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UPDATED & EXPANDED

New Managers

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

FEATURING "Becoming the Boss" *by Linda A. Hill*

HBR's 10 Must Reads

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Becoming the Boss

by Linda A. Hill

Even for the most gifted individuals, the process of becoming a leader is an arduous, albeit rewarding, journey of continuous learning and self-development. The initial test along the path is so fundamental that we often overlook it: becoming a boss for the first time. That's a shame, because the trials involved in this rite of passage have serious consequences for both the individual and the organization.

Executives are shaped irrevocably by their first management positions. Decades later, they recall those first months as transformational experiences that forged their leadership philosophies and styles in ways that may continue to haunt and hobble them throughout their careers. Organizations suffer considerable human and financial costs when a person who has been promoted because of strong individual performance and qualifications fails to adjust successfully to management responsibilities.

The failures aren't surprising, given the difficulty of the transition. Ask any new manager about the early days of being a boss—indeed, ask any senior executive to recall how he or she felt as a new manager. If you get an honest answer, you'll hear a tale of disorientation and, for some, overwhelming confusion. The new role didn't feel anything like it was supposed to. It felt too big for any one person to handle. And whatever its scope, it sure didn't seem to have anything to do with leadership.

In the words of one new branch manager at a securities firm: "Do you know how hard it is to be the boss when you are so out of control? It's hard to verbalize. It's the feeling you get when you have a child. On day X minus 1, you still don't have a child. On day X, all of a sudden you're a mother or a father and you're supposed to know everything there is to know about taking care of a kid."

Given the significance and difficulty of this first leadership test, it's surprising how little attention has been paid to the experiences of new managers and the challenges they face. The shelves are lined with books describing effective and successful leaders. But very few address the challenges of learning to lead, especially for the first-time manager.

For the past 15 years or so, I've studied people making major career transitions to management, focusing in particular on the star performer who is promoted to manager. My original ambition was to provide a forum for new managers to speak in their own words about what it means to learn to manage. I initially followed 19 new managers over the course of their first year in an effort to get a rare glimpse into their subjective experience: What did they find most difficult? What did they need to learn? How did they go about learning it? What resources did they rely upon to ease the transition and master their new assignments?

Since my original research, which I described in the first edition of *Becoming a Manager*, published in 1992, I've continued to study the personal transformation involved when someone becomes a boss. I've written case studies about new managers in a variety of functions and industries and have designed and led new-manager leadership programs for companies and not-for-profit organizations. As firms have become leaner and more dynamic—with different units working together to offer integrated products and services and with companies working with suppliers, customers, and competitors in an array of strategic alliances—new managers have described a transition that gets harder all the time.

Idea in Brief

Ask new managers about their early days as bosses, and you'll hear tales of disorientation, even despair. As Hill points out, most novice bosses don't realize how sharply management differs from individual work. Hampered by misconceptions, they fail the trials involved in this rite of passage. And when they stumble, they jeopardize their careers and inflict staggering costs on their organizations.

How to avoid this scenario? Beware of common misconceptions about management: For example, subordinates don't necessarily obey your orders, despite your formal authority over them. You won't have more freedom to make things happen—instead, you'll feel constrained by organizational interdependencies. And you're responsible not only for maintaining your own operations—but also for initiating positive changes both inside and outside of your areas of responsibility.

Armed with *realistic* expectations, you'll be more likely to survive the transition to management—and generate valuable results for your organization.

Let me emphasize that the struggles these new managers face represent the norm, not the exception. These aren't impaired managers operating in dysfunctional organizations. They're ordinary people facing ordinary adjustment problems. The vast majority of them survive the transition and learn to function in their new role. But imagine how much more effective they would be if the transition were less traumatic.

To help new managers pass this first leadership test, we need to help them understand the essential nature of their role—what it truly means to be in charge. Most see themselves as managers and leaders; they use the rhetoric of leadership; they certainly feel the burdens of leadership. But they just don't get it.

Why Learning to Manage Is So Hard

One of the first things new managers discover is that their role, by definition a stretch assignment, is even more demanding than they'd anticipated. They are surprised to learn that the skills and methods required for success as an individual contributor and those required for success as a manager are starkly different—and that there is a gap between their current capabilities and the requirements of the new position.

In their prior jobs, 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 their careers as individual performers haven't prepared them.

Take the case of Michael Jones, the new securities-firm branch manager I just mentioned. (The identities of individuals cited in this article have been disguised.) Michael had been a broker for 13 years and was a stellar producer, one of the most aggressive and innovative professionals in his region. At his company, new branch managers were generally promoted from the ranks on the basis of individual competence and achievements, so no one was surprised when the regional director asked him to consider a management career. Michael was confident he understood what it took to be an effective manager. In fact, on numerous occasions he had commented that if he had been in charge, he would have been willing and able to fix things and make life better in the branch. After a month in his new role, however, he was feeling moments of intense panic; it was harder than he had imagined to get his ideas implemented. He realized he had given up his “security blanket” and there was no turning back.

Michael’s reaction, although a shock to him, isn’t unusual. Learning to lead is a process of learning by doing. It can’t be taught in a classroom. It is a craft primarily acquired through on-the-job experiences—especially adverse experiences in which the new manager, working beyond his current capabilities, proceeds by trial and error. Most star individual performers haven’t made many mistakes, so this is new for them. Furthermore, few managers are aware, in the stressful, mistake-making moments, that they are learning. The learning occurs incrementally and gradually.

As this process slowly progresses—as the new manager unlearns a mindset and habits that have served him over a highly successful early career—a new professional identity emerges. He internalizes new ways of thinking and being and discovers new ways of measuring success and deriving satisfaction from work. Not surprisingly, this kind of psychological adjustment is taxing. As one new manager notes, “I never knew a promotion could be so painful.”

Painful—and stressful. New managers inevitably ponder two questions: “Will I like management?” and “Will I be good at management?” Of course, there are no immediate answers; they come only with experience. And these two questions are often accompanied by an even more unsettling one: "Who am I becoming?"

A New Manager's Misconceptions

Becoming a boss is difficult, but I don't want to paint an unrelentingly bleak picture. What I have found in my research is that the transition is often harder than it need be because of new managers' misconceptions about their role. Their ideas about what it means to be a manager hold some truth. But, because these notions are simplistic and incomplete, they create false expectations that individuals struggle to reconcile with the reality of managerial life. By acknowledging the following misconceptions—some of which rise almost to the level of myth in their near-universal acceptance—new managers have a far greater chance of success. (For a comparison of the misconceptions and the reality, see the sidebar "Why New Managers Don't Get It.")

Why New Managers Don't Get It

Beginning managers often fail in their new role, at least initially, because they come to it with misconceptions or myths about what it means to be a boss. These myths, because they are simplistic and incomplete, lead new managers to neglect key leadership responsibilities.

	Myth	Reality
Defining characteristic of the new role	**Authority** "Now I will have the freedom to implement my ideas."	**Interdependency** "It's humbling that someone who works for me could get me fired."
Source of power	**Formal authority** "I will finally be on top of the ladder."	**Everything but** "Folks were wary, and you really had to earn it."
Desired outcome	**Control** "I must get compliance from my subordinates."	**Commitment** "Compliance does not equal commitment."
Managerial focus	**Managing one-on-one** "My role is to build relationships with individual subordinates."	**Leading the team** "I need to create a culture that will allow the group to fulfill its potential."
Key challenge	**Keeping the operation in working order** "My job is to make sure the operation runs smoothly."	**Making changes that will make the team perform better** "I am responsible for initiating changes to enhance the group's performance."

Managers wield significant authority

When asked to describe their role, new managers typically focus on the rights and privileges that come with being the boss. They assume the position will give them more authority and, with that, more freedom and autonomy to do what they think is best for the organization. No longer, in the words of one, will they be "burdened by the unreasonable demands of others."

New managers nursing this assumption face a rude awakening. Instead of gaining new authority, those I have studied describe finding themselves hemmed in by interdependencies. Instead of feeling free, they feel constrained, especially if they were accustomed to the relative independence of a star performer. 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 is pressured, hectic, and fragmented.

"The fact is that you really are not in control of anything," says one new manager. "The only time I am in control is when I shut my door, and then I feel I am not doing the job I'm supposed to be doing, which is being with the people." Another new manager observes: "It's humbling that someone who works for me could get me fired."

The people most likely to make a new manager's life miserable are those who don't fall under her formal authority: outside suppliers, for example, or managers in another division. Sally McDonald, a rising star at a chemical company, stepped into a product development position with high hopes, impeccable credentials as an individual performer, a deep appreciation for the company's culture—and even the supposed wisdom gained in a leadership development course. Three weeks later, she observed grimly: "Becoming a manager is not about becoming a boss. It's about becoming a hostage. There are many terrorists in this organization that want to kidnap me."

Until they give up the myth of authority for the reality of negotiating interdependencies, new managers will not be able to lead effectively. As we have seen, this 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.

Even if new managers appreciate the importance of these relationships, they often ignore or neglect them and focus instead on what seems like the more immediate task of leading those closest to them: their subordinates. When they finally do accept their network-builder role, they often feel overwhelmed by its demands. Besides, negotiating with these other parties from a position of relative weakness—for that's often the plight of new managers at the bottom of the hierarchy—gets tiresome.

But the dividends of managing the interdependencies are great. While working in business development at a large U.S. media concern, Winona Finch developed a business plan for launching a Latin American edition of the company's U.S. teen magazine. When the project got tentative approval, Finch asked to manage it. She and her team faced a number of obstacles. International projects were not favored by top management, and before getting final funding, Finch would need to secure agreements with regional distributors representing 20% of the Latin American market—not an easy task for an untested publication competing for scarce newsstand space. To control costs, her venture would have to rely on the sales staff of the Spanish-language edition of the company's flagship women's magazine, people who were used to selling a very different kind of product.

Winona had served a stint as an acting manager two years before, so despite the morass of detail she had to deal with in setting up the new venture, she understood the importance of devoting time and attention to managing relationships with her superiors and peers. For example, she compiled biweekly executive notes from her department heads that she circulated to executives at headquarters. To enhance communication with the women's magazine, she initiated regular Latin American board meetings at which top worldwide executives from both the teen and women's publications could discuss regional strategy.

Her prior experience notwithstanding, she faced the typical stresses of a new manager: "It's like you are in final exams 365 days a year," she says. Still, the new edition was launched on schedule and exceeded its business plan forecasts.

Authority flows from the manager's position

Don't get me wrong: Despite the interdependencies that constrain them, new managers do wield some power. The problem is that most of them mistakenly believe their power is based on the formal authority that comes with their now lofty—well, relatively speaking—position in the hierarchy. This operating assumption leads many to adopt 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.

New managers soon learn, however, 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. (Some new managers, when pressed, admit that they didn't always listen to their bosses either.)

After a few painful experiences, new managers come to the unsettling realization that the source of their power is, according to one, "everything but" formal authority. That is, authority emerges only as the manager establishes credibility with subordinates, peers, and superiors. "It took me three months to realize I had no effect on many of my people," recalls one manager I followed. "It was like I was talking to myself."

Many new managers are surprised by how difficult it is to earn people's respect and trust. They are shocked, and even insulted, that their expertise and track record don't speak for themselves. My research shows that many also aren't aware of the qualities that contribute to credibility.

They need to demonstrate their *character*—the intention to do the right thing. This is of particular importance to subordinates, who tend to analyze every statement and nonverbal gesture for signs of the new boss's motives. Such scrutiny can be unnerving. "I knew I was a good guy, and I kind of expected people to accept me immediately for what I was," says one new manager. "But folks were wary, and you really had to earn it."

They need to demonstrate their *competence*—knowing how to do the right thing. This can be problematic, because new managers initially feel the need to prove their technical knowledge and prowess, the foundations of their success as individual performers. But while evidence of technical competence is important in gaining subordinates' respect, it isn't ultimately the primary area of competence that direct reports are looking for.

When Peter Isenberg took over the management of a trading desk in a global investment bank, he oversaw a group of seasoned, senior traders. To establish his credibility, he adopted a hands-on approach, advising traders to close down particular positions or try different trading strategies. The traders pushed back, demanding to know the rationale for each directive. Things got uncomfortable. The traders' responses to their new boss's comments became prickly and terse. One day, Isenberg, who recognized his lack of knowledge about foreign markets, asked one of the senior people a simple question about pricing. The trader stopped what he was doing for several minutes to explain the issue and offered to discuss the matter further at the end of the day. "Once I stopped talking all the time and began to listen, people on the desk started to educate me about the job and, significantly, seemed to question my calls far less," Isenberg says.

The new manager's eagerness to show off his technical competence had undermined his credibility as a manager and leader. His eagerness to jump in and try to solve problems raised implicit questions about his managerial competence. In the traders' eyes, he was becoming a micromanager and a "control freak" who didn't deserve their respect.

Finally, new managers need to demonstrate their *influence*—the ability to deliver and execute the right thing. There is "nothing worse than working for a powerless boss," says a direct report of one new manager I studied. Gaining and wielding influence within the organization is particularly difficult because, as I have noted, new managers are the "little bosses" of the organization. "I was on top of the world when I knew I was finally getting promoted," one new manager says. "I felt like I would be on the top of the ladder I had been climbing for years. But then I suddenly felt like I was at the bottom again—except this time it's not even clear what the rungs are and where I am climbing to."

Once again, we see a new manager fall into the trap of relying too heavily on his formal authority as his source of influence. Instead, he needs to build his influence by creating a web of strong, interdependent relationships, based on credibility and trust, throughout his team and the entire organization—one strand at a time.

Managers must control their direct reports

Most new managers, in part because of insecurity in an unfamiliar role, yearn for compliance from their subordinates. They fear that if they don't establish this early on, their direct reports will walk all over them. As a means of gaining this control, they often rely too much on their formal authority—a technique whose effectiveness is, as we have seen, questionable at best.

But even if they are able to achieve some measure of control, whether through formal authority or authority earned over time, they have achieved a false victory. Compliance does not equal commitment. If people aren't committed, they won't take the initiative. And if subordinates aren't taking the initiative, the manager can't delegate effectively. The direct reports won't take the calculated risks that lead to the continuous change and improvement required by today's turbulent business environment.

Winona Finch, who led the launch of the teen magazine in Latin America, knew she faced a business challenge that would require her team's total support. She had in fact been awarded the job in part because of her personal style, which her superiors hoped would compensate for her lack of experience in the Latin American market and in managing profit-and-loss responsibilities. In addition to being known as a clear thinker, she had a warm and personable way with people. During the project, she successfully leveraged these natural abilities in developing her leadership philosophy and style.

Instead of relying on formal authority to get what she wanted from her team, she exercised influence by creating a culture of inquiry. The result was an organization in which people felt empowered, committed, and accountable for fulfilling the company's vision. "Winona was easygoing and fun," a subordinate says. "But she would ask and ask and ask to get to the bottom of something. You would say something to her, she would say it back to you, and that way everyone was 100% clear on what we were talking about. Once she got the information and knew what you were doing, you had to be consistent. She would say, 'You told me X; why are you doing Y? I'm confused.'" Although she was demanding, she didn't demand that people do things her way. Her subordinates were committed to the team's goals because they were empowered, not ordered, to achieve them.

The more power managers are willing to share with subordinates in this way, the more influence they tend to command. When they lead in a manner that allows their people to take the initiative, they build their own credibility as managers.

Managers must focus on forging good individual relationships

Managing interdependencies and exercising informal authority derived from personal credibility require new managers to build trust, influence, and mutual expectations with a wide array of people. This is often achieved by establishing productive personal relationships. Ultimately, however, the new manager must figure out how to harness the power of a team. Simply focusing on one-on-one relationships with members of the team can undermine that process.

During their first year on the job, many new managers fail to recognize, much less address, their team-building responsibilities. Instead, they conceive of their people-management role as building the most effective relationships they can with each individual subordinate, erroneously equating the management of their team with managing the individuals on the team.

They attend primarily to individual performance and pay little or no attention to team culture and performance. They hardly ever rely on group forums for identifying and solving problems. Some spend too much time with a small number of trusted subordinates, often those who seem most supportive. New managers tend to handle issues, even those with teamwide implications, one-on-one. This leads them to make decisions based on unnecessarily limited information.

In his first week as a sales manager at a Texas software company, Roger Collins was asked by a subordinate for an assigned parking spot that had just become available. The salesman had been at the company for years, and Collins, wanting to get off to a good start with this veteran, said, “Sure, why not?” Within the hour, another salesman, a big moneymaker, stormed into Collins’s office threatening to quit. It seems the shaded parking spot was coveted for pragmatic and symbolic reasons, and the beneficiary of Collins’s casual gesture was widely viewed as incompetent. The manager’s decision was unfathomable to the star.

Collins eventually solved what he regarded as a trivial management problem—“This is not the sort of thing I’m supposed to be worrying about,” he said—but he began to recognize that every decision about individuals affected the team. He had been working on the assumption that if he could establish a good relationship with each person who reported to him, his whole team would function smoothly. What he learned was that supervising each individual was not the same as leading the team. In my research, I repeatedly hear new managers describe situations in which they made an exception for one subordinate—usually with the aim of creating a positive relationship with that person—but ended up regretting the action’s unexpected negative consequences for the team. Grasping this notion can be especially difficult for up-and-comers who have been able to accomplish a great deal on their own.

When new managers focus solely on one-on-one relationships, they neglect a fundamental aspect of effective leadership: harnessing the collective power of the group to improve individual performance and commitment. By shaping team culture—the group's norms and values—a leader can unleash the problem-solving prowess of the diverse talents that make up the team.

Managers must ensure that things run smoothly

Like many managerial myths, this one is partly true but is misleading because it tells only some of the story. Making sure an operation is operating smoothly is an incredibly difficult task, requiring a manager to keep countless balls in the air at all times. Indeed, the complexity of maintaining the status quo can absorb all of a junior manager's time and energy.

But new managers also need to realize they are responsible for recommending and initiating changes that will enhance their groups' performance. Often—and it comes as a surprise to most—this means challenging organizational processes or structures that exist above and beyond their area of formal authority. Only when they understand this part of the job will they begin to address seriously their leadership responsibilities. (See the sidebar "Oh, One More Thing: Create the Conditions for Your Success.")

Oh, One More Thing: Create the Conditions for Your Success

New managers often discover, belatedly, that they are expected to do more than just make sure their groups function smoothly today. They must also recommend and initiate changes that will help their groups do even better in the future.

A new marketing manager at a telecommunications company whom I'll call John Delhorne discovered that his predecessor had failed to make critical investments, so he tried on numerous occasions to convince his immediate superior to increase the marketing budget. He also presented a proposal to acquire a new information system that could allow his team to optimize its marketing initiatives. When he could not persuade his boss to release more money, he hunkered down and focused on changes within his team that would make it as productive as possible under the circumstances. This course seemed prudent, especially because his relationship with his boss, who was taking longer and longer to answer Delhorne's emails, was becoming strained.

When the service failed to meet certain targets, the CEO unceremoniously fired Delhorne because, Delhorne was told, he hadn't been proactive. The CEO chastised Delhorne for "sitting back and not asking for his help" in securing the funds needed to succeed in a critical new market. Delhorne, shocked and hurt, thought the CEO was being grossly unfair. Delhorne contended it wasn't his fault that the company's strategic-planning and budgeting procedures were flawed. The CEO's response: It was Delhorne's responsibility to create the conditions for his success.

In fact, most new managers see themselves as targets of organizational change initiatives, implementing with their groups the changes ordered from above. They don't see themselves as change agents. Hierarchical thinking and their fixation on the authority that comes with being the boss lead them to define their responsibilities too narrowly. Consequently, they tend to blame flawed systems, and the superiors directly responsible for those systems, for their teams' setbacks—and they tend to wait for other people to fix the problems.

But this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of their role within the organization. New managers need to generate changes, both within *and outside* their areas of responsibility, to ensure that their teams can succeed. They need to work to change the context in which their teams operate, ignoring their lack of formal authority.

This broader view benefits the organization as well as the new manager. Organizations must continually revitalize and transform themselves. They can meet these challenges only if they have cadres of effective leaders capable of both managing the complexity of the status quo and initiating change.

New Managers Aren't Alone

As they go through the daunting process of becoming a boss, new managers can gain a tremendous advantage by learning to recognize the misconceptions I've just outlined. But given the multilayered nature of their new responsibilities, they are still going to make mistakes as they try to put together the managerial puzzle—and making mistakes, no matter how important to the learning process, is no fun. They are going to feel pain as their professional identities are stretched and reshaped. As they struggle to learn a new role, they will often feel isolated.

Unfortunately, my research has shown that few new managers ask for help. This is in part the outcome of yet another misconception: The boss is supposed to have all the answers, so seeking help is a sure sign that a new manager is a "promotion mistake." Of course, seasoned managers know that no one has all the answers. The insights a manager does possess come over time, through experience. And, as countless studies show, it is easier to learn on the job if you can draw on the support and assistance of peers and superiors.

Another reason new managers don't seek help is that they perceive the dangers (sometimes more imagined than real) of forging developmental relationships. When you share your anxieties, mistakes, and shortcomings with peers in your part of the organization, there's a risk that the individuals will use that information against you. The same goes for sharing your problems with your superior. The inherent conflict between the roles of evaluator and developer is an age-old dilemma. So new managers need to be creative in finding support. For instance, they might seek out peers who are outside their region or function or in another organization altogether. The problem with bosses, while difficult to solve neatly, can be alleviated. And herein lies a lesson not only for new managers but for experienced bosses, as well.

