

Saving your rookie managers from themselves

Carol A. Walker, Harvard Business Review, April 2002

Most organizations promote employees to managerial positions based on their technical competence. But, these newly promoted managers do not realize that their roles have changed. They fail to grasp that it is no longer about personal achievement, but enabling others to achieve. This adjustment of mindset is complicated by normal insecurities that make rookie managers hesitate to ask for help even when they should. As a result, they feel stressed, become self-focused, and cannot properly support their teams.

It is important for organizations to understand the typical challenges a first-time manager faces, and anticipate and deal with the problems before they arise. The five main areas where rookie managers stumble – and how they must be guided by senior managers – are as follows:

Delegating

New managers assume that they must single-handedly complete all the tasks assigned to them. They are unwilling to delegate for three main reasons:

- They are afraid of losing their importance.
- They are sceptical whether their staff will do the job properly.
- They fear that they may end up overburdening their staff.

Senior managers should explain to the rookie that developing staff is as important as meeting targets. Then, they should show trust in and empower the rookie, so that, eventually, the rookie will do the same with his/her own staff. Senior managers must reiterate that reducing the task to smaller, easier-to-achieve segments, and delegating them to staff members is more effective.

Getting support from above

Most newly promoted managers continue to view themselves as subordinates to their bosses, rather than partner with them. They fear displeasing their boss. So, instead of approaching their boss for help, they try to hide their mistakes.

Bosses of newly promoted managers should make it abundantly clear that they are always willing to help. Apart from informal drop-ins and lunch meetings, they should also regularly check on how the rookie is doing.

Projecting confidence

It is not just about delivering results but also about body language. Rookies who look tensed and harried all the time, or are arrogant and fuming, fail to motivate their teams, and also lose the confidence of senior managers. Another blunder that rookies make is that, they create a perception of merely communicating the ideas or instructions of senior executives.

Bosses must let rookies know that they are always ready to listen to their problems. By letting out some of their pent-up feelings, rookies will feel better, and bosses can help them regain confidence. When handing over a new task, the boss can coach the new manager about how to present it to the staff, and also, how to respond to various questions that may be raised.

Focusing on the big picture

Most newly promoted managers, who are used to constant troubleshooting, continue to focus on immediate problems, rather than the big picture. While working side-by-side with the staff promotes team-spirit, long term thinking is also important. Senior managers must make rookies aware that strategic thinking is vital for career development.

Giving constructive feedback

New managers often hesitate to provide negative feedback to their staff. They react only when the problem gets out of hand, by which time it is too late to do anything about it – and it only leads to bitter feelings between the manager and the staff member.

Senior managers must establish an atmosphere where constructive feedback is accepted gracefully, not negatively. They can share their own personal experiences to drive home the point.

Conclusion

Most rookie managers struggle with the basics of management. To be fair to them, managers at all levels are prone to making these mistakes. Organizations that support new managers and help them learn these skills will definitely have an edge over competitors.