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The earliest test of leadership comes with that first assignment to manage others. Most new managers initially fail this test because of a set of common misconceptions about what it means to be in charge.

Becoming the Boss

by Linda A. Hill

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

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Becoming the Boss

The Idea in Brief

Ask new managers about their early days as bosses, and you'll hear tales of disorientation, even despair. As Hill points out, most novice bosses don't realize how sharply management differs from individual work. Hampered by misconceptions, they fail the trials involved in this rite of passage. And when they stumble, they jeopardize their careers and inflict staggering costs on their organizations.

How to avoid this scenario? Beware of common misconceptions about management: For example, subordinates don't necessarily obey your orders, despite your formal authority over them. You won't have more freedom to make things happen—instead, you'll feel constrained by organizational interdependencies. And you're responsible not only for maintaining your own operations—but also for initiating positive changes both inside and outside of your areas of responsibility.

Armed with *realistic* expectations, you'll be more likely to survive the transition to management—and generate valuable results for your organization.

The Idea in Practice

To succeed as a new manager, Hill suggests this approach:

REPLACE MYTHS WITH REALITIES

Myth	Reality	To manage effectively…	Example
Managers wield significant authority and freedom to make things happen.	You are enmeshed in a web of relationships with people who make relentless and conflicting demands on you.	Build relationships with people outside your group that your team depends on to do its work.	A U.S. media-company manager charged with setting up a new venture in Asia initiated regular meetings on regional strategy between executives from both businesses.
Managers' power derives from their formal position in the company.	Your power comes from your ability to establish credibility with employees, peers, and superiors.	Demonstrate character (intending to do the right thing), managerial competence (listening more than talking), and influence (getting others to do the right thing).	An investment bank manager won employees' respect by shifting from showing off his technical competence to asking them about their knowledge and ideas.
Managers must control their direct reports.	Control doesn't equal commitment. And employees don't necessarily always follow orders.	Build commitment by empowering employees to achieve the team's goals—not ordering them.	Instead of demanding that people do things her way, a media manager insisted on clarity about team goals and accountability for agreed-upon objectives.
Managers lead their team by building relationships with individual members of the team.	Actions directed at one subordinate often negatively affect your other employees' morale or performance.	Pay attention to your team's overall performance. Use group-based forums for problem solving and diagnosis. Treat subordinates in an equitable manner.	After granting a special parking spot to a veteran salesman—a move that ruffled other salespeople's feathers—a new sales manager began leading his entire team rather than trying to get along well with each individual.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

- Recognize that your boss is likely more tolerant of your questions and mistakes than you might expect
- Help your boss develop you. Instead of asking your boss to solve your problems, present ideas for how you would handle a thorny situation, and solicit his thoughts on your ideas
- Find politically safe sources of coaching and mentoring from peers outside your function or in another organization

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Even for the most gifted individuals, the process of becoming a leader is an arduous, albeit rewarding, journey of continuous learning and self-development. The initial test along the path is so fundamental that we often overlook it: becoming a boss for the first time. That's a shame, because the trials involved in this rite of passage have serious consequences for both the individual and the organization.

Executives are shaped irrevocably by their first management positions. Decades later, they recall those first months as transformational experiences that forged their leadership philosophies and styles in ways that may continue to haunt and hobble them throughout their careers. Organizations suffer considerable human and financial costs when a person who has been promoted because of strong individual performance and qualifications fails to adjust successfully to management responsibilities.

The failures aren't surprising, given the difficulty of the transition. Ask any new manager about the early days of being a boss—indeed, ask any senior executive to recall how he or she felt as a new manager. If you get an honest answer, you'll hear a tale of disorientation and, for some, overwhelming confusion. The new role didn't feel anything like it was supposed to. It felt too big for any one person to handle. And whatever its scope, it sure didn't seem to have anything to do with leadership.

In the words of one new branch manager at a securities firm: "Do you know how hard it is to be the boss when you are so out of control? It's hard to verbalize. It's the feeling you get when you have a child. On day X minus 1, you still don't have a child. On day X, all of a sudden you're a mother or a father and you're supposed to know everything there is to know about taking care of a kid."