The new manager avoids turning to her immediate superior for advice because she sees that person as a threat to, rather than an ally in, her development. Because she fears punishment for missteps and failures, she resists seeking the help that might prevent such mistakes, even when she's desperate for it. As one new manager reports:

"I know on one level that I should deal more with my manager because that is what he is there for. He's got the experience, and I probably owe it to him to go to him and tell him what's up. He would probably have some good advice. But it's not safe to share with him. He's an unknown quantity. If you ask too many questions, he may lose confidence in you and think things aren't going very well. He may see that you are a little bit out of control, and then you really have a tough job. Because he'll be down there lickety-split, asking lots of questions about what you are doing, and before you know it, he'll be involved right in the middle of it. That's a really uncomfortable situation. He's the last place I'd go for help."

Such fears are often justified. Many a new manager has regretted trying to establish a mentoring relationship with his boss. "I don't dare even ask a question that could be perceived as naive or stupid," says one. "Once I asked him a question and he made me feel like I was a kindergartner in the business. It was as if he had said, 'That was the dumbest thing I've ever seen. What on earth did you have in mind?'"

This is a tragically lost opportunity for the new manager, the boss, and the organization as a whole. It means that the new manager's boss loses a chance to influence the manager's initial conceptions and misconceptions of her new position and how she should approach it. The new manager loses the chance to draw on organizational assets—from financial resources to information about senior management's priorities—that the superior could best provide.

When a new manager can develop a good relationship with his boss, it can make all the difference in the world—though not necessarily in ways the new manager expects. My research suggests that eventually about half of new managers turn to their bosses for assistance, often because of a looming crisis. Many are relieved to find their superiors more tolerant of their questions and mistakes than they had expected. "He recognized that I was still in the learning mode and was more than willing to help in any way he could," recalls one new manager.

Sometimes, the most expert mentors can seem deceptively hands-off. One manager reports how she learned from an immediate superior: "She is demanding, but she enjoys a reputation for growing people and helping them, not throwing them to the wolves. I wasn't sure after the first 60 days, though. Everything was so hard and I was so frustrated, but she didn't offer to help. It was driving me nuts. When I asked her a question, she asked me a question. I got no answers. Then I saw what she wanted. I had to come in with some ideas about how I would handle the situation, and then she would talk about them with me. She would spend all the time in the world with me."

His experience vividly highlights why it's important for the bosses of new managers to understand—or simply recall—how difficult it is to step into a management role for the first time. Helping a new manager succeed doesn't benefit only that individual. Ensuring the new manager's success is also crucially important to the success of the entire organization.

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What Great Managers Do

by Marcus Buckingham

The best boss I ever had.” That’s a phrase most of us have said or heard at some point, but what does it mean? What sets the great boss apart from the average boss? The literature is rife with provocative writing about the qualities of managers and leaders and whether the two differ, but little has been said about what happens in the thousands of daily interactions and decisions that allow managers to get the best out of their people and win their devotion. What do great managers actually *do*?

In my research, beginning with a survey of 80,000 managers conducted by the Gallup Organization and continuing during the past two years with in-depth studies of a few top performers, I’ve found that while there are as many styles of management as there are managers, there is one quality that sets truly great managers apart from the rest: They discover what is unique about each person and then capitalize on it. Average managers play checkers, while great managers play chess. The difference? In checkers, all the pieces are uniform and move in the same way; they are interchangeable. You need to plan and coordinate their movements, certainly, but they all move at the same pace, on parallel paths. In chess, each type of piece moves in a different way, and you can't play if you don't know how each piece moves. More important, you won't win if you don't think carefully about how you move the pieces. Great managers know and value the unique abilities and even the eccentricities of their employees, and they learn how best to integrate them into a coordinated plan of attack.

This is the exact opposite of what great leaders do. Great leaders discover what is universal and capitalize on it. Their job is to rally people toward a better future. Leaders can succeed in this only when they can cut through differences of race, sex, age, nationality, and personality and, using stories and celebrating heroes, tap into those very few needs we all share. The job of a manager, meanwhile, is to turn one person's particular talent into performance. Managers will succeed only when they can identify and deploy the differences among people, challenging each employee to excel in his or her own way. This doesn't mean a leader can't be a manager or vice versa. But to excel at one or both, you must be aware of the very different skills each role requires.

The Game of Chess

What does the chess game look like in action? When I visited Michelle Miller, the manager who opened Walgreens' 4,000th store, I found the wall of her back office papered with work schedules. Michelle's store in Redondo Beach, California, employs people with sharply different skills and potentially disruptive differences in personality. A critical part of her job, therefore, is to put people into roles and shifts that will allow them to shine—and to avoid putting clashing personalities together. At the same time, she needs to find ways for individuals to grow.

Idea in Brief

You've spent months coaching that employee to treat customers better, work more independently, or get organized—all to no avail.

How to make better use of your precious time? Do what great managers do: Instead of trying to change your employees, identify their unique abilities (and even their eccentricities)—then help them use those qualities to excel in their own way.

You'll need these three tactics:

- **Continuously tweak roles to capitalize on individual strengths.** One Walgreens store manager put a laconic but highly organized employee in charge of restocking aisles—freeing up more sociable employees to serve customers.
- **Pull the triggers that activate employees' strengths.** Offer incentives such as time spent with you, opportunities to work independently, and recognition in forms each employee values most.
- **Tailor coaching to unique learning styles.** Give "analyzers" the information they need before starting a task. Start "doers" off with simple tasks, then gradually raise the bar. Let "watchers" ride shotgun with your most experienced performers.

The payoff for capitalizing on employees' unique strengths? You save time. Your people take ownership for improving their skills. And you teach employees to value differences—building a powerful sense of team.

There's Jeffrey, for example, a "goth rocker" whose hair is shaved on one side and long enough on the other side to cover his face. Michelle almost didn't hire him because he couldn't quite look her in the eye during his interview, but he wanted the hard-to-cover night shift, so she decided to give him a chance. After a couple of months, she noticed that when she gave Jeffrey a vague assignment, such as "Straighten up the merchandise in every aisle," what should have been a two-hour job would take him all night—and wouldn't be done very well. But if she gave him a more specific task, such as "Put up all the risers for Christmas," all the risers would be symmetrical, with the right merchandise on each one, perfectly priced, labeled, and "faced" (turned toward the customer). Give Jeffrey a generic task, and he would struggle. Give him one that forced him to be accurate and analytical, and he would excel. This, Michelle concluded, was Jeffrey's forte. So, as any good manager would do, she told him what she had deduced about him and praised him for his good work.

And a good manager would have left it at that. But Michelle knew she could get more out of Jeffrey. So she devised a scheme to reassign responsibilities across the entire store to capitalize on his unique strengths. In every Walgreens, there is a responsibility called "resets and revisions." A reset involves stocking an aisle with new merchandise, a task that usually coincides with a predictable change in customer buying patterns (at the end of summer, for example, the stores will replace sun creams and lip balms with allergy medicines). A revision is a less time-consuming but more frequent version of the same thing: Replace these cartons of toothpaste with this new and improved variety. Display this new line of detergent at this end of the row. Each aisle requires some form of revision at least once a week.

In most Walgreens stores, each employee "owns" one aisle, where she is responsible not only for serving customers but also for facing the merchandise, keeping the aisle clean and orderly, tagging items with a Telxon gun, and conducting all resets and revisions. This arrangement is simple and efficient, and it affords each employee a sense of personal responsibility. But Michelle decided that since Jeffrey was so good at resets and revisions—and didn't enjoy interacting with customers—this should be his full-time job, in every single aisle.

It was a challenge. One week's worth of revisions requires a binder three inches thick. But Michelle reasoned that not only would Jeffrey be excited by the challenge and get better and better with practice, but other employees would be freed from what they considered a chore and have more time to greet and serve customers. The store's performance proved her right. After the reorganization, Michelle saw not only increases in sales and profit but also in that most critical performance metric, customer satisfaction. In the subsequent four months, her store netted perfect scores in Walgreens' mystery shopper program.

So far, so very good. Sadly, it didn't last. This "perfect" arrangement depended on Jeffrey remaining content, and he didn't. With his success at doing resets and revisions, his confidence grew, and six months into the job, he wanted to move into management. Michelle wasn't disappointed by this, however; she was intrigued. She had watched Jeffrey's progress closely and had already decided that he might do well as a manager, though he wouldn't be a particularly emotive one. Besides, like any good chess player, she had been thinking a couple of moves ahead.

Over in the cosmetics aisle worked an employee named Genoa. Michelle saw Genoa as something of a double threat. Not only was she adept at putting customers at ease—she remembered their names, asked good questions, was welcoming yet professional when answering the phone—but she was also a neatnik. The cosmetics department was always perfectly faced, every product remained aligned, and everything was arranged just so. Her aisle was sexy: It made you want to reach out and touch the merchandise.

To capitalize on these twin talents, and to accommodate Jeffrey's desire for promotion, Michelle shuffled the roles within the store once again. She split Jeffrey's reset and revision job in two and gave the "revision" part of it to Genoa so that the whole store could now benefit from her ability to arrange merchandise attractively. But Michelle didn't want the store to miss out on Genoa's gift for customer service, so Michelle asked her to focus on the revision role only between 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m., and after that, when the store began to fill with customers on their lunch breaks, Genoa should shift her focus over to them.

She kept the reset role with Jeffrey. Assistant managers don't usually have an ongoing responsibility in the store, but, Michelle reasoned, he was now so good and so fast at tearing an aisle apart and rebuilding it that he could easily finish a major reset during a five-hour stint, so he could handle resets along with his managerial responsibilities.

By the time you read this, the Jeffrey–Genoa configuration has probably outlived its usefulness, and Michelle has moved on to design other effective and inventive configurations. The ability to keep tweaking roles to capitalize on the uniqueness of each person is the essence of great management.

A manager's approach to capitalizing on differences can vary tremendously from place to place. Walk into the back office at another Walgreens, this one in San Jose, California, managed by Jim Kawashima, and you won't see a single work schedule. Instead, the walls are covered with sales figures and statistics, the best of them circled with red felt-tip pen, and dozens of photographs of sales contest winners, most featuring a customer service representative named Manjit.

Manjit outperforms her peers consistently. When I first heard about her, she had just won a competition in Walgreens' suggestive selling program to sell the most units of Gillette deodorant in a month. The national average was 300; Manjit had sold 1,600. Disposable cameras, toothpaste, batteries—you name it, she could sell it. And Manjit won contest after contest despite working the graveyard shift, from 12:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., during which she met significantly fewer customers than did her peers.

Manjit hadn't always been such an exceptional performer. She became stunningly successful only when Jim, who has made a habit of resuscitating troubled stores, came on board. What did Jim do to initiate the change in Manjit? He quickly picked up on her idiosyncrasies and figured out how to translate them into outstanding performance. For example, back in India, Manjit was an athlete—a runner and a weight lifter—and had always thrilled to the challenge of measured performance. When I interviewed her, one of the first things out of her mouth was, "On Saturday, I sold 343 low-carb candy bars. On Sunday, I sold 367. Yesterday, 110, and today, 105." I asked if she always knows how well she's doing. "Oh yes," she replied. "Every day I check Mr. K's charts. Even on my day off, I make a point to come in and check my numbers."

Manjit loves to win and revels in public recognition. Hence, Jim's walls are covered with charts and figures, Manjit's scores are always highlighted in red, and there are photos documenting her success. Another manager might have asked Manjit to curb her enthusiasm for the limelight and give someone else a chance. Jim found a way to capitalize on it.

But what about Jim's other staff members? Instead of being resentful of Manjit's public recognition, the other employees came to understand that Jim took the time to see them as individuals and evaluate them based on their personal strengths. They also knew that Manjit's success spoke well of the entire store, so her success galvanized the team. In fact, before long, the pictures of Manjit began to include other employees from the store, too. After a few months, the San Jose location was ranked number one out of 4,000 in Walgreens' suggestive selling program.

The Research

To gather the raw material for my book *The One Thing You Need to Know: About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success,* from which this article has been adapted, I chose an approach that is rather different from the one I used for my previous books. For 17 years, I had the good fortune to work with the Gallup Organization, one of the most respected research firms in the world. During that time, I was given the opportunity to interview some of the world's best leaders, managers, teachers, salespeople, stockbrokers, lawyers, and public servants. These interviews were a part of large-scale studies that involved surveying groups of people in the hopes of finding broad patterns in the data. For my book, I used this foundation as the jumping-off point for deeper, more individualized research.

In each of the three areas targeted in the book—managing, leading, and sustained individual success—I first identified one or two people in various roles and fields who had measurably, consistently, and dramatically outperformed their peers. These individuals included Myrtle Potter, president of commercial operations for Genentech, who transformed a failing drug into the highest selling prescription drug in the world; Sir Terry Leahy, the president of the European retailing giant Tesco; Manjit, the customer service representative from Jim Kawashima's top-performing Walgreens store in San Jose, California, who sold more than 1,600 units of Gillette deodorant in one month; and David Koepp, the prolific screenwriter who penned such blockbusters as *Jurassic Park*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Spider-Man*.

What interested me about these high achievers was the practical, seemingly banal details of their actions and their choices. Why did Myrtle Potter repeatedly turn down promotions before taking on the challenge of turning around that failing drug? Why did Terry Leahy rely more on the memories of his working-class upbringing to define his company's strategy than on the results of customer surveys or focus groups? Manjit works the night shift, and one of her hobbies is weight lifting. Are those factors relevant to her performance? What were these special people doing that made them so very good at their roles?

Once these many details were duly noted and recorded, they slowly came together to reveal the "one thing" at the core of great managing, great leading, and sustained individual success.

Great Managers Are Romantics

Think back to Michelle. Her creative choreography may sound like a last resort, an attempt to make the best of a bad hire. It's not. Jeffrey and Genoa are not mediocre employees, and capitalizing on each person's uniqueness is a tremendously powerful tool.

First, identifying and capitalizing on each person's uniqueness saves time. No employee, however talented, is perfectly well-rounded. Michelle could have spent untold hours coaching Jeffrey and cajoling him into smiling at, making friends with, and remembering the names of customers, but she probably would have seen little result for her efforts. Her time was much better spent carving out a role that took advantage of Jeffrey's natural abilities.

Second, capitalizing on uniqueness makes each person more accountable. Michelle didn't just praise Jeffrey for his ability to execute specific assignments. She challenged him to make this ability the cornerstone of his contribution to the store, to take ownership for this ability, to practice it, and to refine it.

Third, capitalizing on what is unique about each person builds a stronger sense of team, because it creates interdependency. It helps people appreciate one another's particular skills and learn that their coworkers can fill in where they are lacking. In short, it makes people need one another. The old cliché is that there's no "I" in "team." But as Michael Jordan once said, "There may be no 'I' in 'team,' but there is in 'win.'"

Finally, when you capitalize on what is unique about each person, you introduce a healthy degree of disruption into your world. You shuffle existing hierarchies: If Jeffrey is in charge of all resets and revisions in the store, should he now command more or less respect than an assistant manager? You also shuffle existing assumptions about who is allowed to do what: If Jeffrey devises new methods of resetting an aisle, does he have to ask permission to try these out, or can he experiment on his own? And you shuffle existing beliefs about where the true expertise lies: If Genoa comes up with a way of arranging new merchandise that she thinks is more appealing than the method suggested by the “planogram” sent down from Walgreens headquarters, does her expertise trump the planners back at corporate? These questions will challenge Walgreens’ orthodoxies and thus will help the company become more inquisitive, more intelligent, more vital, and, despite its size, more able to duck and weave into the future.

All that said, the reason great managers focus on uniqueness isn’t just because it makes good business sense. They do it because they can’t help it. Like Shelley and Keats, the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, great managers are fascinated with individuality for its own sake. Fine shadings of personality, though they may be invisible to some and frustrating to others, are crystal clear to and highly valued by great managers. They could no more ignore these subtleties than ignore their own needs and desires. Figuring out what makes people tick is simply in their nature.

The Elusive “One Thing”

It’s bold to characterize anything as the explanation or solution, so it’s a risky move to make such definitive assertions as “this is the one thing all great managers do.” But with enough research and focus, it is possible to identify that elusive “one thing.”

I like to think of the concept of “one thing” as a “controlling insight.” Controlling insights don’t explain all outcomes or events; they serve as the best explanation of the greatest number of events. Such insights help you know which of your actions will have the most far-reaching influence in virtually every situation.

For a concept to emerge as the single controlling insight, it must pass three tests. First, it must be applicable across a wide range of situations. Take leadership as an example. Lately, much has been made of the notion that there is no one best way to lead and that instead, the most effective leadership style depends on the circumstance. While there is no doubt that different situations require different actions from a leader, that doesn’t mean the most insightful thing you can say about leadership is that it’s situational. With enough focus, you can identify the one thing that underpins successful leadership across all situations and all styles.

Second, a controlling insight must serve as a multiplier. In any equation, some factors will have only an additive value: When you focus your actions on these factors, you see some incremental improvement. The controlling insight should be more powerful. It should show you how to get exponential improvement. For example, good managing is the result of a combination of many actions—selecting talented employees, setting clear expectations, catching people doing things right, and so on—but none of these factors qualifies as the “one thing” that great managers do, because even when done well, these actions merely prevent managers from chasing their best employees away.

Finally, the controlling insight must guide action. It must point to precise things that can be done to create better outcomes more consistently. Insights that managers can act on—rather than simply ruminate over—are the ones that can make all the difference.

The Three Levers

Although the Romantics were mesmerized by differences, at some point, managers need to rein in their inquisitiveness, gather up what they know about a person, and put the employee's idiosyncrasies to use. To that end, there are three things you must know about someone to manage her well: her strengths, the triggers that activate those strengths, and how she learns.

Make the most of strengths

It takes time and effort to gain a full appreciation of an employee's strengths and weaknesses. The great manager spends a good deal of time outside the office walking around, watching each person's reactions to events, listening, and taking mental notes about what each individual is drawn to and what each person struggles with. There's no substitute for this kind of observation, but you can obtain a lot of information about a person by asking a few simple, open-ended questions and listening carefully to the answers. Two queries in particular have proven most revealing when it comes to identifying strengths and weaknesses, and I recommend asking them of all new hires —and revisiting the questions periodically.

To identify a person's strengths, first ask, "What was the best day at work you've had in the past three months?" Find out what the person was doing and why he enjoyed it so much. Remember: A strength is not merely something you are good at. In fact, it might be something you aren't good at yet. It might be just a predilection, something you find so intrinsically satisfying that you look forward to doing it again and again and getting better at it over time. This question will prompt your employee to start thinking about his interests and abilities from this perspective.

To identify a person's weaknesses, just invert the question: "What was the worst day you've had at work in the past three months?" And then probe for details about what he was doing and why it grated on him so much. As with a strength, a weakness is not merely something you are bad at (in fact, you might be quite competent at it). It is something that drains you of energy, an activity that you never look forward to doing and that when you are doing it, all you can think about is stopping.

Although you're keeping an eye out for both the strengths and weaknesses of your employees, your focus should be on their strengths. Conventional wisdom holds that self-awareness is a good thing and that it's the job of the manager to identify weaknesses and create a plan for overcoming them. But research by Albert Bandura, the father of social learning theory, has shown that self-assurance (labeled "self-efficacy" by cognitive psychologists), not self-awareness, is the strongest predictor of a person's ability to set high goals, to persist in the face of obstacles, to bounce back when reversals occur, and, ultimately, to achieve the goals they set. By contrast, self-awareness has not been shown to be a predictor of any of these outcomes, and in some cases, it appears to retard them.

Great managers seem to understand this instinctively. They know that their job is not to arm each employee with a dispassionately accurate understanding of the limits of her strengths and the liabilities of her weaknesses but to reinforce her self-assurance. That's why great managers focus on strengths. When a person succeeds, the great manager doesn't praise her hard work. Even if there's some exaggeration in the statement, he tells her that she succeeded because she has become so good at deploying her specific strengths. This, the manager knows, will strengthen the employee's self-assurance and make her more optimistic and more resilient in the face of challenges to come.

The focus-on-strengths approach might create in the employee a modicum of overconfidence, but great managers mitigate this by emphasizing the size and the difficulty of the employee's goals. They know that their primary objective is to create in each employee a specific state of mind: one that includes a realistic assessment of the difficulty of the obstacle ahead but an unrealistically optimistic belief in her ability to overcome it.

And what if the employee fails? Assuming the failure is not attributable to factors beyond her control, always explain failure as a lack of effort, even if this is only partially accurate. This will obscure self-doubt and give her something to work on as she faces up to the next challenge.

Repeated failure, of course, may indicate weakness where a role requires strength. In such cases, there are four approaches for overcoming weaknesses. If the problem amounts to a lack of skill or knowledge, that's easy to solve: Simply offer the relevant training, allow some time for the employee to incorporate the new skills, and look for signs of improvement. If her performance doesn't get better, you'll know that the reason she's struggling is because she is missing certain talents, a deficit no amount of skill or knowledge training is likely to fix. You'll have to find a way to manage around this weakness and neutralize it.

Which brings us to the second strategy for overcoming an employee weakness. Can you find her a partner, someone whose talents are strong in precisely the areas where hers are weak? Here's how this strategy can look in action. As vice president of merchandising for the women's clothing retailer Ann Taylor, Judi Langley found that tensions were rising between her and one of her merchandising managers, Claudia (not her real name), whose analytical mind and intense nature created an overpowering "need to know." If Claudia learned of something before Judi had a chance to review it with her, she would become deeply frustrated. Given the speed with which decisions were made, and given Judi's busy schedule, this happened frequently. Judi was concerned that Claudia's irritation was unsettling the whole product team, not to mention earning the employee a reputation as a malcontent.

An average manager might have identified this behavior as a weakness and lectured Claudia on how to control her need for information. Judi, however, realized that this "weakness" was an aspect of Claudia's greatest strength: her analytical mind. Claudia would never be able to rein it in, at least not for long. So Judi looked for a strategy that would honor and support Claudia's need to know, while channeling it more productively. Judi decided to act as Claudia's information partner, and she committed to leaving Claudia a voice mail at the end of each day with a brief update. To make sure nothing fell through the cracks, they set up two live "touch base" conversations per week. This solution managed Claudia's expectations and assured her that she would get the information she needed, if not exactly when she wanted it, then at least at frequent and predictable intervals. Giving Claudia a partner neutralized the negative manifestations of her strength, allowing her to focus her analytical mind on her work. (Of course, in most cases, the partner would need to be someone other than a manager.)

