

## **Developing first line leaders**

### **Introduction**

Developing first line leaders is the strategic challenge for many companies today. These are people who have become leaders for the first time in their career. The transition from individual worker to team leader poses formidable challenges. The top management must help these people to make the transition smoothly.

The Indian economy has grown at a rapid pace in recent times, led by the IT Services and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries. Attracting and retaining talent is the key issue for companies in these industries. In particular, the strategic challenge companies in these industries face today is growing leaders fast enough to keep up with the growth of the business.

Many of the team leaders in our knowledge industries are people who have become managers for the first time. We will refer to them as first line or first time leaders in this article. In most cases, they are very young and are not really prepared for the role. Yet they have to be pushed into these roles taking into account both the growth needs of the industry as well as their high aspirations. In short, growing first line leaders is what is seizing much of the attention of top management these days.

### **Understanding the challenge**

These first time leaders usually face a different set of challenges. One of the first things they discover after they are promoted is that their role is far more complex and demanding than they ever imagined. They are surprised to learn that the skills and approach required for success as an individual contributor are quite different from those required for success as a manager.

As individual contributors, 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 they are not prepared.

They also realise that there is no clear cut formula for success. Learning to lead is a process of trial and error that comes from on-the-job experiences -- especially adverse experiences in which the new managers, working beyond their current capabilities, learn things the hard way. Most star individual performers have not made many mistakes, so this is new for them. The learning occurs incrementally and gradually and somewhat painfully. Slowly the new manager unlearns the existing mind-set and a new professional identity emerges. This kind of psychological adjustment is taxing for most new leaders.

It is necessary to understand why first line managers get into problems. The problems they face, can be divided into the following categories:

- Dealing with subordinates
- Dealing with the boss
- Displaying confidence
- Focusing on the big picture
- Focusing on activities as opposed to goals
- Giving feedback
- Building networks

### **Dealing with subordinates**

First line leaders eagerly look forward to the rights and privileges that come with being the boss. They assume they will get more authority, freedom and autonomy in their new role. What happens instead is that they feel constrained, especially if they are used to the relative independence of a star performer. After becoming leaders, leave alone gaining new authority, they find themselves surrounded by interdependencies. 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 becomes too hectic and fragmented.

Most new managers also tend to lean heavily towards 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. But this approach often backfires. New managers soon learn 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. Even if they are able to achieve some measure of control, it turns out to be a false victory.

First line leaders may succeed in enforcing compliance but fail to elicit the required commitment of team members. If people aren't committed, they won't take the initiative. And obviously without initiative, delegation becomes difficult. After a few painful experiences, new managers realise that their authority can come only after they establish credibility with subordinates, peers, and superiors. They have to demonstrate both competence and character. Character means the intention to do the right thing. Competence means knowing how to do the right thing.

The challenges are even greater when the team size is somewhat large. During their first year on the job, many new managers fail to recognize, leave alone assume, their team-building responsibilities. Instead, they focus on building closer relationships

with each individual subordinate. They wrongly equate the management of their team with managing the individuals on the team. Not surprisingly, many first line leaders spend too much time with a small number of trusted subordinates, often those who seem most supportive. The result is new managers tend to handle issues, even those with team wide implications, based on one-on-one interactions. The result- sub optimal decisions are taken based on limited information.

### **Delegation**

Effective delegation may be one of the most difficult tasks for first line leaders. Senior managers give them big responsibilities and tight deadlines, and they put a lot of pressure on them to produce results. The natural response of rookies when faced with such challenges is to "just do it," They do not think of delegating. This reluctance to delegate arises due to various factors.

First is the fear of losing stature and feeling redundant. Second is the fear of abdicating control: Will someone else do it correctly? Due to this fear, the rookie manager may delegate tasks but supervise the subordinate so closely that he will never feel accountable. Finally, first line leaders may be hesitant to delegate work because they are afraid of overburdening their staff. They may be uncomfortable assigning work to former peers for fear that they'll resent them.

The mental blocks towards delegation can be grouped as follows.

- It is easier for me to do it than explain to someone else.
- I don't have confidence in my staff.
- I like to get things done in my own way.
- My staff will resent the additional work.
- People expect me to take the decisions.

Effective delegation has several building blocks:

- Understand the task well and the building blocks
- Identify the skills and capabilities needed
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the team members
- Communicate clearly
- Provide necessary resources to subordinates
- Monitor from time to time; Trust but verify
- Focus on results, not activities.
- Resist the temptation to jump in too early
- Give feedback from time to time
- Be tolerant of failures

Delegation should not lead to abdication of responsibility. Some activities should not be delegated:

- Planning, directing and motivating
- Employee performance evaluation
- Complex customer negotiations
- Tasks requiring specific technical skills
- Hiring, firing and career development

### **Dealing with the boss**

Most first-time managers see their relationship with their boss more as one of servitude than of partnership. Not only does the boss's position intimidate them; but they also feel vulnerable.