Given the significance and difficulty of this first leadership test, it's surprising how little attention has been paid to the experiences of new managers and the challenges they face. The shelves are lined with books describing effective and successful leaders. But very few address the challenges of learning to lead, especially for the first-time manager.

For the past 15 years or so, I've studied people making major career transitions to management, focusing in particular on the star performer who is promoted to manager. My original ambition was to provide a forum for new managers to speak in their own words about what it means to learn to manage. I initially followed 19 new managers over the course of their first year in an effort to get a rare glimpse into their subjective experience: What did they find most difficult? What did they need to learn? How did they go about learning it? What resources did they rely upon to ease the transition and master their new assignments?

Since my original research, which I described in the first edition of *Becoming a Manager,* published in 1992, I've continued to study the personal transformation involved when someone becomes a boss. I've written case studies about new managers in a variety of functions and industries and have designed and led new-manager leadership programs for companies and not-for-profit organizations. As firms have become leaner and more dynamic—with different units working together to offer integrated products and services and with companies working with suppliers, customers, and competitors in an array of strategic alliances—new managers have described a transition that gets harder all the time.

Let me emphasize that the struggles these new managers face represent the norm, not the exception. These aren't impaired managers operating in dysfunctional organizations. They're ordinary people facing ordinary adjustment problems. The vast majority of them survive the transition and learn to function in their new role. But imagine how much more effective they would be if the transition were less traumatic.

To help new managers pass this first leadership test, we need to help them understand the essential nature of their role—what it truly means to be in charge. Most see themselves as managers and leaders; they use the rhetoric of leadership; they certainly feel the burdens of leadership. But they just don't get it.

Why Learning to Manage Is So Hard

One of the first things new managers discover is that their role, by definition a stretch assignment, is even more demanding than they'd anticipated. They are surprised to learn that the skills and methods required for success as an individual contributor and those required for success as a manager are starkly different—and that there is a gap between their current capabilities and the requirements of the new position.

In their prior jobs, success depended primarily on their personal expertise and actions. As managers, they are responsible for setting and implementing an agenda for a whole group, something for which their careers as individual performers haven't prepared them.

Take the case of Michael Jones, the new securities-firm branch manager I just mentioned. (The identities of individuals cited in this article have been disguised.) Michael had been a broker for 13 years and was a stellar producer, one of the most aggressive and innovative professionals in his region. At his company, new branch managers were generally promoted from the ranks on the basis of individual competence and achievements, so no one was surprised when the regional director asked him to consider a management career. Michael was confident he understood what it took to be an effective manager. In fact, on numerous occasions he had commented that if he had been in charge, he would have been willing and able to fix things and make life better in the branch. After a month in his new role, however, he was feeling moments of intense panic; it was harder than he had imagined to get his ideas implemented. He realized he had given up his "security blanket" and there was no turning back.

Michael's reaction, although a shock to him, isn't unusual. Learning to lead is a process of learning by doing. It can't be taught in a classroom. It is a craft primarily acquired through on-the-job experiences—especially adverse experiences in which the new manager, working beyond his current capabilities, proceeds by trial and error. Most star individual performers haven't made many mistakes, so this is new for them. Furthermore, few managers are aware, in the stressful, mistake-making moments, that they are learning. The learning occurs incrementally and gradually.

As this process slowly progresses—as the new manager unlearns a mind-set and habits that have served him over a highly successful early career—a new professional identity emerges. He internalizes new ways of thinking and being and discovers new ways of measuring success and deriving satisfaction from work. Not surprisingly, this kind of psychological adjustment is taxing. As one new manager notes,

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"I never knew a promotion could be so painful."

Painful—and stressful. New managers inevitably ponder two questions: "Will I like management?" and "Will I be good at management?" Of course, there are no immediate answers; they come only with experience. And these two questions are often accompanied by an even more unsettling one: "Who am I becoming?"

A New Manager's Misconceptions

Becoming a boss is difficult, but I don't want to paint an unrelentingly bleak picture. What I have found in my research is that the transition is often harder than it need be because of new managers' misconceptions about their role. Their ideas about what it means to be a manager hold some truth. But, because these notions are simplistic and incomplete, they create false expectations that individuals struggle to reconcile with the reality of managerial life. By acknowledging the following misconceptions—some of which rise almost to the level of myth in their near-universal acceptance—new managers have a far greater chance of success. (For a comparison of the misconceptions and the reality, see the exhibit "Why New Managers Don't Get It.")