Should the perfect partner prove hard to find, try this third strategy: Insert into the employee's world a technique that helps accomplish through discipline what the person can't accomplish through instinct. I met one very successful screenwriter and director who had struggled with telling other professionals, such as composers and directors of photography, that their work was not up to snuff. So he devised a mental trick: He now imagines what the "god of art" would want and uses this imaginary entity as a source of strength. In his mind, he no longer imposes his own opinion on his colleagues but rather tells himself (and them) that an authoritative third party has weighed in.

What You Need to Know About Each of Your Direct Reports

- What are his or her strengths?
- What are the triggers that activate those strengths?
- What is or her learning style?

If training produces no improvement, if complementary partnering proves impractical, and if no nifty discipline technique can be found, you are going to have to try the fourth and final strategy, which is to rearrange the employee's working world to render his weakness irrelevant, as Michelle Miller did with Jeffrey. This strategy will require of you, first, the creativity to envision a more effective arrangement and, second, the courage to make that arrangement work. But as Michelle's experience revealed, the payoff that may come in the form of increased employee productivity and engagement is well worth it.

Trigger good performance

A person's strengths aren't always on display. Sometimes they require precise triggering to turn them on. Squeeze the right trigger, and a person will push himself harder and persevere in the face of resistance. Squeeze the wrong one, and the person may well shut down. This can be tricky because triggers come in myriad and mysterious forms. One employee's trigger might be tied to the time of day (he is a night owl, and his strengths only kick in after 3 p.m.). Another employee's trigger might be tied to time with you, the boss (even though he's worked with you for more than five years, he still needs you to check in with him every day, or he feels he's being ignored). Another worker's trigger might be just the opposite—independence (she's only worked for you for six months, but if you check in with her even once a week, she feels micromanaged).

The most powerful trigger by far is recognition, not money. If you're not convinced of this, start ignoring one of your highly paid stars, and watch what happens. Most managers are aware that employees respond well to recognition. Great managers refine and extend this insight. They realize that each employee plays to a slightly different audience. To excel as a manager, you must be able to match the employee to the audience he values most. One employee's audience might be his peers; the best way to praise him would be to stand him up in front of his coworkers and publicly celebrate his achievement. Another's favorite audience might be you; the most powerful recognition would be a one-on-one conversation where you tell him quietly but vividly why he is such a valuable member of the team. Still another employee might define himself by his expertise; his most prized form of recognition would be some type of professional or technical award. Yet another might value feedback only from customers, in which case a picture of the employee with her best customer or a letter to her from the customer would be the best form of recognition.

Given how much personal attention it requires, tailoring praise to fit the person is mostly a manager's responsibility. But organizations can take a cue from this, too. There's no reason why a large company can't take this individualized approach to recognition and apply it to every employee. Of all the companies I've encountered, the North American division of HSBC, a London-based bank, has done the best job of this. Each year it presents its top individual consumer-lending performers with its Dream Awards. Each winner receives a unique prize. During the year, managers ask employees to identify what they would like to receive should they win. The prize value is capped at $10,000, and it cannot be redeemed as cash, but beyond those two restrictions, each employee is free to pick the prize he wants. At the end of the year, the company holds a Dream Awards gala, during which it shows a video about the winning employee and why he selected his particular prize.

You can imagine the impact these personalized prizes have on HSBC employees. It's one thing to be brought up on stage and given yet another plaque. It's another thing when, in addition to public recognition of your performance, you receive a college tuition fund for your child, or the Harley-Davidson motorcycle you've always dreamed of, or—the prize everyone at the company still talks about—the airline tickets to fly you and your family back to Mexico to visit the grandmother you haven't seen in 10 years.

Tailor to learning styles

Although there are many learning styles, a careful review of adult learning theory reveals that three styles predominate. These three are not mutually exclusive; certain employees may rely on a combination of two or perhaps all three. Nonetheless, staying attuned to each employee's style or styles will help focus your coaching.

First, there's analyzing. Claudia from Ann Taylor is an analyzer. She understands a task by taking it apart, examining its elements, and reconstructing it piece by piece. Because every single component of a task is important in her eyes, she craves information. She needs to absorb all there is to know about a subject before she can begin to feel comfortable with it. If she doesn't feel she has enough information, she will dig and push until she gets it. She will read the assigned reading. She will attend the required classes. She will take good notes. She will study. And she will still want more.

The best way to teach an analyzer is to give her ample time in the classroom. Role-play with her. Do postmortem exercises with her. Break her performance down into its component parts so she can carefully build it back up. Always allow her time to prepare.

The analyzer hates mistakes. A commonly held view is that mistakes fuel learning, but for the analyzer, this just isn't true. In fact, the reason she prepares so diligently is to minimize the possibility of mistakes. So don't expect to teach her much by throwing her into a new situation and telling her to wing it.

The opposite is true for the second dominant learning style, doing. While the most powerful learning moments for the analyzer occur prior to the performance, the doer's most powerful moments occur during the performance. Trial and error are integral to this learning process. Jeffrey, from Michelle Miller's store, is a doer. He learns the most while he's in the act of figuring things out for himself. For him, preparation is a dry, uninspiring activity. So rather than role-play with someone like Jeffrey, pick a specific task within his role that is simple but real, give him a brief overview of the outcomes you want, and get out of his way. Then gradually increase the degree of each task's complexity until he has mastered every aspect of his role. He may make a few mistakes along the way, but for the doer, mistakes are the raw material for learning.

Finally, there's watching. Watchers won't learn much through role-playing. They won't learn by doing, either. Since most formal training programs incorporate both of these elements, watchers are often viewed as rather poor students. That may be true, but they aren't necessarily poor learners.

Watchers can learn a great deal when they are given the chance to see the total performance. Studying the individual parts of a task is about as meaningful for them as studying the individual pixels of a digital photograph. What's important for this type of learner is the content of each pixel, its position relative to all the others. Watchers are only able to see this when they view the complete picture.

As it happens, this is the way I learn. Years ago, when I first began interviewing, I struggled to learn the skill of creating a report on a person after I had interviewed him. I understood all the required steps, but I couldn't seem to put them together. Some of my colleagues could knock out a report in an hour; for me, it would take the better part of a day. Then one afternoon, as I was staring morosely into my Dictaphone, I overheard the voice of the analyst next door. He was talking so rapidly that I initially thought he was on the phone. Only after a few minutes did I realize that he was dictating a report. This was the first time I had heard someone "in the act." I'd seen the finished results countless times, since reading the reports of others was the way we were supposed to learn, but I'd never actually heard another analyst in the act of creation. It was a revelation. I finally saw how everything should come together into a coherent whole. I remember picking up my Dictaphone, mimicking the cadence and even the accent of my neighbor, and feeling the words begin to flow.

If you're trying to teach a watcher, by far the most effective technique is to get her out of the classroom. Take her away from the manuals, and make her ride shotgun with one of your most experienced performers.

. . .

We've seen, in the stories of great managers like Michelle Miller and Judi Langley, that at the very heart of their success lies an appreciation for individuality. This is not to say that managers don't need other skills. They need to be able to hire well, to set expectations, and to interact productively with their own bosses, just to name a few. But what they do—instinctively—is play chess. Mediocre managers assume (or hope) that their employees will all be motivated by the same things and driven by the same goals, that they will desire the same kinds of relationships and learn in roughly the same way. They define the behaviors they expect from people and tell them to work on behaviors that don't come naturally. They praise those who can overcome their natural styles to conform to preset ideas. In short, they believe the manager's job is to mold, or transform, each employee into the perfect version of the role.

Great managers don't try to change a person's style. They never try to push a knight to move in the same way as a bishop. They know that their employees will differ in how they think, how they build relationships, how altruistic they are, how patient they can be, how much of an expert they need to be, how prepared they need to feel, what drives them, what challenges them, and what their goals are. These differences of trait and talent are like blood types: They cut across the superficial variations of race, sex, and age and capture the essential uniqueness of each individual.

Like blood types, the majority of these differences are enduring and resistant to change. A manager's most precious resource is time, and great managers know that the most effective way to invest their time is to identify exactly how each employee is different and then to figure out how best to incorporate those enduring idiosyncrasies into the overall plan.

To excel at managing others, you must bring that insight to your actions and interactions. Always remember that great managing is about release, not transformation. It's about constantly tweaking your environment so that the unique contribution, the unique needs, and the unique style of each employee can be given free rein. Your success as a manager will depend almost entirely on your ability to do this.

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How Leaders Create and Use Networks

by Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter

When Henrik Balmer became the production manager and a board member of a newly bought-out cosmetics firm, improving his network was the last thing on his mind. The main problem he faced was time: Where would he find the hours to guide his team through a major upgrade of the production process and then think about strategic issues like expanding the business? The only way he could carve out time and still get home to his family at a decent hour was to lock himself—literally—in his office. Meanwhile, there were day-to-day issues to resolve, like a recurring conflict with his sales director over custom orders that compromised production efficiency. Networking, which Henrik defined as the unpleasant task of trading favors with strangers, was a luxury he could not afford. But when a new acquisition was presented at a board meeting without his input, he abruptly realized he was out of the loop—not just inside the company, but outside, too—at a moment when his future in the company was at stake.

Henrik's case is not unusual. Over the past two years, we have been following a cohort of 30 managers making their way through what we call the leadership transition, an inflection point in their careers that challenges them to rethink both themselves and their roles. In the process, we've found that networking—creating a fabric of personal contacts who will provide support, feedback, insight, resources, and information—is simultaneously one of the most self-evident and one of the most dreaded developmental challenges that aspiring leaders must address.

Their discomfort is understandable. Typically, managers rise through the ranks by dint of a strong command of the technical elements of their jobs and a nose-to-the-grindstone focus on accomplishing their teams' objectives. When challenged to move beyond their functional specialties and address strategic issues facing the overall business, many managers do not immediately grasp that this will involve relational—not analytical—tasks. Nor do they easily understand that exchanges and interactions with a diverse array of current and potential stakeholders are not distractions from their "real work" but are actually at the heart of their new leadership roles.

Like Henrik (whose identity we've disguised, along with all the other managers we describe here), a majority of the managers we work with say that they find networking insincere or manipulative—at best, an elegant way of using people. Not surprisingly, for every manager who instinctively constructs and maintains a useful network, we see several who struggle to overcome this innate resistance. Yet the alternative to networking is to fail—either in reaching for a leadership position or in succeeding at it.

Idea in Brief

What separates successful leaders from the rest of the pack? Networking: creating a tissue of personal contacts to provide the support, feedback, and resources needed to get things done.

Yet many leaders avoid networking. Some think they don't have time for it. Others disdain it as manipulative.

To succeed as a leader, Ibarra and Hunter recommend building three types of networks:

- **Operational**—people you need to accomplish your assigned, routine tasks
- **Personal**—kindred spirits outside your organization who can help you with personal advancement
- **Strategic**—people outside your control who will enable you to reach key organizational objectives

You need all three types of networks. But to *really* succeed, you must master strategic networking—by interacting regularly with people who can open your eyes to new business opportunities and help you capitalize on them. Build your strategic network, and burnish your own—and your company's—performance.

Watching our emerging leaders approach this daunting task, we discovered that three distinct but interdependent forms of networking—*operational, personal*, and *strategic*—played a vital role in their transitions. The first helped them manage current internal responsibilities, the second boosted their personal development, and the third opened their eyes to new business directions and the stakeholders they would need to enlist. While our managers differed in how well they pursued operational and personal networking, we discovered that almost all of them underutilized strategic networking. In this article, we describe key features of each networking form (summarized in the table "The three forms of networking") and, using our managers' experiences, explain how a three-pronged networking strategy can become part and parcel of a new leader's development plan.

The three forms of networking

Managers who think they are adept at networking are often operating only at an operational or personal level.
Effective leaders learn to employ networks for strategic purposes.

	Operational	Personal	Strategic
Purpose	Getting work done efficiently; maintaining the capacities and functions required of the group	Enhancing personal and professional development; providing referrals to useful information and contacts	Figuring out future priorities and challenges; getting stakeholder support for them
Location and temporal orientation	Contacts are mostly internal and oriented toward current demands.	Contacts are mostly external and oriented toward current interests and future potential interests.	Contacts are internal and external and oriented toward the future.
Players and recruitment	Key contacts are relatively nondiscretionary; they are prescribed mostly by the task and	Key contacts are mostly discretionary; it is not always clear who is relevant.	Key contacts follow from the strategic context and the organizational environment, but

	organizational structure, so it is very clear who is relevant.		specific membership is discretionary; it is not always clear who is relevant.
Network attributes and key behaviors	Depth: building strong working relationships	Breadth: reaching out to contacts who can make referrals	Leverage: creating inside-outside links

Operational Networking

All managers need to build good working relationships with the people who can help them do their jobs. The number and breadth of people involved can be impressive—such operational networks include not only direct reports and superiors but also peers within an operational unit, other internal players with the power to block or support a project, and key outsiders such as suppliers, distributors, and customers. The purpose of this type of networking is to ensure coordination and cooperation among people who have to know and trust one another in order to accomplish their immediate tasks. That isn't always easy, but it is relatively straightforward, because the task provides focus and a clear criterion for membership in the network: Either you're necessary to the job and helping to get it done, or you're not.

Although operational networking was the form that came most naturally to the managers we studied, nearly every one had important blind spots regarding people and groups they depended on to make things happen. In one case, Alistair, an accounting manager who worked in an entrepreneurial firm with several hundred employees, was suddenly promoted by the company's founder to financial director and given a seat on the board. He was both the youngest and the least-experienced board member, and his instinctive response to these new responsibilities was to reestablish his functional credentials. Acting on a hint from the founder that the company might go public, Alistair undertook a reorganization of the accounting department that would enable the books to withstand close scrutiny. Alistair succeeded brilliantly in upgrading his team's capabilities, but he missed the fact that only a minority of the seven-person board shared the founder's ambition. A year into Alistair's tenure, discussion about whether to take the company public polarized the board, and he discovered that all that time cleaning up the books might have been better spent sounding out his codirectors.

One of the problems with an exclusive reliance on operational networks is that they are usually geared toward meeting objectives as assigned, not toward asking the strategic question, "What *should* we be doing?" By the same token, managers do not exercise as much personal choice in assembling operational relationships as they do in weaving personal and strategic networks, because to a large extent the right relationships are prescribed by the job and organizational structure. Thus, most operational networking occurs within an organization, and ties are determined in large part by routine, short-term demands. Relationships formed with outsiders, such as board members, customers, and regulators, are directly task-related and tend to be bounded and constrained by demands determined at a higher level. Of course, an individual manager can choose to deepen and develop the ties to different extents, and all managers exercise discretion over who gets priority attention. It's the quality of relationships—the rapport and mutual trust—that gives an operational network its power. Nonetheless, the substantial constraints on network membership mean these connections are unlikely to deliver value to managers beyond assistance with the task at hand.

The typical manager in our group was more concerned with sustaining cooperation within the existing network than with building relationships to face nonroutine or unforeseen challenges. But as a manager moves into a leadership role, his or her network must reorient itself externally and toward the future.

Personal Networking

We observed that once aspiring leaders like Alistair awaken to the dangers of an excessively internal focus, they begin to seek kindred spirits outside their organizations. Simultaneously, they become aware of the limitations of their social skills, such as a lack of knowledge about professional domains beyond their own, which makes it difficult for them to find common ground with people outside their usual circles. Through professional associations, alumni groups, clubs, and personal interest communities, managers gain new perspectives that allow them to advance in their careers. This is what we mean by personal networking.

Many of the managers we study question why they should spend precious time on an activity so indirectly related to the work at hand. Why widen one's circle of casual acquaintances when there isn't time even for urgent tasks? The answer is that these contacts provide important referrals, information, and, often, developmental support such as coaching and mentoring. A newly appointed factory director, for example, faced with a turnaround-or-close-down situation that was paralyzing his staff, joined a business organization—and through it met a lawyer who became his counsel in the turnaround. Buoyed by his success, he networked within his company's headquarters in search of someone who had dealt with a similar crisis. Eventually, he found two mentors.

A personal network can also be a safe space for personal development and as such can provide a foundation for strategic networking. The experience of Timothy, a principal in a midsize software company, is a good example. Like his father, Timothy stuttered. When he had the opportunity to prepare for meetings, his stutter was not an issue, but spontaneous encounters inside and outside the company were dreadfully painful. To solve this problem, he began accepting at least two invitations per week to the social gatherings he had assiduously ignored before. Before each event, he asked who else had been invited and did background research on the other guests so that he could initiate conversations. The hardest part, he said, was "getting through the door." Once inside, his interest in the conversations helped him forget himself and master his stutter. As his stutter diminished, he also applied himself to networking across his company, whereas previously he had taken refuge in his technical expertise. Like Timothy, several of our emerging leaders successfully used personal networking as a relatively safe way to expose problems and seek insight into solutions—safe, that is, compared with strategic networking, in which the stakes are far higher.

Personal networks are largely external, made up of discretionary links to people with whom we have something in common. As a result, what makes a personal network powerful is its referral potential. According to the famous six degrees of separation principle, our personal contacts are valuable to the extent that they help us reach, in as few connections as possible, the far-off person who has the information we need.

In watching managers struggle to widen their professional relationships in ways that feel both natural and legitimate to them, we repeatedly saw them shift their time and energy from operational to personal networking. For people who have rarely looked outside their organizations, this is an important first step, one that fosters a deeper understanding of themselves and the environments in which they move. Ultimately, however, personal networking alone won't propel managers through the leadership transition. Aspiring leaders may find people who awaken new interests but fail to become comfortable with the power players at the level above them. Or they may achieve new influence within a professional community but fail to harness those ties in the service of organizational goals. That's why managers who know they need to develop their networking skills, and make a real effort to do so, nonetheless may end up feeling like they have wasted their time and energy. As we'll see, personal networking will not help a manager through the leadership transition unless he or she learns how to bring those connections to bear on organizational strategy.

Strategic Networking

When managers begin the delicate transition from functional manager to business leader, they must start to concern themselves with broad strategic issues. Lateral and vertical relationships with other functional and business unit managers —all people outside their immediate control—become a lifeline for figuring out how their own contributions fit into the big picture. Thus strategic networking plugs the aspiring leader into a set of relationships and information sources that collectively embody the power to achieve personal and organizational goals.

Operating beside players with diverse affiliations, backgrounds, objectives, and incentives requires a manager to formulate business rather than functional objectives, and to work through the coalitions and networks needed to sell ideas and compete for resources. Consider Sophie, a manager who, after rising steadily through the ranks in logistics and distribution, was stupefied to learn that the CEO was considering a radical reorganization of her function that would strip her of some responsibilities. Rewarded to date for incremental annual improvements, she had failed to notice shifting priorities in the wider market and the resulting internal shuffle for resources and power at the higher levels of her company. Although she had built a loyal, high-performing team, she had few relationships outside her group to help her anticipate the new imperatives, let alone give her ideas about how to respond. After she argued that distribution issues were her purview, and failed to be persuasive, she hired consultants to help her prepare a counterproposal. But Sophie's boss simply concluded that she lacked a broad, longer-term business perspective. Frustrated, Sophie contemplated leaving the company. Only after some patient coaching from a senior manager did she understand that she had to get out of her unit and start talking to opinion leaders inside and outside the company to form a sellable plan for the future.

From Functional Manager to Business Leader: How Companies Can Help

Executives who oversee management development know how to spot critical inflection points: the moments when highly successful people must change their perspective on what is important and, accordingly, how they spend their time. Many organizations still promote people on the basis of their performance in roles whose requirements differ dramatically from those of leadership roles. And many new leaders feel that they are going it alone, without coaching or guidance. By being sensitive to the fact that most strong technical or functional managers lack the capabilities required to build strategic networks that advance their personal and professional goals, human resources and learning professionals can take steps to help in this important area.

For example, Genesis Park, an innovative in-house leadership development program at PricewaterhouseCoopers, focuses explicitly on building networks. The five-month program, during which participants are released from their client responsibilities, includes business case development, strategic projects, team building, change management projects, and in-depth discussions with business leaders from inside and outside the company. The young leaders who participate end up with a strong internal-external nexus of ties to support them as their careers evolve.

Companies that recognize the importance of leadership networking can also do a lot to help people overcome their innate discomfort by creating natural ways for them to extend their networks. When Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn sought to break down crippling internal barriers at the company, he created cross-functional teams of middle managers from diverse units and charged them with proposing solutions to problems ranging from supply costs to product design. Nissan subsequently institutionalized the teams, not just as a way to solve problems but also to encourage lateral networks. Rather than avoid the extra work, aspiring leaders ask for these assignments.

Most professional development is based on the notion that successful people acquire new role-appropriate skills as they move up the hierarchy. But making the transition from manager to leader requires subtraction as well as addition: To make room for new competencies, managers must rely less on their older, well-honed skills. To do so, they must change their perspective on how to add value and what to contribute. Eventually, they must also transform how they think and who they are. Companies that help their top talent reinvent themselves will better prepare them for a successful leadership transition.

What differentiates a leader from a manager, research tells us, is the ability to figure out where to go and to enlist the people and groups necessary to get there. Recruiting stakeholders, lining up allies and sympathizers, diagnosing the political landscape, and brokering conversations among unconnected parties are all part of a leader's job. As they step up to the leadership transition, some managers accept their growing dependence on others and seek to transform it into mutual influence. Others dismiss such work as "political" and, as a result, undermine their ability to advance their goals.

