

Plenty to Learn, but Plenty of Guidance, Too

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by Barbara J. Manger, MPA, RHIA, CCS

Climbing the career ladder is a sign of success. Many new HIM professionals begin their employment on one of the bottom rungs in a non-supervisory position while attending school or immediately after graduation. These positions give new graduates an advantage when a supervisory position in the organization becomes available. Many organizations stress promotion from within, which provides an avenue of advancement for those on a management career tract. Yet, being a first-time supervisor can be a difficult experience and you may struggle to balance new responsibilities, new relationships, and new expectations. Fortunately, this challenging transition will help you develop skills you'll use throughout your career.

A New View

Moving into a management position changes your perspective. You'll need to consider the larger picture of how things work together, whereas before you probably kept views focused on the tasks at hand. This new vantage point requires a broader and increased set of skills and strengths. Your technical expertise positioned you for advancement, but as a manager you'll need to use interpersonal skills in dealing with subordinates and other managers plus conceptual and decision-making skills in planning and implementing processes.¹

Help Is within Reach

Your first instinct might be to resist asking for assistance or advice because you don't want others to think you don't have the answers. However, it is doubtful that others expect you to know it all and they're more than likely to be very receptive to requests for guidance, particularly in the first few weeks.² Seek assistance from others at your level within the organization.

Perhaps there is another supervisor or manager whose skills you have admired who would be willing to serve as a mentor as you ease into your new role. Kean graduates have said that they value the input of the connections they established while attending school. Relationships made with clinical site supervisors can be continued while former classmates are often in similar situations and are more than willing to brainstorm ideas and solutions to common problems. You will feel more comfortable and confident in your new role with support and assistance.

From Peers to Subordinates

When promoted from within, you have the added challenges of adjusting relationships with former colleagues, particularly those who are considered friends. It is important to establish yourself in your new role of boss early on and be consistent in maintaining this role.³ Former peers can make your transition difficult because they will be watching to see how you change, how you treat them, and if you're showing any favoritism. It is to their advantage to keep you at their level. Those with more seniority may question your ability to do the job, particularly if they feel they were more qualified. Staff will have respect for and trust in your skills at their level but be unaware and perhaps skeptical of your talents or skills as a manager.

The way you handle these relationships will have an important effect on your success. Friends should be supportive of your new responsibilities, but if they are expecting special treatment or create an uncomfortable atmosphere, you should meet with them early on. In establishing your new role, it will be essential to make sure everyone understands your desire to be fair and consistent in all situations. There's no need to end friendships, but you'll need to establish a clear distinction between your role as a friend and your role as boss.

To strengthen your identity as a manager, you may want to seek out friends at your new level. This will also facilitate networking with others faced with similar work issues.

So Much to Learn, So Little Time

Many of your new position's tasks and functions will be unfamiliar. Although you may have some recollection of learning the theory behind these practices, you will find that facing them in the real world is more difficult than you anticipated. Learning by doing takes time and it is not expected that you will be an expert in every situation. Recent former graduates in this same situation say that you will spend a lot of time reading and asking questions. Although you will want to show your new boss that you are knowledgeable, not asking questions won't help and your lack of knowledge will become evident in a short period of time.⁴

Many new supervisors fail to take advantage of educational opportunities early in their new jobs because of their increased workload. However, seminars and courses in related subjects may shorten the learning curve. As with any other conquests in life, learn from your successes and mistakes.

Digging in

When you first step into your supervisory role you may be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work to be accomplished. Take time to familiarize yourself with the job and recognize that many processes work as they are and don't need to be changed. It will be important to set priorities and concentrate on handling these tasks. Anything of significance should surface shortly after starting the job as it will be brought to your attention by your boss or your subordinates. In prioritizing, you will need to determine which areas are critical and create an action plan to address them.

When making changes, be mindful that many people find it difficult to accept change. Gather information, meet with employees to get their view, and find out what helps them get the job done. Being a good listener will give you the feedback necessary to recognize, then address their concerns. Open communication with your team should engender support if you let them know what the current situation is, what others think, and how things need to change. Defining what is needed from them to be successful and setting specific deadlines should put you on the road to success. You may not make everyone happy, but you'll enjoy more cooperation than if you proceeded alone.

You're on Your Way

Your past accomplishments, your success at your previous job, and your potential to succeed has led your manager to believe you can motivate others and be successful in your new role. If others can be confident in your abilities, you can, too. Recent graduates say it took three to 12 months to feel really comfortable in a new role, but perseverance and a willingness to learn and take chances has helped them succeed. And many offered important advice: keep others informed as much as possible, be visible to those you supervise, be fair and lead by example, and show appreciation to those who assist you along the way.

Notes

1. Dwan, Sue. "Traps for New Managers." *NZ Business* 15, no. 7 (2001): 44.
2. Fuller, George. *First-Time Supervisor's Survival Guide*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

References

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