b> , they . . .	As <b>managers</b> , they . . .
. . . found satisfaction in <b>hands-on implementation</b> of projects with defined deadlines.	. . . need to find satisfaction in <b>strategic planning</b> , often without defined deadlines.
. . . needed the <b>discipline</b> to carry out their manager's instructions.	. . . need the <b>decisiveness</b> to take ownership of their own vision.
. . . completed tasks on an <b>individual basis</b> .	. . . need to adopt a <b>collaborative, delegatory approach</b> , which seeks to achieve goals through others.
. . . may have flourished thanks to the <b>receptiveness</b> with which they received and internalized managerial feedback.	. . . need to take the <b>initiative</b> to provide direct reports with feedback and to have difficult conversations about inadequate performance.
. . . primarily needed to cultivate <b>relationships with individuals</b> .	. . . need to cultivate <b>relationships that bring whole teams together</b> .

New managers shouldn't abandon the values and practices that enabled their early-career success; however, they need to adopt new ones as well.

<sup>1</sup> Debra L. Nelson and James Quick, *Organizational Behavior: Science, the Real World, and You*, Seventh Edition, (Mason, OH: Cengage, 2012), 594.

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HR professionals can help new managers make the necessary adjustments by encouraging them to take several courses of action.

### Managers should develop a strategic vision for their team.

They can do this by:

- Setting aside time for strategic planning in order to:
  - Identify opportunities that can be seized and pitfalls that can be avoided
  - Map out the steps necessary to achieve long-term goals
  - Consider how to capitalize on relationships among individuals, the team, and the organization
- Practicing habits of decisiveness; these habits include writing down thoughts before deciding and assigning a specific and limited amount of time in which to make decisions

### Managers should become boosters for individual and team achievement.

To do this, they should:

- View delegated duties as an opportunity for employees to develop professionally, not as an imposition
- Delegate work methodically, assigning tasks to employees with appropriate skills and carefully communicating expectations
- Schedule check-ins with employees to monitor their progress on specific projects and to clarify any misunderstood expectations well before the final product is due
- Schedule formal reviews for employees – but without neglecting other, informal opportunities to give employees feedback and commendations
- Celebrate successes as a team/department in order to cultivate group cohesion

### Managers should pursue opportunities for their own professional development.

For instance, they can:

- Identify their areas of weakness and explore learning/coaching opportunities to address those weaknesses
- Capitalize on their existing strengths when learning new skills
- Turn mistakes into learning opportunities; by showing their own “human-ness,” managers can establish a comfortable learning environment for the whole team

### ***Managerial Communication***

Adopting a new attitude will allow managers to feel at ease with their new responsibilities. However, they won’t be able to successfully execute those responsibilities unless they can guide the work of their team members.

To provide this guidance, managers must do more than simply transfer information; they also must cultivate relationships, enable collaborative problem solving, and develop staff. These tasks demand clear communication and careful attention to delicate interpersonal dynamics.

New managers can improve their competency in these areas by developing the following capabilities:

- **Self-awareness** By understanding their own preferred communication styles, managers can make adjustments in order to better connect with others and to suit particular contexts. By administering assessments that evaluate personal communication styles, HR can help managers develop this self-awareness.
- **Respectful communication practices** Simple habits such as addressing people by name and establishing eye-contact help employees feel valued, and, in turn, encourage them to treat others the same way and to take pride in their work.
- **Careful written communication** Managers should remember that:
  - Reviewing messages prior to sending/distributing is crucial, as is anticipating the recipients' responses
  - The subject line of emails should be used to summarize content, convey relative urgency, and make it easy for the recipient to find the message when searching for it later
  - Emotions shouldn't influence what they write, or how they express themselves in writing; managers should reflect on their own feelings before drafting in order to filter out emotions
- **Active listening skills** We convey messages not only when we speak and write but also when we listen. When managers are listening to their employees, they can convey interest and approachability, as well as ensure mutual comprehension by:
  - Acknowledging the speaker's point with verbal and non-verbal signals (thoughtful nodding, etc.)
  - Listening with the intent to understand
  - Paraphrasing the speaker's point when he/she has finished speaking
  - Empathetically reflecting the speaker's feelings as appropriate
  - Asking pointed clarifying questions to fill in specific gaps
  - Asking open-ended questions that invite elaboration

**An active listener avoids:**

- Daydreaming
- Interrupting
- Rehearsing his/her response
- Judging the speaker

### ***The Managerial Public Image: Projecting Confidence and Tolerance***

Active listening isn't the only unspoken form of communication that managers should capitalize on. They communicate some of their most important messages simply by setting the right example. In order to project a positive public image at the office, managers should:

- **Handle stress with composure** A manager's demeanor can be contagious. When he/she exhibits anxiety, it can infect other team members, diminishing their focus and productivity. Conversely, when a leader responds to crises with poise, it encourages the rest of the team to behave in a similar fashion
- **Deal with mistakes gracefully** When a manager gives employees new responsibilities, he/she should view this as a learning experience, which necessarily involves some trial and error. By responding to inevitable mistakes with understanding, a manager helps ensure that employees won't shy away from new responsibilities in the future.

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- **Focus on solving problems rather than blaming people** Goal-oriented managers foster goal-oriented teams. But, conversely, when managers adopt an accusatory demeanor, it encourages employees to focus on preparing excuses rather than on working together to develop solutions.
- **Get along with a wide range of people** Teams need people with many different skills, perspectives, and personalities. Managers should be the glue that helps this diverse array of individuals coalesce as a cooperative unit. By publicly demonstrating their openness to working with a wide range of people, managers implicitly encourage other team members to do the same.

## 5 Ways to Engage Staff and Optimize Performance

Once managers are fluent in a variety of explicit and implicit communication styles, they can undertake five modes of outreach to engage, develop, and motivate staff members. Successful managers will:

1. Ensure clarity of vision, mission, and goals by:
  - Demonstrating the connection between organizational and departmental/team goals
  - Explaining how individual work supports the mission
2. Provide staff with support and tools that can include input, equipment, time, and information
3. Exhibit genuine interest in all staff by:
  - Spending time getting to know people
  - Acknowledging the unique contributions of each staff member
  - Offering opportunities for staff development
4. Welcome staff input by:
  - Indicating that staff ideas and contributions are valued
  - Acting upon these ideas/contributions when possible
5. Help staff meet performance goals by:
  - Consistently setting high standards for achievement
  - Monitoring progress to show interest and commitment

## Attaining Managerial Success Is Possible

Becoming an effective manager requires time and thoughtful effort, but by following the foregoing guidelines, new managers will have every opportunity to succeed. Having adjusted their mindsets to suit their new roles as managers, they will be able to think strategically and decisively. Having cultivated their communication skills and established a positive public image, they will be able to elicit buy-in for their plans, promote team cohesion, and inspire individual achievement. More than a technical expertise in this or that particular area, it is the ability to reshape not only their own attitudes but also the behavior of others, that will contribute most to new managers' success.