Several of the participants in our sample chose the latter approach, justifying their choice as a matter of personal values and integrity. In one case, Jody, who managed a department in a large company under what she described as "dysfunctional" leadership, refused even to try to activate her extensive network within the firm when internal adversaries took over key functions of her unit. When we asked her why she didn't seek help from anyone in the organization to stop this coup, she replied that she refused to play "stupid political games.... You can only do what you think is the ethical and right thing from your perspective." Stupid or not, those games cost her the respect and support of her direct reports and coworkers, who hesitated to follow someone they perceived as unwilling to defend herself. Eventually she had no choice but to leave.

The key to a good strategic network is leverage: the ability to marshal information, support, and resources from one sector of a network to achieve results in another. Strategic networkers use indirect influence, convincing one person in the network to get someone else, who is not in the network, to take a needed action. Moreover, strategic networkers don’t just influence their relational environment; they shape it in their own image by moving and hiring subordinates, changing suppliers and sources of financing, lobbying to place allies in peer positions, and even restructuring their boards to create networks favorable to their business goals. Jody abjured such tactics, but her adversaries did not.

Strategic networking can be difficult for emerging leaders because it absorbs a significant amount of the time and energy that managers usually devote to meeting their many operational demands. This is one reason why many managers drop their strategic networking precisely when they need it most: when their units are in trouble and only outside support can rescue them. The trick is not to hide in the operational network but to develop it into a more strategic one.

One manager we studied, for example, used lateral and functional contacts throughout his firm to resolve tensions with his boss that resulted from substantial differences in style and strategic approaches between the two. Tied down in operational chores at a distant location, the manager had lost contact with headquarters. He resolved the situation by simultaneously obliging his direct reports to take on more of the local management effort and sending messages through his network that would help bring him back into the loop with the boss.

Operational, personal, and strategic networks are not mutually exclusive. One manager we studied used his personal passion, hunting, to meet people from professions as diverse as stonemasonry and household moving. Almost none of these hunting friends had anything to do with his work in the consumer electronics industry, yet they all had to deal with one of his own daily concerns: customer relations. Hearing about their problems and techniques allowed him to view his own from a different perspective and helped him define principles that he could test in his work. Ultimately, what began as a personal network of hunting partners became operationally and strategically valuable to this manager. The key was his ability to build inside-outside links for maximum leverage. But we've seen others who avoided networking, or failed at it, because they let interpersonal chemistry, not strategic needs, determine which relationships they cultivated.

Just Do It

The word "work" is part of networking, and it is not easy work, because it involves reaching outside the borders of a manager's comfort zone. How, then, can managers lessen the pain and increase the gain? The trick is to leverage the elements from each domain of networking into the others—to seek out personal contacts who can be objective, strategic counselors, for example, or to transform colleagues in adjacent functions into a constituency. Above all, many managers will need to change their attitudes about the legitimacy and necessity of networking.

Mind your mindset

In our ongoing discussions with managers learning to improve their networking skills, we often hear, "That's all well and good, but I already have a day job." Others, like Jody, consider working through networks a way to rely on "whom you know" rather than "what you know"—a hypocritical, even unethical way to get things done. Whatever the reason, when aspiring leaders do not believe that networking is one of the most important requirements of their new jobs, they will not allocate enough time and effort to see it pay off.

The best solution we've seen to this trap is a good role model. Many times, what appears to be unpalatable or unproductive behavior takes on a new light when a person you respect does it well and ethically. For example, Gabriel Chenard, general manager for Europe of a group of consumer product brands, learned from the previous general manager how to take advantage of branch visits to solidify his relationships with employees and customers. Every flight and car trip became a venue for catching up and building relationships with the people who were accompanying him. Watching how much his boss got done on what would otherwise be downtime, Gabriel adopted the practice as a crucial part of his own management style. Networking effectively and ethically, like any other tacit skill, is a matter of judgment and intuition. We learn by observing and getting feedback from those for whom it's second nature.

Work from the outside in

One of the most daunting aspects of strategic networking is that there often seems to be no natural "excuse" for making contact with a more senior person outside one's function or business unit. It's difficult to build a relationship with anyone, let alone a senior executive, without a reason for interacting, like a common task or a shared purpose.

Some successful managers find common ground from the outside in—by, for instance, transposing a personal interest into the strategic domain. Linda Henderson is a good example. An investment banker responsible for a group of media industry clients, she always wondered how to connect to some of her senior colleagues who served other industries. She resolved to make time for an extracurricular passion—the theater—in a way that would enhance her business development activities. Four times a year, her secretary booked a buffet dinner at a downtown hotel and reserved a block of theater tickets. Key clients were invited. Through these events, Linda not only developed her own business but also learned about her clients' companies in a way that generated ideas for other parts of her firm, thus enabling her to engage with colleagues.

Other managers build outside-inside connections by using their functional interests or expertise. For example, communities of practice exist (or can easily be created on the Internet) in almost every area of business from brand management to Six Sigma to global strategy. Savvy managers reach out to kindred spirits outside their organizations to contribute and multiply their knowledge; the information they glean, in more cases than not, becomes the "hook" for making internal connections.

Reallocate your time

If an aspiring leader has not yet mastered the art of delegation, he or she will find many reasons not to spend time networking. Participating in formal and informal meetings with people in other units takes time away from functional responsibilities and internal team affairs. Between the obvious payoff of a task accomplished and the ambiguous, often delayed rewards of networking, naive managers repeatedly choose the former. The less they practice networking, the less efficient at it they become, and the vicious cycle continues.

Henrik, the production manager and board member we described earlier, for example, did what he needed to do in order to prepare for board meetings but did not associate with fellow board members outside those formal events. As a result, he was frequently surprised when other board members raised issues at the heart of his role. In contrast, effective business leaders spend a lot of time every day gathering the information they need to meet their goals, relying on informal discussions with a lot of people who are not necessarily in charge of an issue or task. They network in order to obtain information continually, not just at formal meetings.

Ask and you shall receive

Many managers equate having a good network with having a large database of contacts, or attending high-profile professional conferences and events. In fact, we've seen people kick off a networking initiative by improving their record keeping or adopting a network management tool. But they falter at the next step—picking up the phone. Instead, they wait until they need something *badly*. The best networkers do exactly the opposite: They take every opportunity to give to, and receive from, the network, whether they need help or not.

A network lives and thrives only when it is used. A good way to begin is to make a simple request or take the initiative to connect two people who would benefit from meeting each other. Doing something—anything—gets the ball rolling and builds confidence that one does, in fact, have something to contribute.

Stick to it

It takes a while to reap the benefits of networking. We have seen many managers resolve to put networking at the top of their agendas, only to be derailed by the first crisis that comes along. One example is Harris Roberts, a regulatory affairs expert who realized he needed a broader network to achieve his goal of becoming a business unit manager. To force himself into what felt like an "unnatural act," Harris volunteered to be the liaison for his business school cohort's alumni network. But six months later, when a major new-drug approval process overwhelmed his calendar, Harris dropped all outside activities. Two years later, he found himself out of touch and still a functional manager. He failed to recognize that by not taking the time to attend industry conferences or compare notes with his peers, he was missing out on the strategic perspective and information that would make him a more attractive candidate for promotion.

Building a leadership network is less a matter of skill than of will. When first efforts do not bring quick rewards, some may simply conclude that networking isn't among their talents. But networking is not a talent; nor does it require a gregarious, extroverted personality. It is a skill, one that takes practice. We have seen over and over again that people who work at networking can learn not only how to do it well but also how to enjoy it. And they tend to be more successful in their careers than those who fail to leverage external ties or insist on defining their jobs narrowly.

Making a successful leadership transition requires a shift from the confines of a clearly defined operational network. Aspiring leaders must learn to build and use strategic networks that cross organizational and functional boundaries, and then link them up in novel and innovative ways. It is a challenge to make the leap from a lifetime of functional contributions and hands-on control to the ambiguous process of building and working through networks. Leaders must find new ways of defining themselves and develop new relationships to anchor and feed their emerging personas. They must also accept that networking is one of the most important requirements of their new leadership roles and continue to allocate enough time and effort to see it pay off.

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How to Preempt Team Conflict

by Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux

Team conflict can add value or destroy it. Good conflict fosters respectful debate and yields mutually agreed-upon solutions that are often far superior to those first offered. Bad conflict occurs when team members simply can't get past their differences, killing productivity and stifling innovation.

Disparate opinions aren't the root of the problem, however. Most destructive conflict stems from something deeper: a perceived incompatibility in the way various team members operate due to any number of factors, including personality, industry, race, gender, and age. The conventional approach to working through such conflict is to respond to clashes as they arise or wait until there is clear evidence of a problem before addressing it. But these approaches routinely fail because they allow frustrations to build for too long, making it difficult to reset negative impressions and restore trust.

In our 25 years of researching team dynamics, coaching teams in *Fortune* 500 corporations, and teaching thousands of executives at Duke University, London Business School, and IMD, we've found that a proactive approach is much more effective. When you surface differences before a team starts work —even when the group seems homogeneous and harmonious— you can preempt destructive conflict.

We have developed and tested a methodology that focuses on five areas: how people look, act, speak, think, and feel. Team leaders facilitate a series of 20- to 30-minute conversations, encouraging members to express their preferences and expectations in each area, identify the most likely areas of misalignment or friction, and come up with suggestions for how those with differing expectations can work together. Through the nonjudgmental exchange of ideas and feedback, teams establish a foundation of trust and understanding and are able to set ground rules for effective collaboration.

Though setting aside time for these conversations up front might seem onerous, we've found that it's a worthwhile investment for any team—new or old, C-suite or frontline—that will be collaborating on significant work for an extended period of time. Leaders need no special training to facilitate the discussions. Indeed, we've found that managers can master these conflict-prevention skills far more easily than those required for conflict resolution.

Five Conversations

Because the five conversations we propose go so far beyond typical "getting to know you" chitchat, it's important to kick them off properly. First, although this may seem obvious, make sure to include everyone on the team and explain why you're initiating the discussions. You might say something like: "Working on a team means collaborating with people whose approaches may differ from your own. Let's explore these differences now, while the pressure is off, so that they don't catch us by surprise and generate unproductive conflict at an inopportune moment." Explain that the focus of the discussions will be on the *process* of work rather than the *content*.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Team conflict erupts not because of differences in opinion but because of a perceived incompatibility in the way different team members think and act. When people can't get past their differences, the resulting clashes kill productivity and stifle innovation.

An Alternative View

Differences in perspective and experience can generate great value, of course. A new methodology helps leaders guide their teams through five conversations before work starts, to build shared understanding and lay the foundation for effective collaboration.

In Practice

The approach focuses on the *process* of work rather than the *content.* Leaders facilitate targeted discussions that explore the varying ways team members look, act, speak, think, and feel, to immunize the team against unproductive conflict when the pressure is on.

As the facilitator, make sure that people are comfortable sharing at their own pace and coach them on how to ask clarifying, nonjudgmental questions of one another. Encourage everyone to begin statements with "In my world …" and questions with "In your world … ?" This phrasing, borrowed from organizational behavior scholar Edgar Schein, reinforces the idea that underlying sources of differences are irrelevant. What does matter is the attitudes and behaviors expressed as a result of each person's cumulative personal and professional experience. For example, the fact that you are assertive may be related to your personality, gender, or culture, but the only thing your colleagues need to know is that you tend to vocalize your opinions in plain terms.

Look: Questions to Ask

In your world:

- What makes a good first impression? A bad one?
- What do you notice first about others (dress, speech, demeanor)?
- What does that make you think about them (rigid, pushy, lazy)?
- What intangible credentials do you value (education, experience, connections)?
- How do you perceive status difference?

Team members are likely to be hesitant as you begin, so ease everyone into the process by volunteering to share first. Once the dialogue gains steam, let others guide (but not dominate) it. Eventually, people will move from superficial disclosures to deeper discussion. As they listen to the responses of others and offer their own, they will develop not only a better understanding of their colleagues but also greater self-awareness.

The five topics can be addressed in any order; however, we've found the sequence presented here to be the most logical, especially with new teams, because we perceive first how others look and then how they speak and act. Only after observing them for a longer period can we infer how they think or feel. That said, facilitators should not get hung up on the categories, because there is inevitable overlap. Likewise, if participants struggle with the "In my world" language, it can be tweaked.

Let's now consider the five categories in turn.

Look: Spotting the Difference

Colleagues routinely make fast judgments (especially negative ones) about the character, competence, or status of their peers on the basis of the briefest exposure—what Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal, in research conducted at Harvard, called "thin slices" of behavior. These reactions are often triggered by differences in the way people present themselves. We unconsciously respond to cues in how they look, move, and dress, in their tone of voice, and in what they say about themselves.

The goal of this conversation is to help team members reflect on how they intend to come across to others—and how they actually do. A good place to begin is a discussion about the drivers of status in team members' respective "worlds." For example, some people put a premium on job-related characteristics, such as experience, connections, and functional background. For others, status is linked to demographic cues such as age, gender, nationality, and education. Team members can quickly put colleagues off by emphasizing the wrong credentials, adopting an unsuitable persona, or even dressing inappropriately for the culture. One executive from the "buttoned-up" banking sector faced this type of conflict when he joined an advertising group. In a team discussion, one of his colleagues told him, “The norm here is business casual. So by wearing a suit and tie at all times, it’s like you think you’re special, and that creates distance.”

A similar situation arose at a heavy-engineering company when a female designer joined its board. Her colorful clothing and introductory comments, which included two literary references, made her pragmatic peers think she valued style over substance, which set her up to be marginalized.

An example that highlights the value of discussing perceptions up front comes from a global food group, where a leadership-development rotation of promising young executives had been creating resentment among older subsidiary executives, most notably in the Australian operation. The local team had developed a dysfunctional “keep your head down” attitude and simply tolerated each ambitious MBA until he or she moved on. But when one incoming manager engaged his team in the five conversations at the start of his term, he was able to dispel their negative preconceptions and develop far-more-productive relationships than his predecessors had.

Act: Misjudging Behavior

On diverse teams, clashing behavioral norms are common sources of trouble. Seemingly trivial gestures can have a disproportionate impact, aggravating stereotypes, alienating people, and disrupting communication flows.

Physical boundaries are often a problem area. Consider the media firestorm that retired French soccer player Thierry Henry set off when, as a TV pundit reacting to surprising breaking news, he touched the thigh of his male English colleague. French culture accepts that sort of interaction, but for television studio colleagues in the macho world of British football, it was a step too far. Or consider the introverted, high-anxiety executive we worked with whose warm and gregarious peer made him uncomfortable: Their expectations for the proper distance at which to interact differed starkly. “I was taking a coffee with him at one of those standing tables,” he remembers. “We literally shuffled round the table as he moved toward me and I tried to reestablish my buffer zone.”

Act: Questions to Ask

In your world:

- How important are punctuality and time limits?
- Are there consequences of being late or missing deadlines?
- What is a comfortable physical distance for interacting in the workplace?
- Should people volunteer for assignments or wait to be nominated?
- What group behaviors are valued (helping others, not complaining)?

Attitudes about time can stir up conflict, too. People differ widely—even within the same firm or department—with regard to the importance of being punctual and respectful of other people's schedules. More broadly, the value of keeping projects on pace and hitting milestone deadlines may be paramount to some, whereas others may value flexibility and the ability to nimbly respond as circumstances unfold. An example comes from a Nordic industrial machinery company that had recurrent tensions in the top team. The non-Nordic executives in the group were deeply frustrated by what they saw as a lack of urgency shown by their Nordic colleagues, and they responded with brusqueness—which, of course, upset their peers. Eventually, the group discussed the situation and set new rules of engagement. But a preemptive conversation would have saved them all a great deal of time and energy.

Speak: Questions to Ask

In your world:

- Is a promise an aspiration or a guarantee?
- Which is most important: directness or harmony?
- Are irony and sarcasm appreciated?
- Do interruptions signal interest or rudeness?
- Does silence mean reflection or disengagement?
- Should dissenting views be aired in public or discussed off-line?
- Is unsolicited feedback welcome?

Differing levels of assertiveness between team members can present problems as well. Male executives, for example, or people from individualistic corporate and national cultures, often feel quite comfortable volunteering for special assignments or nominating themselves to take on additional responsibilities because they consider it a sign of commitment, competence, and self-confidence. But others may see those actions as blatant, undignified, and shallow self-promotion. Expectations for how much colleagues should help one another, as opposed to contributing individually to the group effort, can also vary widely. For example, a team of software engineers ran into problems when it became clear that some members were very selective in giving aid to peers, while others did so whenever asked. Those who spent more time helping others understandably began to feel resentful and disadvantaged, since doing so often interfered with their own work. It's important to establish team norms around all these behaviors up front to avoid unnecessary antagonism.

Speak: Dividing by Language

Communication styles have many dimensions—the words people choose to express themselves, tolerance for candor, humor, pauses and interruptions, and so on—and the possibilities for misunderstanding are endless.

Teams made up of people with different native languages present significant challenges in this area. But even when everyone is fluent in a particular language, there may be deep differences in how individuals express themselves. For example, depending on context, culture, and other factors, "yes" can mean "maybe" or "let's try it" or even "no way." At a European software firm we worked with, two executives were at each other's throats over what one of them called "broken promises." Discussion revealed that words one had interpreted as a firm commitment were merely aspirational to his counterpart.

Sometimes even laudable organizational goals can engender troublesome communication dynamics: For example, corporations that promote a culture of positivity may end up with employees who are reluctant or afraid to challenge or criticize. As the marketing director of a fast-moving consumer goods firm told us: "You're not supposed to be negative about people's ideas. What's going through the back of your mind is 'I can't see this working.' But what comes out of your mouth is 'Yeah, that's great.'"

When teams discuss at the outset how much candor is appropriate, they can establish clear guidelines about speaking up or pushing back on others. At a German investment bank, a top team that had been dominated by several assertive consultants adopted a "four sentence" rule—a cutoff for each person's contributions in meetings—as a way to encourage taking turns and give more-reserved members a chance to contribute. At Heineken USA, board members use little toy horses that sit on the conference table to accomplish the same goal: If you're talking and someone tips one over, you know you're beating a dead horse and it's time to move on.

Think: Occupying Different Mindsets

Perhaps the biggest source of conflict on teams stems from the way in which members think about the work they're doing. Their varied personalities and experiences make them alert to varying signals and cause them to take different approaches to problem solving and decision making. This can result in their working at cross-purposes. As one executive with a U.S. apparel company noted: "There is often tension between the ready-fire-aim types on our team and the more analytical colleagues."

We found this dynamic in a new-product team at a Dutch consumer goods company. Members' cognitive styles differed greatly, particularly with regard to methodical versus intuitive thinking. Once aware of the problem, the project manager initiated discussions about ways to rotate leadership of the project, matching team needs to mindsets. During the more creative and conceptual phases, the freethinkers would be in charge, while analytical and detail-oriented members would take over evaluation, organization, and implementation activities. All members came to understand the value of the different approaches.

Think: Questions to Ask

In your world:

- Is uncertainty viewed as a threat or an opportunity?
- What's more important: the big picture or the details?
- Is it better to be reliable or flexible?
- What is the attitude toward failure?
- How do people tolerate deviations from the plan?

Teams also need to find alignment on tolerance for risk and shifting priorities. A striking example comes from a biotech team made up of scientists and executives. By virtue of their training, the scientists embraced experimentation, accepted failure as part of the discovery process, and valued the continued pursuit of breakthroughs, regardless of time horizon or potential for commercial applications. That mindset jarred their MBA-trained peers, who sought predictability in results and preferred to kill projects that failed to meet expectations. To bridge those differences, a facilitator used role play to help the two groups better understand each other's perspective.

Feel: Charting Emotions

Team members may differ widely in the intensity of their feelings, how they convey passion in a group, and the way they manage their emotions in the face of disagreement or conflict.

Feel: Questions to Ask

In your world:

- What emotions (positive and negative) are acceptable and unacceptable to display in a business context?
- How do people express anger or enthusiasm?
- How would you react if you were annoyed with a teammate (with silence, body language, humor, through a third party)?

Sometimes enthusiasm can overwhelm peers or fuel skepticism. An extroverted CMO at a logistics company we worked with assumed that the more passion she showed for her ideas, the more responsive the group would be to them. But her "rah-rah" approach was too much for the introverted, pragmatic CEO. She would start picking apart proposals whenever the CMO got excited. At the other extreme, strong negative emotions—especially overt displays of anger—can be upsetting or intimidating.

Negative feelings can be a sensitive issue to broach, so it's helpful to start by talking about the kind of context team members are used to. From there, the discussion can get more personal. For example, in one conversation we facilitated at a construction company, an executive told his colleagues that "yelling was common" in his previous workplace—but that it was a habit he wanted to correct. He told us that he had made this disclosure to "keep [him]self honest" in pursuit of that goal.

Early discussions should touch on not only the risks of venting but also the danger of bottling things up. The tendency to signal irritation or discontent indirectly—through withdrawal, sarcasm, and privately complaining about one another—can be just as destructive as volatile outbursts and intimidation. It's important to address the causes of disengagement directly, through open inquiry and debate, and come up with ways to disagree productively.

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The benefits of anticipating and heading off conflict before it becomes destructive are immense. We've found that they include greater participation, improved creativity, and, ultimately, smarter decision making. As one manager put it: "We still disagree, but there's less bad blood and a genuine sense of valuing each other's contributions."

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QUICK READ

What Is Psychological Safety?

by Amy Gallo

No one likes to deliver bad news to their boss. But that's exactly what I had to do when a project I'd been working on wasn't delivering the results we expected. I'd been a big advocate for our team taking on the initiative, and personally I'd invested a lot of time into it—and persuaded others to do the same.

When I met with my manager to present the data, which showed that we hadn't recouped our investment and the initiative had performed worse than planned, I was nervous. I would've understood if she had been frustrated, or even angry, and I expected her to at least ask "What went wrong?" or "How could we have prevented this?" (both questions I had prepared answers for).

