Sharpen Your Tools

Dave Witt, Kathy Cuff

Building Better Leaders

Techniques for stopping bad leadership habits before they start

New managers typically don't get the training they need when they initially step up to leadership roles.

For example, more than 40 percent of The Ken Blanchard Companies' First-Time Manager class attendees have already been in management for more than two years. And research by management consultancy Zenger Folkman found that the average manager doesn't receive training until they have been on the job for 10 years.

That's simply too late. Without training, undesirable managerial habits develop that prevent new managers from being as effective as they need to be. It could also be why 60 percent of new managers un-derperform— or fail—in their first two years.

Old Habits Die Hard

"If left on our own, we continue to lean on our habitual behaviors," said Linda Miller, a master certified coach and coauthor of Blanchard's new First-Time Manager program. "Even when we change roles or move into a new job or position, we still are inclined to fall back into familiar patterns."

That can be a problem for new managers, explains Miller. "They often bring their individual-contributor habits or practices into the new role. They may repeat a pattern over and over again —even when it is not helpful or appropriate—simply because it is comfortable and familiar," she said. "I worked with a client recently who has been a leader for many years. Now, she is struggling with grooming a new generation of leaders to take her place. My hunch is that when she was a new manager, she made all the decisions. Now, that habit has caught up with her. Her organization is ready for her to step back and develop others, but she still feels she needs to make all the decisions instead of delegating them to people who could learn from the experience."

New managers often feel they still need to do work that should be delegated to direct reports.

As Miller explains, "When coaching first-time managers, I often ask how much of their work could be delegated. A new manager has to have a plan for accomplishing results through others. Many find it easier to keep doing a familiar task themselves than to have a conversation with a direct report who could take on the responsibility. Although it may be easier for them to just do the task, a new manager needs to realize that task is no longer part of their role."

Changing Dynamics

Miller often helps new managers with peer relationships.

"Things change when a person becomes a manager—and relationships need to change as well," she said. "People who were once peers may now be direct reports. As a peer, the relationship might have involved social activities, such as going out for drinks after work, but for a new manager, new behaviors need to be created that preserve those personal relationships at a slightly different level."

Counterproductive beliefs and unrealistic expectations from upper management can also get in the way of a new manager's progress in developing new skills. When high-performing individual contributors become managers, leadership often believes that because they excelled in their previous roles, they will be an immediate success in their new role as a manager. These lofty expectations may prevent new managers from requesting support or input from their supervisors or other colleagues. They don't want to be seen as inferior or as a poor choice for management. Instead of asking for help or training, they improvise their own strategies and solutions—through trial and error. This is how many undesirable patterns begin.

Research shows that if organizations don't take a proactive approach in training new managers, 60 percent will underperform in the first two years, and bad habits set in. This can be avoided by earlier training, coaching and mentoring within the organization.

Creating a New Manager Curriculum

Instead of letting new managers take a trial-and-error approach that potentially leads to bad habits, Miller believes organizations need to create a new manager learning path. This begins with normalizing the idea that transitioning from an individual contributor into management is a big change—and that it is normal for first-time managers to feel awkward or even paralyzed by all the new responsibilities.

Next, identify some of the gaps or differences between being an individual contributor and a new manager. For example, early discussions could focus on situations where old habits may not serve the new manager or the organization well.

From there, focus on skill building and getting things done through others. If new managers are not going to do the work themselves, how will goals be achieved? Miller cautions that this question can get a little blurred because new managers often have two jobs: accomplishing their own goals as well as managing a team of direct reports.

Replacing Bad Habits with Good Habits

For new managers who recognize bad habits may be holding them back, Miller's first recommendation is to ask for feedback from their own manager—and, if possible, their reports.

"I encourage leaders of new managers to give input if they see patterns of behavior that may be unproductive," Miller said. "For example, if the new manager always makes the decisions rather than letting others take the lead, or if they always take on work rather than delegating it to their direct reports, their leader needs to discuss those observations.

"When we ask new managers about the most significant event that helped in their development, many point to when an immediate manager or colleague said something direct and concise that changed the way they did things. I encourage new managers to listen to the feedback they are getting and look for patterns. Also, seek a mentor or coach— someone they can be really honest with in sharing their experiences."

Taking Action

Once new managers have examined their behaviors and identified patterns that aren't working, the hard work begins—changing those ingrained behaviors. This requires interrupting the automatic responses, Miller said.

"As a coach, I encourage people to take some time before they respond to a situation," she said. "For example, before saying yes to a request, wait two hours to think it through. Or come up with a question that will interrupt the pattern. For example, a self-directed question might be, 'How else could I approach this work besides doing it myself?' In addition, challenge the belief that is creating the response in the first place—to really think about what keeps them responding in this way.

"So, awareness is No. 1—become aware of the pattern and what needs to change. Then, examine and challenge the belief that creates the response. The next step is to come up with actions, often very simple ones, which can address the changes that are needed."

Creating New Habits

Miller's advice is short and sweet: Don't wait. Start now. Developing your high-potential people early will pay dividends now and in the future.

"It's much easier to train and develop good leadership habits than to change undesirable patterns that may be deeply embedded," she said. "Identifying high-potential people and beginning leadership training before they accept their first leadership role does the organization, as well as the aspiring leaders, a great service. It's not what most organizations do, but it is a unique and promising approach—and a far superior option to trial and error."

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