

Five Common Mistakes New Managers Make

By Julie Bennett

Initiative, skill and dedication may be the reasons you were promoted to management, but those qualities may not make you a good manager.

Most new managers make plenty of mistakes, says Nicole Morgenstern, practice consultant to the American Management Association in New York, which offers management training. "It's unfortunate," she says, "but managers typically do learn on the job."

Here, we examine five common new-manager missteps and ways they can avoid them.

1. Taking On Too Much Yourself

When he was in his 20s, Larry Runge's employer put him in charge of a design project because he was a top computer programmer. After getting the new position, "I spent long nights writing code myself and stayed up all night to get everything running before our deadline, at nine the next morning," he says.

Mr. Runge fell victim to a classic trap for new managers: taking on too much work while failing to delegate. "I should have spent my time encouraging my employees to do the work. When you step in yourself, you're disenfranchising the folks working for you. And no matter how good you are, you're not better than 20 people put together," says Mr. Runge, now 50 and the chief information officer of a consulting company in Northbrook, Ill.

2. Refusing to Ask for Help

Treava Lewandowski of Addison, Texas, was made an assistant manager of a Bath & Body Works store in Plano, Texas, when she was 22. Working in a high-volume store during the holidays managing 20 to 25 stockers, cashiers, salespeople and greeters "was pretty crazy," she says. She says she fell behind on paperwork -- staying at work until 1 a.m. and returning at 8 a.m. -- and didn't let anyone know that she was struggling. Ms. Lewandowski's mistake was allowing the work overwhelm her instead of letting someone else share the load. "It's a sign of maturity to ask for help," says Ms. Morgenstern.

When a sales clerk came to work wearing a shirt that didn't match the store's dress code, she told her to take it off, and the clerk stormed off to complain to another manager, Ms. Lewandowski says. That's when she realized asking for some support was okay. "I thought I'd be in real trouble, but the other managers supported me. Until then, I'd been afraid to ask them for help," says Ms. Lewandowski, who is now 29.

3. Failing to Plan

David Stevens, 37, of Manasquan, N.J., says he was "thrown into a management position" four years ago. His biggest mistake, he says, was a lack of planning. "Whenever a superior asked for something, I was so anxious to perform and please, I'd dive right into it," says Mr. Stevens, now a solution-consulting manager. "I finally learned that if I spent half a day mapping a project out first, and delegating the work to my team, I could save 10 to 15 days on the back end," he says.

4. Jumping the Gun

Harrison Lewis, now 45, learned the limits to this approach the hard way. When he entered a management-training program at Kroger's Atlanta-area grocery stores after college, he began managing unionized workers, so he studied the union contract until he knew it "better than the shop stewards," he says.

When an employee refused an order, behavior that came under insubordination in the contract, Mr. Lewis says, he fired him. The next day, the employee was back on the job after seeking the help of his union. Mr. Lewis says he later realized that his job "wasn't about reading contracts, but about my ability to get a job done through others." If he had talked out the problem with the employee and gone through the proper channels with union representatives, the situation may have been resolved without conflict, he says. Thereafter, when problems arose, he says, he went to the union representative first. "Learning to listen made my job easier and made me a better manager," says Mr. Lewis.

5. Overrelying on Your Title

Perhaps the hardest lesson for young managers to learn is that a management title does not elicit automatic respect and obedience. "Authority," says Ms. Morgenstern, "will come with time. When managing, actions speak louder than words. If you show a level of competence, and demonstrate the skills that come with your title, the respect of your workers will follow."

Christopher Tucker admits to barking orders when he was first made a manager. While he was in college, Mr. Tucker worked for a call center selling mobile phones in his native Swansea, Wales. "The company expanded so quickly," he says, "that they made a lot of us managers too quickly for our own good."

Some of the young managers would require employees who didn't make a sale in an hour to stand on their chairs. If they failed again, the managers would tie balloons to the employees' wrists or belts.

The tactics demoralized the whole office. "I learned that you should always praise workers in front of their peers, but discipline them privately," says Mr. Tucker, now 27 years old, who manages an Act-1 Personnel Services office in Schaumburg, Ill.

It actually was a music course that gave him a lesson in management: "When an orchestra gets out of synch, the conductor doesn't make big, exaggerated motions. His moves become smaller and more precise," Mr. Tucker says. Likewise, "when I stopped shouting and quietly explained what was needed, people actually did what I wanted."

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