Managers wield significant authority. When asked to describe their role, new managers typically focus on the rights and privileges that come with being the boss. They assume the position will give them more authority and, with that, more freedom and autonomy to do what they think is best for the organization. No longer, in the words of one, will they be "burdened by the unreasonable demands of others."

New managers nursing this assumption face a rude awakening. Instead of gaining new authority, those I have studied describe finding themselves hemmed in by interdependencies. Instead of feeling free, they feel constrained, especially if they were accustomed to the relative independence of a star performer. They are enmeshed in a web of relationships—not only with subordinates but also with bosses, peers, and others inside and outside the organization, all of whom make relentless and often conflicting demands on them. The resulting daily routine is pressured, hectic, and fragmented.

"The fact is that you really are not in control of anything," says one new manager. "The only

WHY NEW MANAGERS DON'T GET IT

Beginning managers often fail in their new role, at least initially, because they come to it with misconceptions or myths about what it means to be a boss. These myths, because they are simplistic and incomplete, lead new managers to neglect key leadership responsibilities.

	MYTH	REALITY
Defining characteristic of the new role:	Authority "Now I will have the freedom to implement my ideas."	Interdependency "It's humbling that someone who works for me could get me fired."
Source of power:	Formal authority "I will finally be on top of the ladder."	"Everything but" "Folks were wary, and you really had to earn it."
Desired outcome:	Control "I must get compliance from my subordinates."	Commitment "Compliance does not equal commitment."
Managerial focus:	Managing one-on-one "My role is to build relationships with individual subordinates."	Leading the team "I need to create a culture that will allow the group to fulfill its potential."
Key challenge:	Keeping the operation in working order "My job is to make sure the operation runs smoothly."	Making changes that will make the team perform better "I am responsible for initiating changes to enhance the group's performance."

As one disillusioned new leader puts it, "Becoming a manager is not about becoming a boss. It's about becoming a hostage."

time I am in control is when I shut my door, and then I feel I am not doing the job I'm supposed to be doing, which is being with the people." Another new manager observes: "It's humbling that someone who works for me could get me fired."

The people most likely to make a new manager's life miserable are those who don't fall under her formal authority: outside suppliers, for example, or managers in another division. Sally McDonald, a rising star at a chemical company, stepped into a product development position with high hopes, impeccable credentials as an individual performer, a deep appreciation for the company's culture—and even the supposed wisdom gained in a leadership development course. Three weeks later, she observed grimly: "Becoming a manager is not about becoming a boss. It's about becoming a hostage. There are many terrorists in this organization that want to kidnap me."

Until they give up the myth of authority for the reality of negotiating interdependencies, new managers will not be able to lead effectively. As we have seen, this goes beyond managing the team of direct reports and requires managing the context within which the team operates. Unless they identify and build effective relationships with the key people the team depends upon, the team will lack the resources necessary to do its job.

Even if new managers appreciate the importance of these relationships, they often ignore or neglect them and focus instead on what seems like the more immediate task of leading those closest to them: their subordinates. When they finally do accept their network-builder role, they often feel overwhelmed by its demands. Besides, negotiating with these other parties from a position of relative weakness—for that's often the plight of new managers at the bottom of the hierarchy—gets tiresome.

But the dividends of managing the interdependencies are great. While working in business development at a large U.S. media concern, Winona Finch developed a business plan for launching a Latin American edition of the company's U.S. teen magazine. When the project got tentative approval, Finch asked to manage it. She and her team faced a number of obstacles. International projects were not favored by top management, and before getting final funding, Finch would need to secure agreements with regional distributors representing 20% of the Latin American market—not an easy task for an untested publication competing for scarce newsstand space. To control costs, her venture would have to rely on the sales staff of the Spanish-language edition of the company's flagship women's magazine, people who were used to selling a very different kind of product.