Instead, she asked a simple question: *What did you learn?*

I now understand that what she was doing was building psychological safety. She understood that learning was key—my (and her team's) future performance depended on it. Psychological safety is a critical concept for teams and the people that lead them. It's also a topic we've covered quite a bit at HBR. But not everyone knows or fully understands it, so I reached out to Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor and the author of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Wiley, 2018), who coined the phrase "team psychological safety," to get a refresher on this important idea. I asked her about where the term originated, how it's evolved, and how people can build psychological safety on their own teams.

What Is Psychological Safety?

Let's start with a definition. Team psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes—all without fear of negative consequences. As Edmondson puts it, "It's felt permission for candor."

Edmondson first landed on the concept when she was doing research for her PhD. She had set out to study the relationship between error making and teamwork in hospitals, expecting to find that more-effective teams made fewer mistakes. But what she found was that the teams who reported better teamwork experienced more errors. When she dug into the data, she began to suspect that better teams might be more willing to report their mistakes—because they felt safe doing so—and conducted follow-up research to explore that hypothesis.

The "team" in team psychological safety is important. "This is a group-level phenomenon—it shapes the learning behavior of the group and in turn affects team performance and therefore organizational performance," she says. As Edmondson explained to me, the sense of safety and willingness to speak up is not an individual trait, even though it's something you do feel and experience at the individual level; "it's an emergent property of the group," she says. In fact, in most studies, people who work closely together have similar levels of psychological safety compared with people in other teams.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Psychological safety is a critical concept for teams and the people that lead them. It's a term that is used a lot but often misunderstood.

The Solution

The author talks with Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who coined the phrase "team psychological safety," to answer the following questions:

1. What is psychological safety?
2. Why is psychological safety important?
3. How has the idea evolved?
4. How do you know if your team has it?
5. How do you create psychological safety?
6. What are common misconceptions?

Why Is Psychological Safety Important?

First, psychological safety leads to team members feeling more engaged and motivated, because they feel that their contributions matter and that they're able to speak up without fear of retribution. Second, it can lead to better decision-making, as people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, which often leads to a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered. Third, it can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, as team members feel comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning from them. (This is what my boss was doing in the opening story.)

All of these benefits—the impact on a team's performance, innovation, creativity, resilience, and learning—have been proven in research over the years, most notably in Edmondson's original research and in a study done at Google.[1] That research, known as Project Aristotle, aimed to understand the factors that impacted team effectiveness across Google. Using over 30 statistical models and hundreds of variables, the project concluded that *who* was on a team mattered less than *how* the team worked together. And the most important factor was psychological safety.

Further research has shown the incredible downsides of not having psychological safety, including negative impacts on employee well-being, such as stress, burnout, and turnover, as well as on the overall performance of the organization.

How Has the Idea Evolved?

I asked Edmondson how the idea has changed in the 20 years since she first starting writing about it. Academics have discovered some important nuances. For example, she points out that psychological safety seems to matter more in work environments where employees need to use their discretion. As she explains, “The relationship between psychological safety and performance is stronger in situations where the results or work aren’t prescribed, when you’re doing something creative, novel, or truly collaborative.” She has also written about how hybrid work requires that managers expand how they think about psychological safety.

She and others have also been looking at how psychological safety interacts with diversity on teams. New research by Edmondson and Henrik Bresman, a professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, has shown that on teams with high psychological safety, expertise diversity was positively associated with performance. While their study is a single one in a single industry (drug development), it’s an important proof point “that psychological safety may be the key to realizing the promise of diversity in teams.”[2]

How Do You Know if Your Team Has It?

This is likely the question on most leaders’ minds. Edmondson has developed a simple seven-item questionnaire to assess the perception of psychological safety (if you want to run this survey with your team, you can sign up to use an instrument on Edmondson's website).

How people answer these questions will give you a sense of the degree to which they feel psychologically safe:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes accept others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It isn't difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Edmondson cautions, however, that the scores are not definitive; what matters is the variance. "Anyone filling out a survey is doing so in a way that is relative to their expectations," she says. "For example, if I say, 'Yes, I can ask for help,' I'm doing that relative to what I think it 'ought' to be." She suggests managers use the data from the survey to reflect on their team's experience and be curious about what they could change to improve that experience. Which leads to another critical question: What can you do to foster psychological safety?

How Do You Create Psychological Safety?

Edmondson is quick to point out that "it's more magic than science," and it's important for managers to remember that this is "a climate that we co-create, sometimes in mysterious ways."

Anyone who has worked on a team marked by silence and the inability to speak up knows how hard it is to reverse that.

A lot of what goes into creating a psychologically safe environment are good management practices—establishing clear norms and expectations so there is a sense of predictability and fairness, encouraging open communication and actively listening to employees, making sure team members feel supported, and showing appreciation and humility when people do speak up.

Edmondson mentions a few additional tactics as well.

Make clear why employees' voices matter. For most people, it feels safe to hold back and stay silent—they default to keeping their ideas and opinions to themselves. "You have to override that instinct by setting the stage for them to speak up," she says. Explain clearly and specifically why you need to hear from them, why their viewpoint and input matters, and how it will affect the outcomes of the work.

Admit your own fallibility. If you, as a leader, can own up to and demonstrate how you've learned from your mistakes, it paves the way for others. It's important to model the behavior you want to see in your team and normalize vulnerability. This includes things like being respectful, open to feedback, and willing to take risks.

Actively invite input. Don't assume people will tell you what they're thinking or that they understand that you want their input. "Explicitly request it," says Edmondson. She suggests asking open-ended questions like: What are you seeing? What are your thoughts on this? Where do you stand on this idea?

Respond productively. You can tell people you want their input or it's OK to make mistakes, but they won't do those things if they feel like they're being blamed or shut down. Edmondson suggests asking yourself: When people speak up with a wacky idea or tough feedback, how do you respond? Be "appreciative and forward thinking." Also, replace blame with curiosity. As author and coach Laura Delizonna writes, "If team members sense that you're trying to blame them for something, you become their saber-toothed tiger.... The alternative to blame is curiosity. If you believe you already know what the other person is thinking, then you're not ready to have a conversation. Instead, adopt a learning mindset, knowing you don't have all the facts."

What Are Common Misconceptions?

I also asked Edmondson if there are any myths or misconceptions about psychological safety, and she pointed to two.

"It's all about being nice." Edmondson says that creating a psychologically safe environment isn't about being "nice." In fact, there are many polite workplaces that don't have psychological safety because there's no candor, and people feel silenced by the enforced politeness. "Unfortunately, at work, 'nice' is often synonymous with not being candid."

"You must feel comfortable in a psychologically safe environment." "Too many people think that it's about feeling comfortable all the time and that you can't say anything that makes someone else uncomfortable or you're violating psychological safety," says Edmondson. That's simply not true. Learning and messing up and pointing out mistakes is usually uncomfortable. Being vulnerable will feel risky. The key is to take risks in a safe environment—one without negative interpersonal consequences. "Anything hard to achieve requires being uncomfortable along the way." She shares the analogy of an Olympic gymnast. In her training, she pushes herself and her body; she takes risks but does so in a way that she won't get injured. Edmondson reminds us, "Candor is hard, but non-candor is worse."

. . .

My boss's simple response when I came to her feeling defeated has had a huge impact on me. That one question—*What did you learn?*—changed the way I view my own missteps, with more compassion and understanding, and how I treat others when they make mistakes. As my experience shows, by making psychological safety a priority, leaders set up their teams for success now and long into the future.

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Get the Boss to Buy In

by Susan J. Ashford and James Detert

An engineering manager at an energy company—we'll call him John Healy—wanted to sell his boss on a safer and cheaper gas-scrubbing technology. This might have been an easy task if his boss, the general manager, hadn't selected the existing system just a year before. Instead it was, in Healy's words, "a delicate process." Fortunately, user reviews of the new technology had become available only in the past several months, which Healy tactfully mentioned in his presentation to the GM and other senior executives. He also included a detailed comparison of the two systems, drawing on implementations at comparable plants; the data suggested that the new system would remove contaminants more efficiently and reduce costs by about $700,000 a year. Because the GM was still on the fence, Healy brought in a bio-gas expert his boss trusted and respected to talk about the new technology's merits. The company made the investment and adopted the new system.

Organizations don't prosper unless managers in the middle ranks, like Healy, identify and promote the need for change. People at that level gather valuable intelligence from direct contact with customers, suppliers, and colleagues. They're in a position to see when the market is ripe for a certain offering, for instance, or to detect early signs that a partnership won't work out. But for many reasons, ranging from a fear of negative consequences to compliance with a top-down culture, they may not voice their ideas and concerns. As we know from our research and others' work in this area, not to mention recent news stories, such silence can have dire consequences—like "regulatory capture" in banking and unchecked product safety risks.

Middle Managers Are More Likely to Speak Up When They:

- Identify with the organization
- Have a positive relationship with their audience
- Feel psychologically safe in the organization
- Think someone above them will take action
- Care enough about the issue to invest energy in selling it

Even when they do speak up, most managers struggle to sell their ideas to people at the top. They find it difficult to raise issues to a "strategic" level early in the decision-making process

—if they gain entry into such conversations at all. Studies show that senior executives dismiss good ideas from below far too often, largely for this reason: If they don't already perceive an idea's relevance to organizational performance, they don't deem it important enough to merit their attention. Middle managers have to work to alter that perception.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Middle managers glean valuable insights from their contact with customers, suppliers, and colleagues—but they struggle to sell their ideas to decision makers at the top. As a result, their organizations fail to seize opportunities and solve problems.

The Solution

Research shows that managers who gain buy-in from senior executives use seven tactics more often than managers whose ideas don't go anywhere.

The Benefits

These tactics provide a powerful framework for leading change from the middle ranks. By using them in an extended campaign for support, you can persuade senior leaders to take action and accomplish your goals.

Their task is easier if certain contextual factors are in place—for instance, a track record of strong individual contributions, which enhances credibility, and a culture in which it's safe to speak up. Whether or not those stars are aligned, managers can improve their odds of success by using powerful methods of persuasion. Consider John Healy's approach: He presented his idea with emotional intelligence (making sure the GM didn't look bad for buying the current system), supported it with strong evidence from similar companies, and brought in a carefully chosen outside expert to bolster his argument.

Since Jane Dutton and Susan Ashford (a coauthor of this article) introduced the concept of "issue selling" into the academic discourse, more than two decades ago, many studies have proposed tactics for effectively winning support for new ideas. In a recent study of our own, we examined what actually works in organizations, across a range of roles and industries. Our participants described their experiences selling three basic types of ideas: new products, processes, markets, or customers to pursue; improvements to existing products or processes; and ways of better meeting employees' needs.

Issue sellers who accomplish their goals, we found, look for the best ways, venues, and times to voice their ideas and concerns—using rhetorical skill, political sensitivity, and interpersonal connections to move the right leaders to action. In particular, they employ seven tactics significantly more often than people who don't succeed in gaining buy-in. In this article we pull those tactics into a practical framework that managers can use to gain traction for their ideas, and we illustrate them with examples from our research. Each tactic should be part of an extended campaign to win attention and resources.

Tactic 1: Tailor Your Pitch

More than any other tactic in our research sample, tailoring the pitch to decision makers was associated with success. It's essential for issue sellers to familiarize themselves with their audience's unique blend of goals, values, and knowledge and to allow that insight to shape their messages.

That's how one regional sales manager in the Canada division of an international oil company persuaded senior executives to restructure the sales organization and change its approach to attracting and motivating talent. Although sales teams in the oil industry are usually organized by customer, at this company each one covered a region. Because many customers had offices in multiple regions, teams often undermined one another's efforts by offering competing deals to the same clients. The organization's poor structure led to misaligned incentives and a fragmented customer experience. Making matters worse, most of the reps worked for salaries rather than commissions. "That's why a competitor managed to poach more than half my division's sales force," the regional manager said. Unsurprisingly, nearly all the top performers had left. Having a sales structure so inefficient and out of touch with standard practices made such attrition practically inevitable. Although the executives who had created the structure were competent, they lacked sales experience. The remaining sales team, similarly, was technically knowledgeable but inexperienced, and the force was too small to sustain the business, let alone grow it.

When the regional manager initially shared his concerns with his boss and a few other executives, they disagreed, saying that the solution was simply to push people harder. "That sounded very risky to me, given that the division had just lost more than half its sales team," he told us. He made little progress until he asked other leaders in the division—those with greater decision-making power—what they expected from sales. He met with the new vice president of marketing and sales for Canada, for example, who wanted to prevent teams from working against one another and damaging credibility with clients.

In light of the feedback he'd gathered, the regional manager drafted recommendations and explained how they would help the division double revenue within four years (a target the CEO had recently announced to shareholders). Assigning sales teams to clients rather than to regions, he pointed out, would keep reps from stepping on one another's toes—which addressed the Canada VP's concerns. The manager also argued that attracting and retaining seasoned salespeople was essential to increasing revenue within the CEO's desired time frame. He emphasized the division's high attrition rate for reps—about 40% walked out the door each year—and described how that could be fixed by following the industry's best practices for recruiting and managing sales talent. Commission-based compensation would attract experienced people and give them a reason to stay. Training would help greener reps develop important skills for managing customer relationships.

The Canada VP approved the plan and, more important, provided the resources to carry it out. “We added a dozen experienced people to the sales organization,” the regional manager said. “And after implementation we had only one person leave in four years.” That reduced the once-sizable turnover costs to almost nothing. The division also invested $75,000 in training, which more than paid for itself with a contest to see who could sell the most using the methods learned. (That alone brought $2.7 million in new business in one week.) Although the division missed its four-year target, it doubled revenue in five years.

In light of those benefits, executives no longer blamed laziness for the problems the sales force had experienced. And good people stopped leaving in droves, thanks partly to the shift in mindset at the top and partly to the improved structure and talent practices.

The regional manager attributed the inroads he made to his carefully tailored pitch. In addition to speaking directly to the Canada VP’s and other leaders’ goals, he said, “I had to show how my ideas could help meet the CEO’s revenue expectations.” That allowed him to move from one-on-one and small group meetings to a written proposal and a presentation he could share at a more senior level, where the initiatives got the support they needed.

Tactic 2: Frame the Issue

An issue's place on your organization's list of priorities depends heavily on how you package the idea. A new technological development might seem like techie trivia until you explain how it supports a strategic goal, such as increasing responsiveness to customers. It then becomes important. Once people see how your initiative fits into the big picture, they'll be more willing to devote resources to it.

Similarly, if you're a unit head presenting one of your directors to top management for promotion, you'll want to say that she exceeded her targets and spell out how she can contribute to key goals. You can describe how moving her into a more strategic role will help turn around a struggling department, for instance, or bring energy and creativity to a modestly performing part of the business. By framing her as a leader the organization needs instead of simply letting her impressive work speak for itself, you create a sense of urgency for decision makers. This isn't just someone who has accomplished a lot and deserves to advance, whenever and however that's convenient. It's someone with the skills and drive to make changes that matter now.

As these scenarios show, it's often effective to highlight an idea's business benefits; the successful sellers in our research took that approach significantly more often than those who'd failed. For example, a chief investment officer at a financial firm described how he very gradually made the case that subscribing to a proprietary real estate database was "a need and not just a want.” Every six months or so, over a period of about five years, he would float the suggestion at a moment when access to the database would be useful, and a tech-savvy ally in the asset management department would vocally agree. But they needed broader support for the idea, because most people viewed it as a luxury. “We are a lean-running organization that has historically resisted adopting new technologies,” the chief investment officer explained. Eventually he identified a relevant need in another part of the business: The database could help the accounting department meet its public-reporting and audit requirements. That was the tipping point. He’d spelled out the business benefits for multiple departments. The firm decided to subscribe.

Issue-Selling Prompts

These questions will help you use the seven tactics effectively:

Tailor Your Pitch

- Where does my audience stand on this issue?
- What does my audience find most convincing or compelling?

Frame the Issue

- How can I connect my issue to organizational priorities?
- How can I best describe its benefits?
- How can I link it to other issues receiving attention?
- How can I highlight an opportunity for the organization?

Manage Emotions on Both Sides

- How can I use my emotions to generate positive rather than negative responses?
- How can I manage my audience's emotional responses?

Get the Timing Right

- What is the best moment to be heard? Can I "catch the wave" of a trend, for example, or tap into what's going on in the outside world?
- What is the right time in the decision-making process to raise my issue?

Involve Others

- Which allies from my network can help me sell my issue, and how can I involve them effectively?
- Who are my potential blockers, and how can I persuade them to support me?

- Who are my fence-sitters, and how can I convince them that my issue matters?

Adhere to Norms

- Should I use a formal, public approach to sell my issue (for example, a presentation to upper management)? Or an informal, private approach (casual one-on-one conversations)? Or a combination of the two?

Suggest Solutions

- Am I suggesting a viable solution?
- If not, am I proposing a way to discover one instead of just highlighting the problem?

Moral framing appears to be less powerful than business framing. In our research, the few instances of moral framing were associated with failed attempts or uneven results. When issue sellers peddle their principles too aggressively, people may react negatively to what they perceive as a judgment of their character.

Although focusing on business benefits is often safer, sellers may need to underscore the urgency. They might, for instance, present the idea as an opportunity that shouldn't be missed. Our successful sellers were significantly more likely than the others to explain what the organization stood to gain from their ideas. Emphasizing the positive can give your audience a sense of control over the situation and inspire optimism and buy-in.

Highlighting a threat—a consequence of not adopting your idea—can also create pressure to act. But it can backfire: When decision makers focus on potential loss, they sometimes then bury their heads and avoid the issue. The amount of threat framing did not differ between successful and unsuccessful selling attempts, perhaps because it was viewed as a mixed bag: It's hard to predict whether it will spur action—the classic "fight" response—or result in "flight."

Finally, issue sellers often find success by bundling their ideas with related ones. For instance, someone lobbying to increase leave time for employees caring for aging or sick family members might allude to efforts to increase parental leave. When attached to a larger initiative, a small idea can gain prominence. It's no longer just an elder-care issue; it's a work/life balance issue.

Tactic 3: Manage Emotions on Both Sides

Because issue selling is an interpersonal activity, often involving high stakes, it inevitably stirs emotions. Passion, if appropriately expressed, improves sellers' chances of gaining attention and triggering action. There's a fine line, however, between passion and anger. People sometimes propose initiatives because they are fed up with existing conditions or behavior. And as they encounter roadblocks to their selling efforts, their frustrations may intensify.

Though strong emotions can be channeled into a rousing appeal for action, when unregulated they're more likely to diminish the seller's influence. Decision makers who detect negative emotions from subordinates offering input tend to perceive those employees as complainers, not as change agents. Further, recent research by Wharton's Adam Grant shows that people who keep their emotions in check—or at least control what they display to others—feel more comfortable raising issues and receive higher performance evaluations.

Our study supports Grant's finding: Successful issue sellers paid much more attention to emotional regulation than those who failed. Indeed, the latter sometimes understood that their runaway emotions were partly to blame for their failures.

Important as self-regulation is, it's equally critical to understand and manage the decision maker's emotions—they, too, can make or break your case. John Healy, the manager in our opening example, did that especially well. Anticipating how his boss might feel about having selected the more hazardous and more expensive gas-scrubbing system, he was careful to point out that user reviews of the new technology hadn't been available when that decision had been made. Sellers hoping to have their issues heard should seek to inspire positive emotions in the decision makers—by focusing on benefits, for instance, or showing how action is possible. In our sample, successful sellers reported doing this far more often than others.

Tactic 4: Get the Timing Right

It's critical to find the right moment to raise your ideas. That moment might be when organizational priorities shift, when certain players leave or join the company, or when a boss's preoccupations change. Successful sellers in our study reported greater sensitivity than others to timing, by a wide margin. The best sellers notice when more and more people are beginning to care about a larger topic or trend that's related to their issue, and they position their idea to "catch the wave."

For example, the managing director of an Ecuadoran holding company's luxury division chose just the right time to persuade his CFO and board to tap an unexplored market in Peru. He'd gotten the idea in 2007. Though it was a viable option then, he held off on proposing it, given Peru's recent civil unrest and the fact that his division still had room for growth in its home market. In 2009, after the recession, "Peru had the best-performing stock market in the world," the director said. So his team took a trip to assess the potential. "We looked at new construction developments, and the modern minimalism was in stark contrast with the high-walled constructions from the guerrilla and terrorist era." It seemed that Peru was not just doing well but primed for growth. "There was only one prominent shopping mall, and 'hard' luxury items such as designer-branded bags, watches, and sunglasses were scarce or sold informally," he explained. "Yet Starbucks cafés were full every day and expanding." The director and his team decided that a luxury boutique carrying various products but focusing on watches would be the best project to pursue. They knew that department stores wouldn't cover the demand, because customers would want the luxury experience. "We thought Peru was ready for it," he said. The timing was excellent for another reason: The market in Ecuador had become saturated by then.

The director got the approval he needed, and the company opened two luxury stores in November 2010. “The day we opened our first boutique we sold the entire inventory of perfume we had bought from the pharmacy next door,” he said. “One customer came in and bought all our stock of ink for his luxury writing instrument out of fear of not finding the ink again.” That store accounted for 40% of the division’s profits over the following three years. By 2011 all the most prestigious luxury brands had entered the Peruvian market—but this company had gotten there first.

In addition to keeping a close eye on larger trends and events, it’s important to be mindful of deadlines. If an idea relates directly to an imminent product launch or software release, by all means speak up—now is the time to be heard. But as recent research shows, when a deadline is far away and decision makers are still in exploration mode, open-ended inquiry can be more effective than proposing a specific solution. Of course, sellers can’t always know their audiences’ deadlines. If you discover an immediate challenge, though, you can try to address it in your proposal—and shelve other ideas until people have time to really think them through.