They will not seek the help of their boss even when they run into difficulties because they see the boss as a threat to them, rather than an ally in their development. Due to the fear of punishment for missteps and failures, they resist seeking the help of the boss.

First line leaders should view their bosses as a critical source of support. The boss can help get them connected with the rest of the organization, align priorities with organizational needs and help in mobilizing the resources badly needed.

To fully leverage their relationships with their boss, first time leaders should:

- Understand the boss' strengths, weaknesses, working style and needs.
- Understand their own strengths, weaknesses, working style and needs.
- Use this understanding to build a win-win synergistic relationship
- Avoid viewing the boss as an obstacle and getting into a fight
- Also avoid being compliant and agreeing with the boss all the time.

### **Developing Confidence**

Looking confident even when the pressure is mounting or things are going wrong is an important trait which first time leaders often lack. These leaders are often so internally focused that they are unaware of this need or the image they project. During the first weeks and months on the job, if they don't project confidence, they are unlikely to inspire and energize their teams. Many new managers are unaware that when they don't display confidence, performance of the team drops. Confidence is partly the result of past success. But, confidence is also the cause of future wins.

Confidence is all about having positive expectations that generate the positive energy and enthusiasm required to work toward difficult goals, the resilience to

bounce back from adversity and the equanimity to confront their circumstances honestly, even in bad times.

Low levels of confidence can create problems. Once confidence diminishes, a losing streak can set in, often leading to a vicious cycle. When people are losing, they:

- Stop communicating
- Criticize and blame someone
- Disrespect others
- Become isolated
- Focus inward and become more self-conscious which, psychologists say, decreases skill levels.
- Let inequalities develop and persist
- Lose initiative
- Forget goals and aspirations
- Spread negativity

### **Focusing on the Big Picture**

Inexperienced managers allow immediate tasks to overshadow overarching initiatives. This is particularly true for those promoted from within, because they have just come from the scene of action where they are accustomed to constant fire fighting.

As a star individual performer armed with plenty of technical know-how, rookie managers instinctively run to the immediate rescue of any client or staff member in need. They find it easier and more exciting to get involved in such emergencies. But many of those emergencies are not really true emergencies. In the process of fighting fires, rookie managers fail to find the time to think strategically for the department and address structural issues.

### **Goals vs. activities**

Rookie managers commonly focus on activities rather than on goals. That's because activities can be accomplished quickly whereas achieving goals generally takes more time.

First time managers should have written goals that clearly distinguish between the goals and their supporting activities. This kind of a goal-setting discipline will help new managers to organize their strategic game plans. Critical but soft goals, such as staff development, are often overlooked because they are difficult to measure. Putting such goals in print with clear action steps makes them concrete, leading to a sense of accomplishment when they are achieved and a greater likelihood that they

will be rewarded. Managers with clear goals will be less tempted to micro manage and focus on thinking about the right issues and deploying their teams effectively.

### **Giving Constructive Feedback**

It is human nature to avoid confrontations. Not surprisingly, most people feel awkward when they have to correct others' behaviour or actions. When a staff member is struggling to meet performance goals, the first line leader tends to sit back, watch, and hope that things will magically improve. Other staff members observe the situation and become frustrated by the manager's inaction. Meanwhile, as the period of inaction continues and the subordinate still does not "get" it, the manager's own frustration builds. The straightforward performance issue becomes a credibility problem.

When the manager finally addresses the problem, she personalizes it, lets her frustration seep into the discussion with her staff member, and finds the recipient rushing to defend himself from attack. Most inexperienced managers wait far too long to talk with staff about performance problems.

Giving effective feedback involves the following :

- Focus on improving rather than criticizing performance
- Look at the future, not the past
- Focus on behavior, not character
- Demonstrate sincerity
- Be specific
- Be realistic and focus on things which can be controlled

### **Building networks**

The people most likely to make life difficult for first line leaders are those who don't fall under their formal authority: outside suppliers, for example, or managers in another division. First time leaders should realise that their job 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. It is commonly assumed that only extroverts are good at building networks. The fact is all of us can do some amount of networking. What is necessary is that first line leaders should display a positive attitude towards working with others. Helping people in other departments ensures that assistance from others is available when needed. Networking is a matter of discipline, finding that little bit of time to do things that don't look urgent but are nevertheless important from a long term perspective.

## **Conclusion**

First time leaders hold the key to the effective performance of an organisation. These are the people who ultimately get the work done. Unless they are trained and hand held before being asked to lead teams, many of them will not do well. Senior leaders must do their bit. They must prepare first line leaders carefully for their jobs through classroom training as well as mentoring and coaching. The time and effort spent in this regard is worth it.

## **References**

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