Winona had served a stint as an acting manager two years before, so despite the morass of detail she had to deal with in setting up the new venture, she understood the importance of devoting time and attention to managing relationships with her superiors and peers. For example, she compiled biweekly executive notes from her department heads that she circulated to executives at headquarters. To enhance communication with the women's magazine, she initiated regular Latin American board meetings at which top worldwide executives from both the teen and women's publications could discuss regional strategy.

Her prior experience notwithstanding, she faced the typical stresses of a new manager: "It's like you are in final exams 365 days a year," she says. Still, the new edition was launched on schedule and exceeded its business plan forecasts.

Authority flows from the manager's position. Don't get me wrong: Despite the interdependencies that constrain them, new managers do wield some power. The problem is that most of them mistakenly believe their power is based on the formal authority that comes with their now lofty—well, relatively speaking—position in the hierarchy. This operating assumption leads many to adopt a hands-on, autocratic approach, not because they are eager to exercise their new power over people but because they believe it is the most effective way to produce results.

New managers soon learn, however, that when direct reports are told to do something, they don't necessarily respond. In fact, the more talented the subordinate, the less likely she is to simply follow orders. (Some new managers, when pressed, admit that they didn't always listen to their bosses either.)

After a few painful experiences, new managers come to the unsettling realization that the source of their power is, according to one, "everything but" formal authority. That is, authority emerges only as the manager establishes credibility with subordinates, peers, and superiors.

"It took me three months to realize I had no effect on many of my people," recalls one manager I followed. "It was like I was talking to myself."

Many new managers are surprised by how difficult it is to earn people's respect and trust. They are shocked, and even insulted, that their expertise and track record don't speak for themselves. My research shows that many also aren't aware of the qualities that contribute to credibility.

They need to demonstrate their *character*—the intention to do the right thing. This is of particular importance to subordinates, who tend to analyze every statement and nonverbal gesture for signs of the new boss's motives. Such scrutiny can be unnerving. "I knew I was a good guy, and I kind of expected people to accept me immediately for what I was," says one new manager. "But folks were wary, and you really had to earn it."

They need to demonstrate their *competence*—knowing how to do the right thing. This can be problematic, because new managers initially feel the need to prove their technical knowledge and prowess, the foundations of their success as individual performers. But while evidence of technical competence is important in gaining subordinates' respect, it isn't ultimately the primary area of competence that direct reports are looking for.

When Peter Isenberg took over the management of a trading desk in a global investment bank, he oversaw a group of seasoned, senior traders. To establish his credibility, he adopted a hands-on approach, advising traders to close down particular positions or try different trading strategies. The traders pushed back, demanding to know the rationale for each directive. Things got uncomfortable. The traders' responses to their new boss's comments became prickly and terse. One day, Isenberg, who recognized his lack of knowledge about foreign markets, asked one of the senior people a simple question about pricing. The trader stopped what he was doing for several minutes to explain the issue and offered to discuss the matter further at the end of the day. "Once I stopped talking all the time and began to listen, people on the desk started to educate me about the job and, significantly, seemed to question my calls far less," Isenberg says.

The new manager's eagerness to show off his technical competence had undermined his credibility as a manager and leader. His eagerness to jump in and try to solve problems raised implicit questions about his managerial competence. In the traders' eyes, he was becoming a micromanager and a "control freak" who didn't deserve their respect.

Finally, new managers need to demonstrate their *influence*—the ability to deliver and execute the right thing. There is "nothing worse than working for a powerless boss," says a direct report of one new manager I studied. Gaining and wielding influence within the organization is particularly difficult because, as I have noted, new managers are the "little bosses" of the organization. "I was on top of the world when I knew I was finally getting promoted," one new manager says. "I felt like I would be on the top of the ladder I had been climbing for years. But then I suddenly felt like I was at the bottom again—except this time it's not even clear what the rungs are and where I am climbing to."

Once again, we see a new manager fall into the trap of relying too heavily on his formal authority as his source of influence. Instead, he needs to build his influence by creating a web of strong, interdependent relationships, based on credibility and trust, throughout his team and the entire organization—one strand at a time.

Managers must control their direct reports. Most new managers, in part because of insecurity in an unfamiliar role, yearn for compliance from their subordinates. They fear that if they don't establish this early on, their direct reports will walk all over them. As a means of gaining this control, they often rely too much on their formal authority—a technique whose effectiveness is, as we have seen, questionable at best.