Tactic 5: Involve Others

Issue sellers usually are better off bringing others into their efforts than going it alone. Building a coalition generates organizational buy-in more quickly and on a larger scale as more people contribute energy and resources. One person might have access to important data, for example, and another might have a personal relationship with one of the top managers you're trying to persuade. Perhaps recognizing these advantages, our successful respondents were more likely than the others to involve colleagues in pitching their ideas.

Negotiation experts would tell you to mobilize your allies, persuade your blockers to support the issue or at least back off, and show the fence-sitters why they should care about your idea. When building a coalition, you can reach out to experts in relevant areas to add to your credibility, though a recent study of reactions to issue sellers suggests that it's just as important to include individuals the target audience trusts. Certainly tap members of your network, but also involve people whose networks don't overlap with yours. That will expand the pool of people who might advocate for your idea or lend their expertise.

Tactic 6: Adhere to Norms

The tactics we've covered so far draw on two types of knowledge that successful issue sellers need: strategic (understanding the organization's goals, the plans to achieve them, and the roles decision makers play in those efforts) and relational (figuring out who will be affected by your issue, who cares about it, who might object to it, and so on). Here we'll discuss a third type: knowledge of organizational norms, such as what kinds of data your leaders like to use to make decisions, how they prefer to receive information, and whether they tend to get behind issues similar to yours. Grasping such norms can give you a sense of how effective the other tactics described in this article will be. For example, a study of employees selling environmental issues found that the use of drama and emotion worked only if the organization already had a strong environmental commitment.

One important norm to understand is whether it's generally best to use formal or informal approaches. Casual conversations allow issue sellers to get an off-the-record read on their ideas and avoid putting their target audience on the spot in public. But formal approaches can convey seriousness and apply helpful pressure on decision makers to respond. Issue sellers need to consider these trade-offs in light of what's expected in their organizations. In one company we studied, senior managers claimed to want innovative thinking but were described, even at "blue sky" meetings, as chastising those who didn't present slide shows using company-approved templates. Not surprisingly, their employees reported selling in very formal ways while acknowledging the dampening effect this probably had on innovation.

Successful sellers used more formal—and fewer informal—tactics than those whose pitches failed. So it seems that many business settings require a certain level of convention and decorum, and that the best sellers adapt their behavior to fit that norm. Our qualitative data suggests that sequencing matters, though: People who succeeded tended to roll out their ideas informally early on, in order to gauge interest, and then switch to formal presentations.

Tactic 7: Suggest Solutions

Clearly, people believe that if they're going to speak up about problems, they'd better suggest thoughtful fixes: This was the most frequently used tactic among both types of sellers, successful and not. And those who succeeded used it significantly more often than those who didn't. They pointed to specific solutions, such as adding a business operations team to address a systems flaw. They often included funding ideas when selling the need for something new.

Proposing a solution signals that the seller has put thought into the issue and respects leaders' time. Indeed, recent laboratory research shows that people think more highly of issue sellers who suggest solutions.

But here's the hitch: If people are less likely to raise issues for which they haven't identified a solution, as our data shows, organizations where problems crop up faster than people can devise fixes are at a considerable disadvantage. What's more, some problems are best solved by a group of people who bring diverse knowledge, experience, and expertise to the table. In these cases, expecting issue sellers to have solutions in hand may lead to poor decision-making.

Sellers who feel strongly about an issue but don't see a solution can suggest a sensible process for discovering one. That way they follow the norm of being solution-focused while getting others constructively involved in a timely manner.

Create a Tactical Campaign

There's more to a pitch than a big presentation and a yea-or-nay decision. Those are just the most visible steps in the process. Leading up to them, you should carefully lay a foundation for your argument, tactic by tactic, as you acquire resources and knowledge. Here are some principles to help you make the most of the tactics we've described.

Choose your battles

Some ideas are just plain tough to sell—those that are too far ahead of the audience's current understanding, for instance, or too much of a stretch beyond the organization's norms. That's especially true of any idea that may seem an indictment of the status quo or, worse, of the audience's intelligence, judgment, or morality. In such cases, you may have an uphill battle no matter how skillfully you frame the issue and manage emotions.

Even the best issue sellers can't win every time, and sometimes the payoff isn't worth the effort. To determine whether to invest resources and social capital in selling an issue, ask two questions: How important is this to my company? And how important is it to me? That will help you assess how much risk to take on. Raising concerns about a company's approach to foreign labor practices or about managers' treatment of employees will probably elicit much more pushback than ideas for enhancing products or improving processes. But if the former issues are critical to the organization's well-being or your own professional identity, you might sensitively pursue them even if you know you won't succeed in the short term.

Combine tactics

In our regression analysis, we found that campaigns using multiple tactics succeeded more often than those using any single tactic. Indeed, the combined use of all seven tactics accounted for about 40% of the difference between successes and failures. We saw the same kind of impact in individuals' descriptions of their selling efforts. The engineering manager at the energy company managed the GM's emotions, suggested a solution backed by data, and turned to an outside expert for further support. The Ecuadoran managing director also combined tactics: In addition to choosing the right moment to launch the luxury goods stores, he adhered to his conservative organization's norms for proposing projects—starting with informal conversations, looking at proxy businesses in other industries (in this case, Starbucks), talking with customers and partners to gather insights, and finally building up to the formal review process, using traditional financial tools and outsourced market studies for analysis.

Approach the right audience

It's a common dilemma: Should you air your idea with your boss and risk getting nowhere because he or she lacks sufficient power or interest to back you up? Or go straight to decision makers who will care—and quite likely pay a price for bypassing your manager? Wishing to avoid trouble, many sellers start with their boss and hope their ideas make their way up the hierarchy. But their issues often die right away or languish until senior management becomes aware of them. Sometimes the immediate boss doesn't even bother escalating the issue; other times the messenger isn't as skilled as the initial seller at making the case.

So ask if you can accompany anyone selling on your behalf, whether that's your manager or a colleague who has an "in" with a formal decision-making body. If that's not possible, do everything you can to prepare that person to sell effectively: Work out the details of the business case, help identify the right time and venue for presenting it, and so forth. If you decide to approach decision makers directly, keep your boss in the loop. Otherwise you'll need to have a very good answer when senior leaders ask why you've come to them instead of to your manager.

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No set of prescriptions can capture the nuances of every environment or remove the risks and disappointments of issue selling. But sellers who routinely and effectively use these tactics enjoy greater success than those who don't.

Issue selling isn't a discrete event; it's an ongoing process that requires groundwork, pacing, and patience. When mid-level managers do it effectively, their ideas get decision makers' attention and make a real difference.

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QUICK READ

Four Ways to Improve Your Strategic Thinking Skills

by Nina A. Bowman

If you've ever received feedback that you "need to be more strategic," you know how frustrating it can feel. To add insult to injury, the feedback rarely comes with any concrete guidance on what to do about it. One of my coaching clients, Lisa, a vice president of human resources, was in this situation and explains, "I was just told to think bigger picture and to be more strategic. It felt like I had been given the definition of a word by using the same word. It just wasn't helpful."

So what specific steps *can* you take to be more strategic in your current role?

Start by changing your mindset. If you believe that strategic thinking is only for senior executives, think again. It can, and must, happen at every level of the organization; it's one of those unwritten parts of all job descriptions. Ignore this fact and you risk getting passed over for a promotion or having your budget cut because your department's strategic contribution is unclear.

Once you've accepted that it's part of your job, focus on developing four key abilities that demonstrate your strategic prowess.

Know: Observe and Seek Trends

Lisa wasn't seeing the big picture. Because of the amount of work she had and the pace at which she needed to get it done, she often took a "heads down" approach to her job and failed to "lift up" and observe both internal and external trends. She was missing key information that could help her focus, prioritize, and be proactive in addressing talent issues for her fast-growing company. Because Lisa approached her job in a transactional manner, simply getting the next hire, she didn't recognize that she needed a completely new approach to recruitment and retention.

To be strategic, you need a solid understanding of the industry context, trends, and business drivers. An intellectual appreciation of the importance of bringing in current data and seeking trends isn't enough. You also have to:

- Make it a routine exercise to explore and synthesize the internal trends in your day-to-day work. For example, pay attention to the issues that get raised over and over in your organization and synthesize the common obstacles your colleagues face.
- Be proactive about connecting with peers both in your organization and in your industry to understand their

observations of the marketplace. Then, share your findings across your network.

- Understand the unique information and perspective that your function provides and define its impact on the corporate-level strategy.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Strategic thinking must happen at every level of the organization; it's one of those unwritten parts of all job descriptions. But how do you acquire this important but ill-defined skill?

The Solution

Focus on developing four key abilities that demonstrate your strategic prowess. First, routinely explore the internal trends in your daily work, like issues that come up repeatedly. Second, work on the ability to ask tough questions, such as, "What does success look like in Year 1? What could impact the outcome in a negative way? What are the early signs of success or failure?"

Next, structure your written and verbal communication in a way that helps your audience focus on the core message. And finally, make time in your busy schedule for reflection. At first, you may feel disoriented as you challenge your own assumptions and gain comfort with conflict and curiosity, but when you're able to contribute at a higher level, you'll be glad you took the risk.

Think: Ask the Tough Questions

With a fresh understanding of trends and issues, you can practice using strategic thinking by asking yourself, "How do I broaden what I consider?" Questions are the language of strategy. Lisa came to appreciate that her life and prior experience gave her a unique yet myopic strategic lens. So she pushed herself to ramp up her perspective-taking and inquiry skills. By becoming more curious, and looking at information from different points of view, she was able to reduce her myopia and see different possibilities, different approaches, and different potential outcomes.

For example, when working on an employee retention project, she asked herself, “What does success look like in Year 1?” “What does it look like in Year 3?” “What could impact the outcome in a negative way?” “What are the early signs of success and/or failure?” “What do business partners need to understand to ensure its success?” and “Do the outcomes support the broader goals of the organization?” By asking these tough questions first, she recognized that she could better engage with colleagues and senior executives early on in ways that would benefit the project—and would help shape the perception that she was thoughtful and strategic.

Speak: Sound Strategic

Strategic thinkers also know how to speak the language. They prioritize and sequence their thoughts. They structure their verbal and written communication in a way that helps their audience focus on their core message. They challenge the status quo and get people talking about underlying assumptions. Those who are really skilled walk people through the process of identifying issues, shaping common understanding, and framing strategic choices.

If this sounds complex, that's because it is. But there are ways you can start honing these skills:

- Add more structure to your written and verbal communication. Group and logically order your main points, and keep things as succinct as possible.
- Prime your audience by giving them a heads-up on the overarching topics you want to address so that they are prepared to engage in a higher-level conversation, not just the tactical details.
- Practice giving the answer first, instead of building up to your main point.

Lisa didn't realize that the way she spoke created the perception that she was not strategic. She set about changing that, first by focusing her one-on-ones with her chief human resources officer (CHRO) on higher-level discussions and leaving tactical issues to email. She chose one or two strategic areas to focus on and made sure to frame issues in the context of the CHRO's and the CEO's top priorities.

Act: Make Time for Thinking and Embrace Conflict

In the early phase of our work together, Lisa kept a jam-packed schedule, running from meeting to meeting. She found it difficult to contribute strategically without the time to reflect on the issues and to ponder options. Recognizing that she was not bringing her full value to the table, she started to evaluate her tasks based on urgency and importance as outlined in Stephen Covey's 2×2 matrix.[1] She stopped going to meetings she didn't need to attend. She blocked out thinking time on her calendar and honored it, just as she would for scheduled meetings. And she fought back the initial guilt of "Am I doing real work when I'm just sitting at my desk thinking?"

Lisa also practiced other key skills. She learned to embrace debate and to invite challenge without letting it get personal so that she could ask tough questions. To do this, she focused on issues, not people, and used neutral peers to challenge her thinking. To manage the inevitable ambiguity that arises when you ask more questions, Lisa also learned to clarify her decision-making criteria, allowing her to better act in the face of imperfect information.

The quest to build your strategic skills can be uncomfortable. At first, you might feel like you're kicking up sand in the ocean. Your vision will be blurred as you manage through the unsettling feelings that come with challenging your own assumptions and gaining comfort with conflict and curiosity. Once the dust settles, however, and you're able to contribute at a higher level, you'll be glad you took the risk.

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How to Help (Without Micromanaging)

by Colin M. Fisher, Teresa M. Amabile, and Julianna Pillemer

Micromanagement" is a dirty word in today's workplaces. Bosses who intervene too often or too extensively in their subordinates' activities get a bad reputation, and most forward-thinking organizations have come to value employee autonomy more than oversight. Research shows that people have strong negative emotional and physiological reactions to unnecessary or unwanted help and that it can erode interpersonal relationships. Even the U.S. Army general George S. Patton, a leader in one of the most traditional command-and-control groups in the world, understood the danger of micromanaging: He famously said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

Managers shouldn't be completely laissez-faire, however, especially when subordinates aren't colocated, as was the case for many during the global Covid-19 pandemic. People doing complex work often need more than just superficial advice or encouragement; they need assistance that is both well-timed and appropriate to their issues—and providing it can be challenging without opportunities for serendipitous encounters in a physical office. Extensive research indicates that pervasive helping in an organization correlates with better performance than letting employees go it alone does. So how can you give subordinates the assistance they need without undermining their sense of efficacy and independence?

Over the past 10 years we've been studying how leaders effectively offer help without being perceived as micromanagers. We have observed and talked to people inside various companies, including a prominent strategy consulting firm (we'll call it ConsultCo) where we interviewed partners who were named by top management as exceptional hands-on leaders. At a design consultancy that's well-known for its helping culture (pseudonym: GlowDesign), we conducted a large-scale qualitative study using daily diaries and in-depth weekly interviews with help givers and receivers.[1] And we've run two behavioral experiments in the laboratory, exploring how 124 groups responded to differently timed interventions when asked to make decisions about opening a fictitious restaurant.[2]

Together those projects have yielded important insights into how managers can better assist their employees. As a starting point, your employees need to know that you're willing to offer help—and they must feel comfortable asking for it. Additionally, you need to have a baseline understanding of their work and its challenges, as well as time and energy to give. But just how and when should you roll up your sleeves to get involved in employees' work? We've uncovered three key strategies for being a hands-on boss without micromanaging: (1) Time your help so it comes when people are ready for it, (2) clarify that your role is to be a helper, and (3) align the rhythm of your involvement—its intensity and frequency—with people's specific needs.

Idea in Brief

Extensive research shows that when employees get hands-on managerial support, they perform better than when they're left to their own devices, but unnecessary or unwanted help can be demoralizing and counterproductive. So how do you intervene constructively?

The authors share three key lessons learned during 10 years of study: (1) Step in only when people are engaged in a challenging task and ready to accept help; (2) clarify that your role is to offer assistance, not take over the project or judge anyone; and (3) align the rhythm of your involvement to employees' needs, determining whether the situation calls for intensive guidance in the short term or intermittent path clearing over a prolonged period. These strategies are especially valuable for helping teams that are physically separated, as so many were during the pandemic.

Time Your Help Wisely

When involving yourself in your employees' work, timing matters, but not in the way you might expect. Conventional wisdom suggests that heading off potential issues is the best strategy (recall Benjamin Franklin's famous adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"). We've found, however, that the leaders who are viewed as the most helpful don't try to preempt every problem or dive in as soon as they recognize one. Instead they watch and listen until they believe their subordinates see the need for help and are ready to listen receptively. They understand that people are more willing to welcome assistance when they're already engaged in a task or a project and have experienced its challenges firsthand.

GlowDesign, where we spent two years studying leaders' helping behavior, offers some illustrative examples. In one case, a manager checked in on a shorthanded team and discovered what he felt were fundamental issues with the project's scope. But rather than jump in right away with assistance or advice, he simply told the project lead, Violet, that he was available. (All names in this article are pseudonyms.) "I offered help," he told us, but "it took a while for Violet to figure out how she could use me." She ultimately asked him to weigh in on several key matters.

Those known as great helpers at ConsultCo were similarly careful about the timing of their help. One of the firm's partners, Adriana, described her approach when some of her people were struggling with their work. She told us that even before she met with them, "I thought the team was on the wrong track. [But] when I got in the room, I listened. I limited my questions to clarifying questions to make sure I understood what they were saying. There are two reasons I did this. One is that these are smart people, and I have enough respect for them—even the most junior-tenured people in the firm—to know that the work they do is very valuable.… Second, I thought they would be more willing to rethink [their ideas] if they had a chance to first explain what they were doing.” By the end of the meeting, the team seemed ready for Adriana to offer suggestions, so she did.

Our experimental research—studying those 124 groups making entrepreneurial decisions—confirmed the importance of lending a hand at the right time. We found that when advice was given in the course of teams’ work, *after* problems had emerged rather than beforehand, members understood and valued it more. This led them to actually use the help, improve their processes, share more information, and make objectively better decisions than did groups that received more instruction at the start of their discussions.

What prompts employees to welcome assistance may vary from situation to situation. But we’d counsel managers not to provide input without first allowing those they supervise to gain knowledge of the task and express their views on it. In many cases, a well-timed cure may be better than that ounce of prevention.

Clarify That Your Role Is to Help

Even if the timing is right, intervening can go wrong when it isn’t clear why you are getting involved. Managers play a lot of different roles, and their responsibilities include evaluating employees and doling out rewards and punishments. This power dynamic can get in the way of effective help. When bosses step in, their involvement can imply that people are messing up in a big way. That's why employees often hide or downplay issues and fail to solicit guidance. They can become unreceptive to the assistance, defensive, or demoralized, which hinders creativity and performance. Therefore, as a leader at GlowDesign told us, managers must be careful "not to go in there and create so much anxiety that you're in a worse spot.... It can be like 'Here's the boss, and gosh, he's really unhappy with what we're doing.'"

Because seeking and receiving help can make people feel so vulnerable, managers need to clarify their roles when intervening in employees' work. They should explain that they are there to help, not to judge or take over. They need to foster what Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, calls psychological safety—an environment in which interpersonal risks are encouraged.

The importance of this framing was evident at GlowDesign. We found that leaders rated as particularly helpful took pains to persuade subordinates that they were stepping in for only one reason: to support their employees' work. Consider what happened when a team tasked with one of the firm's biggest projects was hobbled by several members' personal issues. The project leader, Aaron, emailed one of Glow's senior partners, Gary, for advice. Gary was the client's main contact at the firm, but Aaron knew him only slightly and was surprised when he volunteered to fly from Chicago to New York to help. Many people would balk at accepting such an offer, worrying that top managers lacked confidence in them. But Gary was careful to emphasize that he would not supplant Aaron as the person in charge. “I’m not here to change the project,” he said. “I’m just here to help you … to be your crutch.”

Across our research, we found that when managers clarified their intentions, as Gary did, employees were more candid about the problems they faced and more willing to accept help and work collaboratively to solve them. Don’t assume that employees concerned about performance reviews and pay can accurately discern your intentions. No matter how supportive you are as a boss, they won’t forget that part of your job is to monitor and assess them. So when you start taking a stronger hand in their work, assure them that you’re there as an adviser, not an evaluator. Be explicit about what you are trying to accomplish with your intervention.

Align the Rhythm of Your Involvement to People’s Needs

To give people useful help, leaders must take the time to fully understand employees’ problems, especially when the issues are thorny. If the work is complex, creative, and cognitively demanding, you’ll need to engage deeply. But that means more than delivering help with the right content. It also means allocating time and attention in a pattern that works for receivers. We call this the rhythm of involvement, and it will vary depending on whether employees need intensive *guidance* in the short term or intermittent *path clearing* over a prolonged period.

Concentrated guidance is required when employees encounter hurdles that can't be overcome with quick feedback or a few hours of input. In such scenarios, leaders collaborate closely with subordinates in long sessions tightly clustered over a few days. That might sound like the definition of micromanaging. Indeed, bosses who assisted in this way without ensuring that their people were ready for it and without clarifying their helper roles were perceived as taking over. Employees felt undermined, with morale and performance suffering as a result. But when managers instead began with the other strategies we've described, this kind of time-intensive deep help was heartily welcomed.

For example, Hazel, a senior manager at GlowDesign, successfully guided a team as it moved from the research phase of a project to the design phase. Though she had attended a brainstorming session early on, she had been hands-off until the team leader asked for help. She obliged but spent the first day listening and asking questions to better understand the project and ensure that the team was ready for her input. On the second and third days, she suggested a framework to help everyone identify and communicate their key insights, articulate ideas, and move forward. Her intense involvement over a short period wasn't viewed as a threat or a commentary on the team's performance; instead it eased the pressure enormously. Moreover, it marked a turning point for the project: The work done during those three days became the foundation of the client presentation, which led to contracts for several additional projects.

In the second form of help, path clearing, leaders offer assistance in briefer, intermittent intervals when employees face ongoing problems. For instance, if your team is short-staffed, you might stop by every few days for a half hour or so, to help with whatever needs doing—whether it's participating in an important client call or simply ordering lunch during a long work session.

Path clearers maintain enough general knowledge about the project to understand emerging needs but seldom dig into the core work. Rather, they look for smaller ways to give relief to their subordinates. That's how Kaya, a partner at ConsultCo, helped the members of one team who were so busy struggling to meet client demands that they barely had time to update her on what was happening. She found ways to take pressure off them in short, scattered bursts: by talking to individuals about their concerns, cleaning up the team's shared calendar, and handling meeting logistics with the client.

Leaders trying this approach shouldn't underestimate the importance of staying informed about the work. Those who fail to do so can provide only shallow criticism or vague advice when they drop in—interactions that Glow designers derisively referred to as "swoop and poops." So keep abreast of the issues your employees are facing, and step in when you see roadblocks you can remove.

