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Managing People

Stop Doing Your Team's Work for Them

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Summary. Your primary task as a leader is to build capability below you — but for new managers, this can be especially challenging. You want to be liked. That's natural. But remember: Placing performance pressure on your team isn't cruel. A leader who stretches their… **more**

Ascend

Do you remember the feeling you had after being promoted into a management role? That first step on the path towards leadership often brings conflicting emotions. For many of us, once the euphoria subsides, the work somehow doesn't feel as productive (or as much fun) as the tasks we used to undertake. We're easily drawn back into doing exactly the same work as we did before while adding more meetings and administrative tasks to our schedules.

To complicate matters further, in my experience, those who are promoted into management often fail to receive adequate guidance on how their role has changed and how their performance will now be measured. If this was the case for you, up until this point, you may have relied on your instincts to guide you.

The problem is that, as a new manager, your natural instinct is probably to be "liked." You may feel pressure to show your team why you deserve their respect and attention. As you begin to understand their capabilities and performance gaps, you may even feel compelled to fill them yourself. After all, it's quicker and it's easier that way — no one can do the job as well as you can.

It can be incredibly easy to rationalize this approach by hiding behind the most virtuous of notions: "I always support my people"; "I'd never ask anyone to do something I'm not prepared to do myself"; "I'm leading by example." But as seductive as this mindset is, it is equally short-sighted and destructive.

When you do your team's work for them, rather than guiding them and allowing them to grow, no one wins. The overall capability of your team remains weak as people realize that you don't hold them to standard. They fail to receive the lessons they

need to improve. Worse, their performance will continue to be mediocre, and eventually, you will be left with a group of people who can't function at all without your intervention.

For your team, this sets them up for failure. For you, the outcome isn't much better.

Rather than growing as a leader, you will likely become trapped in a spiral of high workload and diminishing returns. Every minute you spend doing someone else's job is a minute you spend not doing your own. That's why gaining the self-control to *lead* rather than to *do* is essential for anyone who aspires to be a strong and capable manager.

Let Go and Lead

When someone on your team isn't delivering the results you want to see, your role is to support, encourage, and motivate them to do their job — to ensure they have adequate resources, sufficient training, and that they're protected from the vagaries of organizational politics that often derail good people. This work involves spending a significant amount of one-on-one time with each of your direct reports, teaching them, and reinforcing your expectations around behavior and performance standards.

If you think that sounds arduous, you're right. Letting go of control and setting clear expectations with your people around the results they need to deliver is going to initially feel slow and frustrating. But it is essential to improving their performance in the long term.

The only way to find out what your people are truly capable of is to stretch them. Over time, this approach will not only improve your team's capability, it will also develop them in ways that enhance their career prospects.

Your primary task as a leader is to build capability below you because your success is ultimately determined by your team. This is as true for a first-time manager as it is for a CEO. Identifying

potential talent, nurturing that talent, and building a pipeline of future leaders is a prerequisite for organizational performance.

Here are three steps you can take to hone this skill and set yourself, and your team, up for success.

Don't play the game — keep the score.

As a new manager you may feel like a team captain striving to be the best player on the field. But remember: you're not the captain, you're the coach. Your job isn't to get on the field and play the game, it's to observe the game, devise a winning strategy, and then give your team the guidance, direction, and motivation they need to play at their peak.

You need to make the scoreboard clearly visible, communicate what it takes to make the score move, and help them figure out what to do when it doesn't. You accomplish this by setting clear expectations, communicating who is accountable for which outcomes, and bringing everyone into the huddle when things don't turn out the way you'd imagined they would.

Ask the right questions.

When someone comes to you with an issue, you'll often know the answer — and it can be very tempting to just solve the problem for them. But a skilled leader will instead ask searching questions, the most important of which is the one you ask yourself: *What's the best thing I can do right now to help this person succeed?* From

there, it becomes much easier to ask the right questions of your people:

- *What do you think is at the core of this issue?*
- *Have you thought about alternative approaches?*
- *What can we sacrifice without detracting from the overall value of the project?*
- *Who can you share the problem with to seek a different perspective?*

Questions like these can unlock newfound creativity, and help your people to dig deeper within themselves, rather than relying on you to be the font of all wisdom. You'll also learn something about their capacity and capability, while giving them the opportunity to grow.

Think about your future.

Solving a problem quickly by doing it yourself creates a rod for your own back. You very quickly become a workhorse, forever bonded to the work of your people. This may give you a comfortable feeling of indispensability, but that isn't what the people above you were looking for when they identified you as a potential leader. They wanted you to excel at the next level, to hone new skills.

If you have the ambition to grow, develop, and progress in your career, your goal shouldn't be to make yourself indispensable to your team, it should be to make yourself redundant. Build a team that can function without you, and then go to the next level and build another one. This is what will ultimately set you apart as a leader, not just a doer.

Finally, keep in mind that placing performance pressure on your team isn't cruel. It's actually one of the most selfless acts a leader can undertake. A leader who stretches their people risks the possibility of not being liked in order to give others the

opportunity to thrive. That's why your mindset should be to focus on getting the best outcomes you possibly can with the resources that your company has entrusted to you.

Being a hero by giving an extra 10% of your own effort is noble, but nowhere near as effective as working out how to get an extra 10% out of every individual you lead.

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