But even if they are able to achieve some measure of control, whether through formal authority or authority earned over time, they have achieved a false victory. Compliance does not equal commitment. If people aren't committed, they won't take the initiative. And if subordinates aren't taking the initiative, the manager can't delegate effectively. The direct reports won't take the calculated risks that lead to the continuous change and improvement required by today's turbulent business environment.

Winona Finch, who led the launch of the teen magazine in Latin America, knew she faced a business challenge that would require

I repeatedly hear new managers describe situations in which they made an exception for one subordinate but ended up regretting the action's unexpected negative consequences for the team.

her team's total support. She had in fact been awarded the job in part because of her personal style, which her superiors hoped would compensate for her lack of experience in the Latin American market and in managing profit-and-loss responsibilities. In addition to being known as a clear thinker, she had a warm and personable way with people. During the project, she successfully leveraged these natural abilities in developing her leadership philosophy and style.

Instead of relying on formal authority to get what she wanted from her team, she exercised influence by creating a culture of inquiry. The result was an organization in which people felt empowered, committed, and accountable for fulfilling the company's vision. "Winona was easygoing and fun," a subordinate says. "But she would ask and ask and ask to get to the bottom of something. You would say something to her, she would say it back to you, and that way everyone was 100% clear on what we were talking about. Once she got the information and knew what you were doing, you had to be consistent. She would say, 'You told me X; why are you doing Y? I'm confused.'" Although she was demanding, she didn't demand that people do things her way. Her subordinates were committed to the team's goals because they were empowered, not ordered, to achieve them.

The more power managers are willing to share with subordinates in this way, the more influence they tend to command. When they lead in a manner that allows their people to take the initiative, they build their own credibility as managers.

Managers must focus on forging good individual relationships. Managing interdependencies and exercising informal authority derived from personal credibility require new managers to build trust, influence, and mutual expectations with a wide array of people. This is often achieved by establishing productive personal relationships. Ultimately, however, the new manager must figure out how to harness the power of a team. Simply focusing on one-on-one relationships with members of the team can undermine that process.

During their first year on the job, many new managers fail to recognize, much less address, their team-building responsibilities. Instead, they conceive of their people-management role as building the most effective relationships they can with each individual subordinate, erroneously equating the management of their team with managing the individuals on the team.

They attend primarily to individual performance and pay little or no attention to team culture and performance. They hardly ever rely on group forums for identifying and solving problems. Some spend too much time with a small number of trusted subordinates, often those who seem most supportive. New managers tend to handle issues, even those with teamwide implications, one-on-one. This leads them to make decisions based on unnecessarily limited information.

In his first week as a sales manager at a Texas software company, Roger Collins was asked by a subordinate for an assigned parking spot that had just become available. The salesman had been at the company for years, and Collins, wanting to get off to a good start with this veteran, said, "Sure, why not?" Within the hour, another salesman, a big moneymaker, stormed into Collins's office threatening to quit. It seems the shaded parking spot was coveted for pragmatic and symbolic reasons, and the beneficiary of Collins's casual gesture was widely viewed as incompetent. The manager's decision was unfathomable to the star.

Collins eventually solved what he regarded as a trivial management problem—"This is not the sort of thing I'm supposed to be worrying about," he said—but he began to recognize that every decision about individuals affected the team. He had been working on the assumption that if he could establish a good relationship with each person who reported to him, his whole team would function smoothly. What he learned was that supervising each individual was not the same as leading the team. In my research, I repeatedly hear new managers describe situations in which they made an exception for one subordinate—usually with the aim of creating a positive relationship with that person—but ended up regretting the action's unexpected negative consequences for the team. Grasping this notion can be especially difficult for up-and-comers who have been able to accomplish a great deal on their own.

When new managers focus solely on one-on-one relationships, they neglect a fundamental aspect of effective leadership: harnessing the collective power of the group to improve individual performance and commitment. By shaping team culture—the group's norms and values—a leader can unleash the problem-solving prowess of the diverse talents that make up the team.