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Our research suggests that leaders can help their employees in hands-on and meaningful ways—without being accused of micromanaging—if they pay careful attention to timing, articulate their helping role up front, and match the rhythm of their assistance to receivers' needs. These guidelines are especially important when teams are physically separated, as so many were during the ongoing pandemic. When workers aren't colocated, managers are more likely to either check in too frequently and interrupt their colleagues' flow or fall out of touch and leave employees adrift. People working from home or from any separate location can easily feel isolated, confused, or even abandoned. Thus being a hands-on manager in such situations is critical; it not only improves employees' performance but also lets people feel supported and connected.

However, intervening in your team's work while ignoring any one of our guidelines can render your help ineffective or even harmful—potentially worse than doing nothing. Offering preemptive advice can keep people from seeing its value. Failing to frame your role can allow subordinates to feel threatened and undermined. And using the wrong rhythm—especially not allocating enough time to be an effective guide or path clearer—can lead to superficial or off-target feedback or be perceived as an invasion, engendering cynicism rather than gratitude. You can easily avoid these micromanagement traps, however. Follow the three strategies we've outlined and become a boss who truly comes through for employees when they need it most.

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QUICK READ

Is Your Hybrid Team Losing Steam?

by Heidi K. Gardner

Chris's product management team is faltering. Despite hitting their deadlines and churning out the basic product upgrades, sales are down, and it's hard to remember the last time they had a breakthrough idea. They want to innovate but can't seem to muster the energy to do it.

Chris's team is hardly alone. Business stressors like layoffs, economic headwinds, and geopolitical instability are depleting teams, causing one in four employees globally to feel burned out.[1] These factors are compounded by the strains of hybrid working, which has made collaboration harder for increasingly siloed and fragmented teams.[2]

Yet in this era of cutbacks and constraint, not only do we expect our teams to do more with less, but we need them to innovate—and quickly—to drive growth.

The blow to effective collaboration matters enormously. Smarter collaboration leads to higher revenue and profit, more-comprehensive solutions, and deeper customer and employee satisfaction. But until these benefits start to flow in, collaboration is often seen as costly, risky, and time-consuming. With a boost of energy, however, people are much more motivated to put their heads together and come up with novel solutions.

Leaders who promote positive energy are associated with stronger innovation and organizational performance, as well as employees who are more engaged, productive, and satisfied with their jobs. These leaders are not necessarily charismatic or extroverted or any other specific personality type. Rather, research shows that leaders who are seen as energizing behave in certain ways, such as exhibiting compassion and humility and recognizing others' efforts with generosity and gratitude.[3]

Beyond that baseline, though, today's complicated times require even more from leaders because teams need different approaches depending on why their energy is flagging. In our forthcoming research, my colleagues and I surveyed 3,000 employees and conducted in-depth interviews with leaders and working professionals. We discovered three different paths—channeling, generating, and multiplying—that successful, energizing leaders must take to harness positive energy for strong hybrid collaboration and its resulting performance outcomes.

Channeling Energy

In some teams, the problem isn't that individual team members lack energy but rather that their efforts are scattered across too many different projects at once. A leader of this kind of team needs to channel energy by focusing everyone's disparate attention and efforts in the same direction to become more collectively powerful.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Business stressors like layoffs, economic headwinds, and geopolitical instability are depleting teams, causing one in four employees globally to feel burned out. These factors are compounded by the strains of hybrid working, which has made collaboration harder for teams that are increasingly siloed and fragmented.

Yet in this era of cutbacks and constraint, not only do we expect our teams to do more with less, but we need them to innovate—and quickly—to drive growth.

The Solution

Teams need different approaches from leaders depending on why their energy is flagging. In her research, the author discovered three different paths that successful, energizing leaders can take to harness positive energy for strong hybrid collaboration and its resulting performance outcomes: channeling, generating, and multiplying.

Since the rise of hybrid working, time spent in virtual meetings has skyrocketed (one Microsoft study showed an increase of 252% since February 2020).[4] Employees are increasingly pulled into back-to-back meetings, leaving them no time to even handle critical follow-up tasks, let alone recharge. In these situations, the problem is not only that people's energy is sapped by the constant switching costs but also that their remaining energy is split across too many priorities.[5] And at companies with recent layoffs, remaining employees may be tapped for even more tasks and projects.

Another insidious aspect for these teams is that managers may misinterpret team members' divided energy and attention. For example, a manager of a hybrid team might jump to a conclusion that a person working from home is actually lazy, checked out, or otherwise unhelpful when the actual root cause of their low energy is overcommitment. This is a case of the fundamental attribution error, a common cognitive bias where people downplay situational factors and exaggerate personality-related ones. This faulty assumption leads to a fixation on monitoring inputs or micromanaging, which were cited in our research as some of the most common ways leaders deplete energy.[6]

This joint problem of overstretched employees plus leaders who are not empathetic enough about their situation is so prevalent in hybrid teams that leaders need to investigate why their team's energy seems so low. Asking them directly is one approach (especially if it's part of a naturally flowing conversation), but in certain cases—such as when trust or psychological safety is low—an anonymous, open-ended team survey could generate more-candid feedback.

In either case, the leader of an overstretched team needs to channel the collective's energy by focusing disparate energies toward common aims. They must also do the following:

Emphasize overarching goals—not missed opportunities. Even if people have many responsibilities, it's easier to cope when the objective is clear. During your meetings and in-person interactions, regularly reframe competing demands in this context. For example, emphasize how various initiatives come together to improve overall customer service, or visually chart out how different work streams merge into a single product-development road map.

On the flip side, don't stew over the opportunity cost of this vision: Once you've made and communicated priorities, accept that your team needs to say no to some new opportunities that might arise. As one survey respondent put it, "Don't expend your energy on what didn't happen." Workers are already on edge, so don't make it worse by introducing unnecessary stressors.

Make overcommitment transparent—but don't valorize busyness. Great leaders create a forum for direct reports to share their priorities with peers so that people can spot overlaps, competing demands, and ways to help one another. Because it's easy to lose track of others' work when they're out of sight, holding this discussion frequently is especially important for hybrid teams. But make sure the focus is on problem-solving ways to channel employees' attention rather than on celebrating folks who are swamped with work.

Leaders who funnel brain power to a common goal make the difference. As you might recall from your introductory physics class, the first law of thermodynamics tells us that the total energy of systems remains constant. What matters is how that energy is directed.

Generating Energy

Some teams are genuinely depleted overall. Groups of employees who survived the latest round of layoffs often experience a sense of exhaustion and emotional turmoil, having lost frequent contact with people who were not only coworkers but also friends.[7] The hybrid or remote environment compounds feelings of isolation because in online meetings we typically have fewer shared sidebar conversations that build rapport and interpersonal trust.

To combat this problem, leaders need to generate energy—essentially building something from nothing. This approach is potentially the most well understood of the three outlined in this article and was an area of focus for organizational leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic. That said, our research has surfaced three crucial actions leaders can take to generate energy:

Co-create a sense of meaning—don't force your own vision. People often get caught up in the minutiae of their fields or customer engagements, but adopting a bigger-picture view of how they're helping clients, patients, or other stakeholders has measurable and lasting effects on motivation and performance. Leaders trying to increase a group's energy should work with employees to unearth these connections between their work and a greater purpose. Don't make your own purpose something you force onto others (or even politely impose on them); this kind of egotistical or self-serving behavior is one of the biggest energy drains our survey respondents identified, whereas co-creation is respectful and empowering.

Elevate others' dignity and worth—not just their utility. Leaders need to treat their people as multifaceted individuals who are integral to the company's success. Acknowledging their special attributes can fill them with a deeper sense of value and determination. As one survey taker noted, these leaders "ask how you are with a smile, listen to what you have to say, and make eye contact."

The opposite behavior is using employees as a mere means to an end, which can be a bigger trap in a remote context—where email, efficiency, and the quantity of output tend to be overemphasized.

Focus on momentum—not only the end goal. As shown by Teresa Amabile's research, frequent progress in one's work boosts positive emotions, motivation, and creative output, whereas setbacks of any size can have an outsize negative effect.[8] So, while a group might not have the energy to take a big leap forward, small achievements can play a huge role in generating momentum and offsetting the energy loss associated with defeat. These wins shouldn't occur haphazardly but instead be grounded in a strategic goal that has been divided into short-term milestones.

Multiplying Energy

This is perhaps the most powerful of the three paths to boosting energy. Leaders who are energy multipliers seek out and harness the seemingly unrelated variety of strengths, talents, and experiences of team members.

Back when I was leading teams at McKinsey & Company, it became clear that certain teams were fully tapping into each team member's professional, cultural, and educational diversity, while others seemed to coast on common experiences, leading to far less innovative or insightful solutions.

In hybrid teams, the risk is that unique sources of strength are not even uncovered, let alone put to their full use. Remote work is associated with more siloed working, which limits people's opportunities to not just understand others' knowledge bases and perspectives but potentially to uncover their own strengths as well.[9]

Our research shows that energy multipliers:

Reveal their own idiosyncrasies—despite the vulnerability.

By speaking about the various aspects of their expertise, personality, and life experiences, leaders get others thinking and sharing about their own multidimensional profiles—which is generally a fun and exciting exercise for people to engage in.

One survey taker gave this advice to his manager as the single biggest energy booster: "Talk to me about what's going on in your life and who you really are." While this self-revelation might feel risky, it's actually a low-cost, proven way of building trust that's often lacking in hybrid teams.

Notice others' different sides—not just your own. Leaders shouldn't talk about themselves *too* much. They must also show interest in their employees' complex competencies and viewpoints. If asking people about themselves doesn't get them energized, not much else will. And according to our research subjects, this interest can lead to a "morale boost," "greater focus," and "wanting to do more," among countless other benefits.

Focus on learning and growth—and not so much on control. Energy multipliers are not afraid of experimenting or losing control. They embolden others to use their individual strengths to make original and valuable contributions to the team's strategic goals. If someone misses their target, the energy-multiplying leader doesn't consider it a failure but rather an opportunity for growing skills and business sense. In a similar vein, energy multipliers don't micromanage—they trust their people to do their best to improve and perform. But they also don't leave them in the dark, especially if they need guidance working through an issue.

One example comes from Abigail Posner, director of creative works at Google. A creative team's morale initially sank when its clients weren't acting on the team's written strategic recommendations for their advertising campaigns. The advertisers struggled to envision how the changes could help.

The team leader was known for celebrating differences, however, which opened up the opportunity for one person with a filmmaking background to jump in and create a mock YouTube ad that incorporated the recommended changes. Then a former journalist volunteered to craft sales materials for the new ad. Combining these talents allowed the team to present their recommendations in a way that was more resonant for their clients, which resulted in greater client value, increased sales, and a reenergized team.

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Smarter collaboration requires infusions of energy. Leaders of collaborative teams have the opportunity to promote stronger results, faster innovation, and higher employee engagement when they generate, channel, or multiply employees' energy. What we've seen from the upheavals brought by Covid, economic uncertainty, and global instability is that low or negative energy is a threat to business growth. And as this uncertainty still prevails, positive energy is no longer a nice-to-have but a must-have so that teams can focus, innovate, and ultimately grow their businesses.

Adapted from hbr.org, May 5, 2023. Reprint H07M52

7

Make the Most of Your One-on-One Meetings

by Steven G. Rogelberg

Turnover was high on Bill's team—higher, in fact, than on most other teams at his company. Although Bill thought of himself as a good manager, exit interviews with his departing team members suggested that they hadn't felt meaningfully engaged or fully supported in their roles and had tended to step on one another's toes with their assignments.

What, exactly, was Bill doing wrong? One area stood out when I spoke with him and his team: He held fewer regular one-on-one (1:1) meetings with his direct reports than his peers at the company did. When he did meet with team members individually, the subject tended to be a critical issue he needed help with rather than their work or their development.

Bill, a composite of managers I've worked with and studied, clearly had a blind spot when it came to 1:1s. Such blind spots are not uncommon. Of 250 direct reports I surveyed recently, nearly half rated their 1:1 experiences as suboptimal. That's hardly surprising, given that few organizations provide strong guidance or training for managers about when and how to meet individually with their employees. But my research shows that managers who don't invest in such conversations—who view them as a burden, hold them too infrequently, or manage them poorly—risk leaving their team members disconnected, both functionally and emotionally.

The best managers recognize that 1:1s are not an add-on to their role—they are foundational to it. Those who fully embrace these meetings as the place where leadership happens can make their teams' day-to-day output better and more efficient, build trust and psychological safety, and improve employees' experiences, motivation, and engagement. The managers thrive in turn, because their success is tied to the performance of those reporting to them.

I've been studying teams, leadership, engagement, and meetings at work for decades, and in the past three years I've set out specifically to learn what makes 1:1s work best by doing three studies: a global survey of 1,000 knowledge workers, a U.S. survey of 250 people who either lead or participate in 1:1s, and interviews with nearly 50 top leaders at various *Fortune* 100 companies. I've discovered that although no one-size-fits-all approach exists, there are some useful guidelines for managers. Most important is that the manager should consider the meeting a focused space for the direct report and make that explicit. The meeting should be dominated by topics relating to the needs, concerns, and hopes of the employee, who should take an active role in presenting them. As the manager, your responsibilities are to ensure that the meetings occur, actively facilitate them, encourage genuine conversation, ask good questions, offer support, and help each team member get what's needed for optimal short-term performance and long-term growth.

Idea in Brief

Few organizations provide strong guidance or training for managers on meeting individually with their employees, but the author's research shows that managers who don't hold these meetings frequently enough or who manage them poorly risk leaving their team members disconnected, both functionally and emotionally. When the meetings are done well, they can make a team's day-to-day activities more efficient and better, build trust and psychological safety, and improve employees' experience, motivation, and engagement at work. The author has found that although there's no one-size-fits-all approach to one-on-ones, they are most successful when the meeting is dominated by topics of importance to the direct report rather than issues that are top of mind for the manager. Managers should focus on making sure the meetings take place, creating space for genuine conversation, asking good questions, offering support, and helping team members get what they need to thrive in both their short-term performance and their long-term growth.

In this article I'll lay out how to prepare for and facilitate effective 1:1s.

Before the Meetings

Setting up your 1:1s should entail more than dropping invites onto your team members' calendars. You should lay the groundwork for your conversations and plan the logistics to best fit each report's unique needs.

Communicate the initiative or your reboot of the initiative

Whether or not the practice of holding 1:1s is new to your team, announce it at a team meeting so that everyone gets the message at the same time and no one feels singled out. Tie the meetings to your organization's values (such as the importance of hearing employees' voices) and to your personal values (such as striving to be a supportive leader). Also stress that these conversations are not meant to signal dissatisfaction with your team's work and are not about micromanaging; rather, they are opportunities for you and each member to get to know each other better, learn about challenges, and discuss careers, and for you to give help when it's needed. This is also a good moment to tell your team members what you need from them to make the meetings successful: They should drive the agenda with key priorities, be curious, be actively engaged, communicate candidly, think deeply about problems and solutions, and be willing to ask for help and act on feedback.

Determine cadence

My research suggests that you should adopt one of three plans for the frequency of 1:1s:

1. You meet with each of your team members *once a week* for 30 minutes or so. In my surveys, employees, regardless of

job level, rated this approach the most desirable; it also correlated with the highest levels of engagement.

2. In the second-highest-rated plan you meet *every other week* for 45 to 60 minutes.
3. In a *hybrid* plan you meet with some team members weekly and others every two weeks.

Whichever plan you choose, aim to spend roughly equivalent amounts of time with employees over the course of a month so that all team members get the same in-person support from you. To determine the right cadence, consider:

- *Team member experience.* Weekly meetings are ideal for more-junior employees and those who are new to the team. They allow you to provide coaching and other support for the employees' growth and development and to build a relationship.
- *Manager tenure.* Similarly, if *you* are new to the team, weekly meetings are ideal for establishing relationships and alignment.
- *Team size.* If your team is large (10 or more), consider holding 1:1s every other week so that you can stagger them across a longer time span. You may need to reduce the time allotted to each meeting. To ease the load associated with a large team, some managers introduce peer mentoring, in

which team members give guidance and feedback to one another rather than rely solely on the manager.

- *Remote or in person*. If your team is remote, weekly meetings can help counter a lack of spontaneous face-to-face contact.
- *Team member preference*. Finally, give your employees a voice in the decision.

I've seen some managers, mostly senior leaders, opt for three or four weeks between 1:1s, but investing only 60 minutes or so with each team member every month makes building a trusting relationship difficult. And because more-recent events are easier to recall, the longer time lapse also means that you're less likely to discuss any issues that arose several weeks prior to the meeting. These meetings are most effective when you can build momentum around specific areas of the direct report's activities and growth. A monthly cadence makes that more challenging. But if your team members are seasoned and have worked with you a long time, and you are readily available for impromptu conversations, this cadence can work and is preferable to nothing. However, employees rated this option as least desirable, and it was associated with smaller gains in engagement.

Finally, avoid canceling 1:1s, which can hamper your team members' progress and make them feel that they are low on your priority list. This was one of Bill's problems: He readily canceled these meetings if he got busy. That sometimes demoralized his team members; they also found themselves duplicating efforts or working at cross-purposes because they hadn't had a chance to coordinate their work through Bill. If you must cancel, reschedule the meeting right away, ideally for the same week—even if that means moving the meeting up rather than moving it out. Another option is to reduce the length of the meeting: Some time together is better than none at all.

Set a location

In my research, employees rated virtual 1:1s as slightly less desirable than those held in person, but they rated the ultimate value of the meetings similarly regardless of which form they'd taken. If you can meet in person, choose a location where you and your employee will feel at ease, present, and free of distractions. In my surveys the most highly rated location was the manager's office or a conference room; the lowest was the direct report's office. Support for outside locations, such as coffee shops, or taking a walk near the office, was uneven, so don't assume that everyone would welcome them. Talk to your team members in advance to gauge where they feel most comfortable.

Create an agenda

Many managers assume that 1:1s are too informal to require an agenda, but my research shows that having one is a strong predictor of the effectiveness of the meeting, whether it was created in advance (which is ideal) or at the meeting itself (if necessary).

Even more critical, though, is the employee's involvement in the agenda's creation: Both direct reports and managers rated meetings most highly when the reports contributed to or established the agenda themselves. Bill's habit of organizing his 1:1s around his own priorities and needs meant that his team members' concerns were usually relegated to the end of the meeting—and often went unaddressed if time ran out.

Collaborating on an agenda can be as simple as having each party create a list of topics to discuss. In the meeting the two should work through first the employee's list and then the manager's, as time allows. (Both should review their notes from previous 1:1s while preparing their lists in case some topic requires follow-up.)

Alternatively, some managers create the agenda from broad questions, such as: What would you like to talk about today? How are things going with you and your team? What are your current priorities, and are there any problems or concerns you would like to talk through? Is there anything I can help you with or anywhere I can better support you? What do I need to know about or understand from your perspective?

A warning: Both these approaches tend to prioritize immediate tactical issues and fires to be put out. However you plan your agendas, periodically weave in longer-horizon topics such as career planning and developmental opportunities—by either taking five or 10 minutes at every meeting to discuss those areas or dedicating one out of every three or four meetings to addressing them. (See the sidebar "Sample Questions for 1:1s" to get a sense of issues that should be discussed over time.)

Sample Questions for 1:1s

Work style preferences

- Tell me about the best manager you've ever had. What did that person do that you thought was most effective and helpful?

Well-being and engagement

- What is your favorite part of the job?
- Least favorite?

Roadblocks, obstacles, or concerns

- Is anything slowing you down or blocking you right now?
- How can I help or support you?

Culture and team dynamics

- What aspects of our team culture do you think we should maintain, change, or work on?

Asking for input

- What feedback from me could be helpful—any particular projects, tasks, skills?
- Would you like more or less coaching or direction from me?

Career development and growth

- What would you like to be doing in five years?
- What work are you doing here that is most in line with your long-term goals?

Personal connections

- What are your favorite podcasts, books, or hobbies?

At the Meetings

Once you've prepared for a meeting, a fruitful discussion will depend on your ability to create a setting in which your employee feels comfortable. A valuable 1:1 addresses both the practical needs and the personal needs—to feel respected, heard, valued, trusted, and included—of the employee. To ensure that a meeting does so:

Set the tone

First, be present. Turn off email alerts, put your phone away, and silence text notifications. Remind yourself as the meeting begins that it is fundamentally about your employee's needs, performance, and engagement.

As you go into the meeting, check your emotional state. Research shows that the mood you bring to a meeting has a contagion effect, so start out with energy and optimism. Reiterate your goals and hopes for the meeting and then move to some non-work-related topics, rapport building, wins, or appreciation to generate momentum and foster feelings of psychological safety. One problem for Bill was that he viewed 1:1s as merely another task on his already long list—something to just get done. That affected how he facilitated (or failed to facilitate), how he listened, how he collaborated, and how he engaged.

Listen more than you talk

The biggest predictor of a 1:1's success, according to my research, is the employee's active participation as measured by the amount of time that person talks during the meeting. The ideal is anywhere from 50% to 90%. The agenda will have some influence on that, but you as the manager should carefully avoid talking more than your employee does.

In addition, listen actively to fully understand your direct report before you speak yourself. Display genuine interest without judgment and acknowledge the employee's viewpoint even if you disagree with it. Ask questions that clarify and constructively challenge that viewpoint. Encourage your team member to provide thoughts on the matters at hand and potential solutions to problems. Stay vigilant about your body language and reactions to ensure that you're creating a welcoming and safe space.

Add your perspective

Once you've listened closely, there will be moments in the meeting when you need to contribute your point of view. A 1:1 provides an excellent opportunity for you to give honest and specific feedback on your direct report's perspectives or actions. It is also a good place for you to engage in collaborative problem solving by truly understanding whatever issue is at hand, pooling information, identifying root causes, and creating a solution that both parties feel good about. If the team member's solution is viable—even if it's not better than your own—it's important that you go with it. That sends a strong message and creates more commitment to the team member's proposed path forward.

