

Maximizing your Chances of Success as a New Manager

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In Asia, thousands of young people are promoted into managerial responsibilities for the first time every year. It is an exciting milestone for new managers and at the same time fraught with unknown challenges. People who assume managerial responsibilities generally do not receive formal guidance. Many companies adopt a passive approach: letting them “sink or swim” on their own.

When left to fend for themselves, rookie managers will invariably make their way by trial and error. It is a Darwinian process with serious ramifications for the future of the organizations. The determining factor will be the learning agility of the individuals. This is how the chips will fall.

✿ The high potential

The cream will rise. There will be a few individuals with the uncanny aptitude to seek out crucial information and pick up new abilities and perspectives with little guidance. They intuitively adapt themselves quickly by learning, unlearning and relearning. Soon, they become recognized as high-potential managers in their organization. In the years ahead, they will fast-track up the hierarchy. As they do so, they impact people positively, creating immense value and sharpening the competitive edge of the company.

✿ The survivors

The path ahead isn't that smooth for most new managers. In learning how to manage, they will be exposed to different experiences with a mixture of successes and setbacks. While generally they may pass muster, their development as a leader is patchy. Not every person is able to learn from experience. While some will extract useful lessons and become better, there are others who will learn little, or even the wrong things. Such people may develop questionable traits and bad working habits that will be a drag on employee morale and productivity in the long run.

A case in point will be the tendency to micromanage. As a rookie manager, one can be a control freak and still achieve results through sheer force of will and dint of hard work. However, as this individual becomes more senior, such a management style will wreak havoc and ruin. He will stifle the growth of people who work for him. Talented people will leave in droves. Productivity will plummet. Haven't we all met senior managers whose

mindset and behaviours suck the life out of their divisions? They insist on doing their subordinates' jobs, and don't have a clue about the real value that they should be adding. This is called value destruction. And it's more common than we think.

✿ **The derailed**

And finally, there will be some first-time managers who will make major missteps. Being emotionally and intellectually ill-prepared, they lurch from one mishap to another. If these are serious enough, they will get replaced or removed from their position.

Why does stepping into managerial responsibilities present such a hurdle?

"In any organization, people tend to rise to their level of incompetence."

- The Peter Principle

When Canadian educational psychologist Laurence Peter first suggested this notion in 1968, it was done tongue-in-cheek. Now many decades later, in the world of leadership development, *The Peter Principle* has almost become a truism. What exactly is this voice from the past warning newly promoted people about? And is there any possible escape?

When people become managers for the first time, they are in effect undergoing a rite of passage. Like adventurers they are about to enter a dark and deep mysterious cave. In both Eastern and Western mythologies, we all know that there are fearsome creatures guarding the various thresholds. Those who are unworthy get eliminated quickly. Only the fittest gain safe passage as they slay one dragon after another. At the end of the journey, our heroes emerge stronger, wiser and more resilient.

Prof Linda Hill of Harvard Business School puts it this way, "The first managerial assignment is a pivotal developmental experience for future executives. It is when an executive's basic philosophy and leadership style is shaped..." She then goes on to stress that a "profound adjustment " is required- a transformation of professional identity, no less.

For more than a decade, I have worked with managers around the world facilitating their transition from one level of management to the next. Lessons learnt and experience have shown that the transitional journey to managerial responsibilities involves critical shifts in 4 areas:

❖ **Juggling** with a broader, more complex and ambiguous set of responsibilities

❖ Constantly **reinventing** oneself by doing less of what had made one successful previously, and picking up new and unfamiliar skills required for the new responsibilities

❖ **Influencing** and managing relationship with key stakeholders, and

❖ Consciously focusing one's attention to **delivering values appropriate to respective levels.**

The concept of “values appropriate to respective levels” is largely unrecognized and poorly understood in organizations around the world. This is the real acid test. Studies have shown that in some companies, at least 50 percent of people in leadership positions are operating below their assigned level. In other words, they are destroying values and clogging up the system. This is the legacy of the old “sink or swim” approach.

Corporations are now asking, “How do we ensure that at every level in our organization, each manager is a value creator?” To tip the balance in their favour, companies these days are putting in place development programmes to ensure that newly promoted managers successfully transition into higher responsibilities.

By enhancing learning agility in each person as she moves up, companies are deepening their talent pool and filling up their leadership pipeline. They know that everything rises and falls on leadership. And it all starts with the first managerial assignment.

Dr. Laurence Peter has since passed on. Perhaps, as he sits in the pantheon of 20th century management greats, he may chuckle with quiet satisfaction that we in the 21st century have finally pried free of *The Peter Principle*.