Managers must ensure that things run smoothly. Like many managerial myths, this one is partly true but is misleading because it tells only some of the story. Making sure an operation is operating smoothly is an incredibly difficult task, requiring a manager to keep countless balls in the air at all times. Indeed, the complexity of maintaining the status quo can absorb all of a junior manager's time and energy.

But new managers also need to realize they are responsible for recommending and initiating changes that will enhance their groups' performance. Often—and it comes as a surprise to most—this means challenging organizational processes or structures that exist above and beyond their area of formal authority. Only when they understand this part of the job will they begin to address seriously their leadership responsibilities. (See the sidebar "Oh, One More Thing: Create the Conditions for Your Success.")

In fact, most new managers see themselves as targets of organizational change initiatives, implementing with their groups the changes ordered from above. They don't see themselves as change agents. Hierarchical thinking and their fixation on the authority that comes with being the boss lead them to define their responsibilities too narrowly. Consequently, they tend to blame flawed systems, and the superiors directly responsible for those systems, for their teams' setbacks—and they tend to wait for other people to fix the problems.

But this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of their role within the organization. New managers need to generate changes, both within *and outside* their areas of responsibility, to ensure that their teams can succeed. They need to work to change the context in which their teams operate, ignoring their lack of formal authority.

This broader view benefits the organization as well as the new manager. Organizations must continually revitalize and transform themselves. They can meet these challenges only if they have cadres of effective leaders capable of both managing the complexity of the status quo and initiating change.

Oh, One More Thing: Create the Conditions for Your Success

New managers often discover, belatedly, that they are expected to do more than just make sure their groups function smoothly today. They must also recommend and initiate changes that will help their groups do even better in the future.

A new marketing manager at a telecommunications company whom I'll call John Delhorne discovered that his predecessor had failed to make critical investments, so he tried on numerous occasions to convince his immediate superior to increase the marketing budget. He also presented a proposal to acquire a new information system that could allow his team to optimize its marketing initiatives. When he could not persuade his boss to release more money, he hunkered down and focused on changes within his team that would make it as productive as possible under the circumstances. This course seemed prudent, especially because his relationship with his boss, who was taking longer and longer to answer Delhorne's e-mails, was becoming strained.

When the service failed to meet certain targets, the CEO unceremoniously fired Delhorne because, Delhorne was told, he hadn't been proactive. The CEO chastised Delhorne for "sitting back and not asking for his help" in securing the funds needed to succeed in a critical new market. Delhorne, shocked and hurt, thought the CEO was being grossly unfair. Delhorne contended it wasn't his fault that the company's strategic-planning and budgeting procedures were flawed. The CEO's response: It was Delhorne's responsibility to create the conditions for his success.

New Managers Aren't Alone

As they go through the daunting process of becoming a boss, new managers can gain a tremendous advantage by learning to recognize the misconceptions I've just outlined. But given the multilayered nature of their new responsibilities, they are still going to make mistakes as they try to put together the managerial puzzle—and making mistakes, no matter how important to the learning process, is no fun. They are going to feel pain as their professional identities are stretched and reshaped. As they struggle to learn a new role, they will often feel isolated.

Unfortunately, my research has shown that few new managers ask for help. This is in part the outcome of yet another misconception: The boss is supposed to have all the answers, so seeking help is a sure sign that a new manager is a "promotion mistake." Of course, seasoned managers know that no one has all the answers. The insights a manager does possess come over time, through experience. And, as countless studies show, it is easier to learn on the job if you can draw on the support and assistance of peers and superiors.

Another reason new managers don't seek help is that they perceive the dangers (sometimes more imagined than real) of forging developmental relationships. When you share

About half of new managers turn to their bosses for assistance. Many are relieved to find their superiors more tolerant of their questions and mistakes than they had expected.

your anxieties, mistakes, and shortcomings with peers in your part of the organization, there's a risk that the individuals will use that information against you. The same goes for sharing your problems with your superior. The inherent conflict between the roles of evaluator and developer is an age-old dilemma. So new managers need to be creative in finding support. For instance, they might seek out peers who are outside their region or function or in another organization altogether. The problem with bosses, while difficult to solve neatly, can be alleviated. And herein lies a lesson not only for new managers but for experienced bosses, as well.

The new manager avoids turning to her immediate superior for advice because she sees that person as a threat to, rather than an ally in, her development. Because she fears punishment for missteps and failures, she resists seeking the help that might prevent such mistakes, even when she's desperate for it. As one new manager reports:

"I know on one level that I should deal more with my manager because that is what he is there for. He's got the experience, and I probably owe it to him to go to him and tell him what's up. He would probably have some good advice. But it's not safe to share with him. He's an unknown quantity. If you ask too many questions, he may lose confidence in you and think things aren't going very well. He may see that you are a little bit out of control, and then you really have a tough job. Because he'll be down there lickety-split, asking lots of questions about what you are doing, and before you know it, he'll be involved right in the middle of it. That's a really uncomfortable situation. He's the last place I'd go for help."

Such fears are often justified. Many a new manager has regretted trying to establish a mentoring relationship with his boss. "I don't dare even ask a question that could be perceived as naive or stupid," says one. "Once I asked him a question and he made me feel like I was a kindergartner in the business. It was as if he had said, 'That was the dumbest thing I've ever seen. What on earth did you have in mind?'"

This is a tragically lost opportunity for the new manager, the boss, and the organization as a whole. It means that the new manager's boss loses a chance to influence the manager's initial conceptions and misconceptions of her new position and how she should approach it. The new manager loses the chance to draw on organizational assets—from financial resources to information about senior management's priorities—that the superior could best provide.

When a new manager can develop a good relationship with his boss, it can make all the difference in the world—though not necessarily in ways the new manager expects. My research suggests that eventually about half of new managers turn to their bosses for assistance, often because of a looming crisis. Many are relieved to find their superiors more tolerant of their questions and mistakes than they had expected. "He recognized that I was still in the learning mode and was more than willing to help in any way he could," recalls one new manager.

Sometimes, the most expert mentors can seem deceptively hands-off. One manager reports how she learned from an immediate superior: "She is demanding, but she enjoys a reputation for growing people and helping them, not throwing them to the wolves. I wasn't sure after the first 60 days, though. Everything was so hard and I was so frustrated, but she didn't offer to help. It was driving me nuts. When I asked her a question, she asked me a question. I got no answers. Then I saw what she wanted. I had to come in with some ideas about how I would handle the situation, and then she would talk about them with me. She would spend all the time in the world with me."

His experience vividly highlights why it's important for the bosses of new managers to understand—or simply recall—how difficult it is to step into a management role for the first time. Helping a new manager succeed doesn't benefit only that individual. Ensuring the new manager's success is also crucially important to the success of the entire organization.

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Further Reading

ARTICLES

Rescue Your Rookie Managers
by Kerry A. Bunker, Kathy E. Kram, Sharon Ting, Carol A. Walker, and Gordon Adler
HBR Article Collection
December 2002
Product no. 2292

This HBR Article Collection shows how supervisors can help newly promoted managers transition into the role. In "The Young and the Clueless," Kerry A. Bunker, Kathy E. Kram, and Sharon Ting recommend building novice managers' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses by providing broad and deep 360-degree feedback. Expose them to diverse leadership styles through mentoring relationships outside the usual hierarchy. And give them assignments where they have to master negotiating and influencing—rather than pulling rank.

In "Saving Your Rookie Managers from Themselves," Carol A. Walker offers suggestions for strengthening especially crucial managerial skills—such as delegating, projecting confidence, and focusing on the big picture. For instance, to encourage delegating, send a clear message that developing staff is just as essential as achieving financial objectives. To encourage big-picture thinking, ask rookies strategic questions, such as "What marketplace trends could affect your unit in six months?"

In "When a New Manager Stumbles, Who's at Fault?" Gordon Adler provides a fictional case study of a novice boss in trouble. Six commentators provide insights into how to help new managers survive and thrive. Advice includes clearly communicating your company's goals and expectations, including long-term strategy and values, to new managers. How? Explain what behaviors they'd demonstrate if their performance were outstanding. Build a near-term, concrete performance plan based on clear, easy-to-measure behaviors—then lay out the actions required to execute it. And commend or correct behaviors in real time, rather than waiting for formal performance reviews.