Be flexible

As you work through your established agenda, allow the conversation to move organically as needed to provide value. Focus on the items that are most critical. If some items go unaddressed, move them to the following 1:1. Let your employee know at the outset that real-time changes can be made to the agenda if a critical item emerges.

Also, to best connect with each direct report, consider that person's preferences regarding communication, collaboration, and so forth, and adjust your leadership approach accordingly. That will increase engagement and inclusion, deepen the relationship, and create trust.

End well

Clarify takeaways and action items for both parties, including how you will support next steps. When both the manager and the employee document these, chances are better that the actions will be carried out. It also builds continuity between meetings and allows for needed follow-up. After Bill implemented this change, he was reminded that his 1:1s were not mere transactions to get through but, rather, represented employees' evolving stories—something to be nurtured and developed over time. Finally, show gratitude and appreciation for your direct report's time—and start and stop on schedule to demonstrate those feelings.

Improve over Time

Ideally, both parties should leave the conversation feeling valued, respected, and well-informed, with clarity about next steps on projects, solutions to problems, and the commitments that each of them has made. However, the most important metric for success is whether your employee found the meeting both valuable tactically and fulfilling personally.

To learn where you stand and to improve these meetings over time, start by asking each team member for feedback and ideas to make future 1:1s better. Or you can anonymously survey your team with three basic questions: What's going well with the 1:1s? What's not going well? Do you have ideas for improving them? Know that what works at one time for your 1:1s may not work at another time, and what is comfortable for one direct report may not be so for another. So even if you think your current pattern is successful, keep trying new things.

What Bill learned from his first survey about 1:1s was sobering. Even more than in the exit interviews, team members raised concerns about whether he really cared about their performance or growth, citing his frequent cancellation of meetings and saying that they often couldn't get a word in edgewise. But once Bill had taken their feedback to heart, the atmosphere on his team began to shift. As he committed to meeting regularly with his employees on topics of importance to them, he found that they seemed more committed to—and proficient at—their work.

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Regular individual meetings with each of your team members may feel like a burden. But meeting for 30 minutes each week with one person adds up to no more than 25 hours over the course of a year. That's not too high a price to pay to bolster your team's and your company's performance; support retention and prevent you from spending just as much time (or more) recruiting and onboarding replacements; and help each of your team members grow and achieve.

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QUICK READ

How to Give (and Receive) Critical Feedback

by Patrick Thean

What's the biggest challenge new managers face when trying to grow in their roles? Answers could include broad, complex, and difficult-to-qualify problems like figuring out how to fulfill the company's vision, retain clientele, or lead a productive team. While these goals are worthy of pursuit, there is one overarching skill leaders need to achieve them all: building strong relationships with their direct reports.

As a new manager, your job is no longer just to guide yourself. It's also to guide others. That means you'll be having more tough conversations than ever before. To help your direct reports stay productive, be positive, and deliver the work you need to reach your collective goals, you'll need to be a masterful communicator and give them the feedback they need to grow. You must do all of this with positive intent and the objective of building trust. Your relationships will be foundational to your ability to gain influence, motivate others, and succeed in your role.

The problem is that new leaders often procrastinate having difficult conversations at the expense of themselves and their teams. At the root of this feeling is usually a lack of experience and practice—both of which can be gained with intention and time.

Here are two especially “spicy” conversations that all new managers face, and how to navigate them now and in the future.

Conversation #1: Giving Feedback to Direct Reports

The first piece of advice I like to give to new leaders is: Feedback is love. Feedback isn’t some scary monster out to destroy the self-esteem of your team and make them hate you. Instead, I like to think of giving and receiving useful feedback as a bond builder that creates relationships able to weather the storms of a market change, a recession, or any other organizational road bump that may come your way. If there is an issue, you want to resolve it before it turns into a bigger problem. (Who knows? It may even get resolved in 10 minutes, but you’ll never know if you ignore it!)

A successful leader recognizes that candor is a worthy skill to hone. It takes courage to show up for your people and be honest about their performance. It takes practice to ensure that critical feedback comes from a place of nonjudgment and respect.

How to have the conversation

As a new leader, you should be having regular weekly or biweekly one-on-one meetings with each of your team members to check in on their work and offer your support. This is a great time to share feedback (both positive and negative). Don't wait until your year-end review—give people an opportunity to listen, learn, and grow before then.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

New leaders often put off difficult discussions at the expense of themselves and their teams. This feeling is rooted in a lack of experience and practice—both of which can be gained with intention and time.

The Solution

There are two especially "spicy" conversations that all new managers face: giving feedback and receiving feedback.

Think of *giving feedback* as a way to build bonds with direct reports. Take a coaching approach. Instead of telling someone, "Hey, you filled this report out all wrong, and I need you to fix it," begin by giving them the benefit of the doubt. Then offer guidance, explain the impact changing their behavior will have, and invite them to respond.

It's important that team members feel you're open to *receiving feedback* too. They should feel safe expressing their thoughts without fear of retribution. If people seem hesitant to approach you, ask for feedback directly and show your appreciation by taking it seriously. Repeating what they say is one way of assuring them that you're listening.

You should go into a feedback discussion with a welcoming energy and remain present, giving your undivided attention to the person in front of you. You might start off by saying something like, "I have some feedback I'd like to share with you about [topic]. Is that alright?"

When delivering critical or negative feedback, take a coaching approach. Instead of telling your direct report, “Hey, you filled this report out all wrong, and I need you to fix it,” begin by giving them the benefit of the doubt and then offer them guidance. For example, better language to use would be: “I know this might be an unfamiliar process. Here are some areas where I see room for improvement.” Explain the impact these improvements would have on the project, team, or goal to ensure your direct report understands the “why” behind your feedback. Then, allow them space to respond. You can even prompt them with a question like, “How does that sound to you?” or “What’s your reaction to this?”

By changing your approach and providing focus and understanding, you’re communicating to the employee that you care about their opinions. It’s also possible that there’s another side of the story you aren’t considering. Maybe your direct report needs more resources. Maybe they’ve received insufficient training. Whatever it is, hearing them out will help you provide them with the support they need.

You can end the conversation with an offer to help: “How can I support you better in the future?” If you indicate that you’re thinking deeply about their response, they’ll be more likely to come to you for advice down the line.

Conversation #2: Receiving Feedback from Direct Reports

The wonderful thing about feedback is that it flows upstream as well. Some managers may be tempted to take a "what I say goes" attitude when it comes to their leadership style, but part of that bond building comes from being open and welcoming feedback from your direct reports. The more honest and detailed direct reports are about their feedback, the stronger the bond. Open communication is a good indicator of integrity, trust, and a healthy work environment.

By giving direct reports the opportunity to provide feedback, you're also showing them that their opinions and frustrations are important to you. Being receptive to productive feedback, good or bad, and taking it seriously are hallmarks of a successful leader.

How to have the conversation

First, you need to create a psychologically safe space where your team members feel comfortable expressing thoughts, doubts, and perspectives without the fear of a consequence.

When leaders are close-minded and dictatorial, employees can easily build up resentment and fail to communicate their displeasure. Cultivating a culture of honest communication between yourself and your direct reports is crucial. You can do this by sharing vulnerably when the opportunity arises and openly appreciating team members who do the same.

For example, if a direct report comes to you with a problem, tell them a story about a time when you were in their shoes, facing a similar challenge. Let them know that you recognize it's not easy to ask for help, and thank them for having the courage to approach you. If relevant, you can also openly tell stories about receiving difficult feedback from team members in the past. Share the ways these discussions ultimately benefited your relationships. This will let your direct reports know that you're open to feedback and that you don't always have all the answers.

If people still seem hesitant to approach you, ask directly for feedback and show your appreciation by taking it seriously when received. Even small shifts in language, like starting your one-on-ones with "Please tell me when I'm wrong—I want to have all the information here to make sure we are both successful in our roles," is a huge step in the right direction. When a direct report expresses their opinions and frustrations, repeat back what they say to you to be sure you're on the same page. For instance, you can say, "I'm hearing that you'd like me to send out the agenda before team meetings so that you have more time to prepare. Is that right?"

Finally, work on implementing the feedback thereafter, and follow up with your team member about the steps you're taking to improve the situation. Doing so will prove that you've taken action and are truly open to positive change. Eventually, the bond between you will grow stronger and the conversations will lose a little bit of their bite.

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"Spicy" conversations are no one's cup of tea, and every leader's privilege. Remind yourself that effective communication is something many people struggle with and it will take practice to master. As a first-time manager, you need to develop this skill to be successful. Once you do, you'll find it much easier to maintain healthy and open communication with your team, leading to a better work environment, a happy and joyful staff, and a growing and sustainable business.

Adapted from hbr.org, June 30, 2023. Reprint H07PFK

8

Collaborative Overload

by Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant

Collaboration is taking over the workplace. As business becomes increasingly global and cross-functional, silos are breaking down, connectivity is increasing, and teamwork is seen as a key to organizational success. According to data we have collected over the past two decades, the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50% or more.

Certainly, we find much to applaud in these developments. However, when consumption of a valuable resource spikes that dramatically, it should also give us pause. Consider a typical week in your own organization. How much time do people spend in meetings, on the phone, and responding to emails? At many companies the proportion hovers around 80%, leaving employees little time for all the critical work they must complete on their own. Performance suffers as they are buried under an avalanche of requests for input or advice, access to resources, or attendance at a meeting. They take assignments home, and soon, according to a large body of evidence on stress, burnout and turnover become real risks.

What's more, research we've done across more than 300 organizations shows that the distribution of collaborative work is often extremely lopsided. In most cases, 20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employees. As people become known for being both capable and willing to help, they are drawn into projects and roles of growing importance. Their giving mindset and desire to help others quickly enhances their performance and reputation. As a recent study led by Ning Li, of the University of Iowa, shows, a single "extra miler"—an employee who frequently contributes beyond the scope of his or her role—can drive team performance more than all the other members combined.

But this "escalating citizenship," as the University of Oklahoma professor Mark Bolino calls it, only further fuels the demands placed on top collaborators. We find that what starts as a virtuous cycle soon turns vicious. Soon helpful employees become institutional bottlenecks: Work doesn't progress until they've weighed in. Worse, they are so overtaxed that they're no longer personally effective. And more often than not, the volume and diversity of work they do to benefit others goes unnoticed, because the requests are coming from other units, varied offices, or even multiple companies. In fact, when we use network analysis to identify the strongest collaborators in organizations, leaders are typically surprised by at least half the names on their lists. In our quest to reap the rewards of collaboration, we have inadvertently created open markets for it without recognizing the costs. What can leaders do to manage these demands more effectively?

Idea in Brief

The Situation

Over the past two decades, the amount of time managers and employees spend on collaborative work has ballooned. At many companies people now spend about 80% of their time in meetings or answering colleagues' requests.

The Problem

Although the benefits of collaboration are well documented, the costs often go unrecognized. When demands for collaboration run too high or aren't spread evenly through the organization, workflow bottlenecks and employee burnout result.

The Solution

Leaders must learn to better manage collaboration in their companies by mapping supply and demand, eliminating or redistributing work, and incentivizing people to collaborate more efficiently.

Precious Personal Resources

First, it's important to distinguish among the three types of "collaborative resources" that individual employees invest in others to create value: informational, social, and personal. *Informational* resources are knowledge and skills—expertise that can be recorded and passed on. *Social* resources involve one's awareness, access, and position in a network, which can be used to help colleagues better collaborate with one another. *Personal* resources include one's own time and energy.

These three resource types are not equally efficient. Informational and social resources can be shared—often in a single exchange—without depleting the collaborator's supply. That is, when I offer you knowledge or network awareness, I also retain it for my own use. But an individual employee's time and energy are finite, so each request to participate in or approve decisions for a project leaves less available for that person's own work.

Unfortunately, personal resources are often the default demand when people want to collaborate. Instead of asking for specific informational or social resources—or better yet, searching in existing repositories such as reports or knowledge libraries—people ask for hands-on assistance they may not even need. An exchange that might have taken five minutes or less turns into a 30-minute calendar invite that strains personal resources on both sides of the request.

Consider a case study from a blue-chip professional services firm. When we helped the organization map the demands facing a group of its key employees, we found that the top collaborator—let's call him Vernell—had 95 connections based on incoming requests. But only 18% of the requesters said they needed more personal access to him to achieve their business goals; the rest were content with the informational and social resources he was providing. The second most connected person was Sharon, with

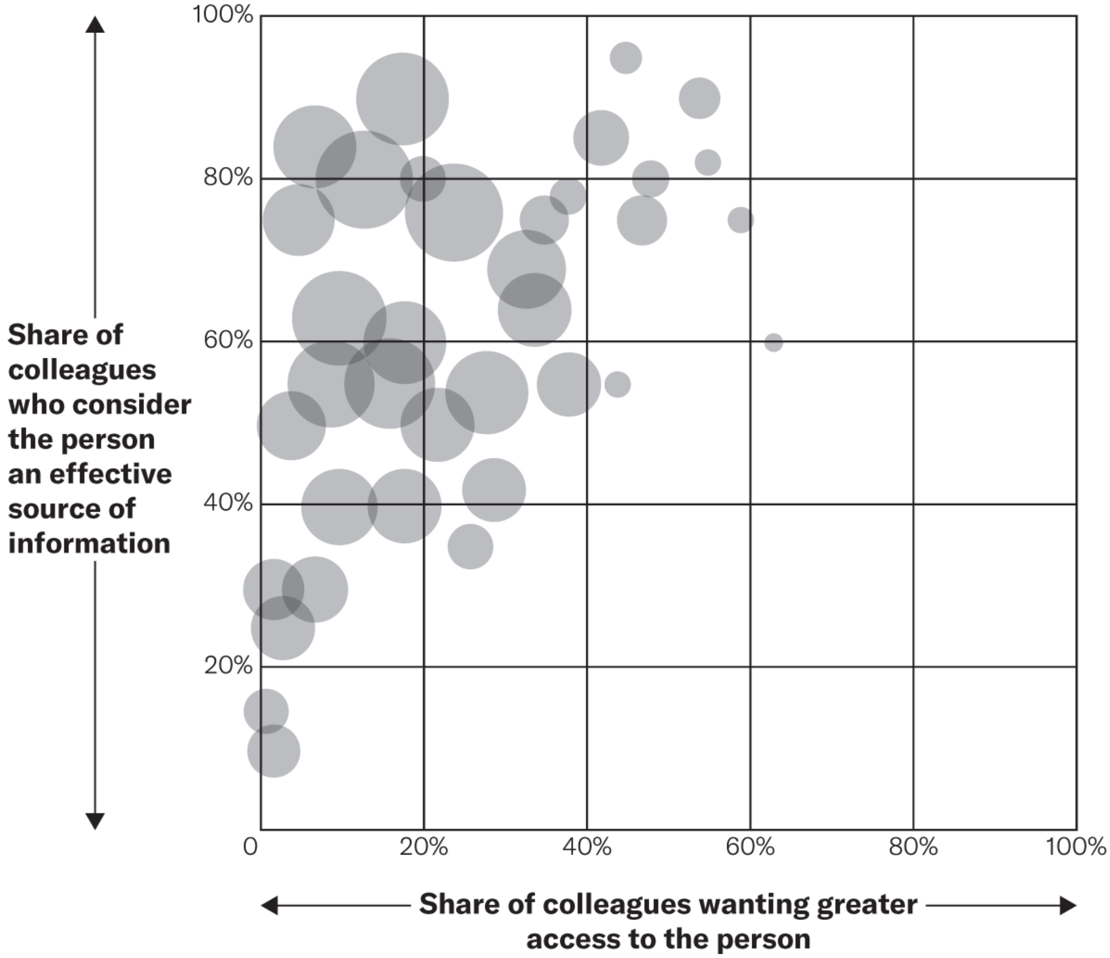
89 people in her network, but her situation was markedly different, and more dangerous, because 40% of them wanted more time with her—a significantly greater draw on her personal resources.

We find that as the percentage of requesters seeking more access moves beyond about 25, it hinders the performance of both the individual and the group and becomes a strong predictor of voluntary turnover. As well-regarded collaborators are overloaded with demands, they may find that no good deed goes unpunished.

The exhibit "In demand, yet disengaged," reflecting data on business unit line leaders across a sample of 20 organizations, illustrates the problem. People at the top center and right of the chart—that is, those seen as the best sources of information and in highest demand as collaborators in their companies—have the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores, as represented by the size of their bubbles. Our research shows that this ultimately results in their either leaving their organizations (taking valuable knowledge and network resources with them) or staying and spreading their growing apathy to their colleagues.

In demand, yet disengaged

Data on leaders across 20 organizations shows that those regarded by colleagues as the best information sources and most desirable collaborators have the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores, as represented by the size of their bubbles.



Leaders can solve this problem in two ways: by streamlining and redistributing responsibilities for collaboration and by rewarding effective contributions.

Redistributing the Work

Any effort to increase your organization's collaborative efficiency should start with an understanding of the existing supply and demand. Employee surveys, electronic communications tracking, and internal systems such as 360-degree feedback and CRM programs can provide valuable data on the volume, type, origin, and destination of requests, as can more in-depth network analyses and tools. For example, Do.com monitors calendars and provides daily and weekly reports to both individual employees and managers about time spent in meetings versus on solo work. The idea is to identify the people most at risk for collaborative overload. Once that's been done, you can focus on three levers:

Encourage behavioral change

Show the most active and overburdened helpers how to filter and prioritize requests; give them permission to say no (or to allocate only half the time requested); and encourage them to make an introduction to someone else when the request doesn't draw on their own unique contributions. The latest version of the team-collaboration software Basecamp now offers a notification "snooze button" that encourages employees to set stronger boundaries around their incoming information flow. It's also worth suggesting that when they do invest personal resources, it be in value-added activities that they find energizing rather than exhausting. In studying employees at one *Fortune* 500 technology company, we found that although 60% wanted to spend less time responding to ad hoc collaboration requests, 40% wanted to spend more time training, coaching, and mentoring. After their contributions were shifted to those activities, employees were less prone to stress and disengagement.

To stem the tide of incoming requests, help seekers, too, must change their behavior. Resetting norms regarding when and how to initiate email requests or meeting invitations can free up a great deal of wasted time. As a step in this direction, managers at Dropbox eliminated all recurring meetings for a two-week period. That forced employees to reassess the necessity of those gatherings and, after the hiatus, helped them become more vigilant about their calendars and making sure each meeting had an owner and an agenda. Rebecca Hinds and Bob Sutton, of Stanford, found that although the company tripled the number of employees at its headquarters over the next two years, its meetings were shorter and more productive.

In addition, requests for time-sapping reviews and approvals can be reduced in many risk-averse cultures by encouraging people to take courageous action on decisions they should be making themselves, rather than constantly checking with leaders or stakeholders.

Leverage technology and physical space to make informational and social resources more accessible and transparent

Relevant technical tools include Slack and Salesforce.com's Chatter, with their open discussion threads on various work topics; and Syndio and VoloMetrix (recently acquired by Microsoft), which help individuals assess networks and make informed decisions about collaborative activities. Also rethink desk or office placement. A study led by the Boston University assistant professor Stine Grodal documented the detrimental effects of team meetings and emails on the development and maintenance of productive helping relationships. When possible, managers should colocate highly interdependent employees to facilitate brief and impromptu face-to-face collaborations, resulting in a more efficient exchange of resources.

Consider structural changes

Can you shift decision rights to more-appropriate people in the network? It may seem obvious that support staff or lower-level managers should be authorized to approve small capital expenditures, travel, and some HR activities, but in many organizations they aren't. Also consider whether you can create a buffer against demands for collaboration. Many hospitals now assign each unit or floor a nurse preceptor, who has no patient care responsibilities and is therefore available to respond to requests as they emerge. The result, according to research that one of us (Adam Grant) conducted with David Hofmann and Zhike Lei, is fewer bottlenecks and quicker connections between nurses and the right experts. Other types of organizations might also benefit from designating "utility players"—which could lessen demand for the busiest employees—and possibly rotating the role among team members while freeing up personal resources by reducing people's workloads.

Rewarding Effective Collaboration

We typically see an overlap of only about 50% between the top collaborative contributors in an organization and those employees deemed to be the top performers. As we've explained, many helpers underperform because they're overwhelmed; that's why managers should aim to redistribute work. But we also find that roughly 20% of organizational "stars" don't help; they hit their numbers (and earn kudos for it) but don't amplify the success of their colleagues. In these cases, as the former Goldman Sachs and GE chief learning officer Steve Kerr once wrote, leaders are hoping for A (collaboration) while rewarding B (individual achievement). They must instead learn how to spot and reward people who do both.

Consider professional basketball, hockey, and soccer teams. They don't just measure goals; they also track assists. Organizations should do the same, using tools such as network analysis, peer recognition programs, and value-added performance metrics. We helped one life sciences company use these tools to assess its workforce during a multibillion-dollar acquisition. Because the deal involved consolidating facilities around the world and relocating many employees, management was worried about losing talent. A well-known consultancy had recommended retention bonuses for leaders. But this approach failed to consider those very influential employees deep in the acquired company who had broad impact but no formal authority. Network analytics allowed the company to pinpoint those people and distribute bonuses more fairly.

Efficient sharing of informational, social, and personal resources should also be a prerequisite for positive reviews, promotions, and pay raises. At one investment bank, employees' annual performance reviews include feedback from a diverse group of colleagues, and only those people who are rated as strong collaborators (that is, able to cross-sell and provide unique customer value to transactions) are considered for the best promotions, bonuses, and retention plans. Corning, the glass and ceramics manufacturer, uses similar metrics to decide which of its scientists and engineers will be named fellows—a high honor that guarantees a job and a lab for life. One criterion is to be the first author on a patent that generates at least $100 million in revenue. But another is whether the candidate has worked as a supporting author on colleagues' patents. Corning grants status and power to those who strike a healthy balance between individual accomplishment and collaborative contribution. (Disclosure: Adam Grant has done consulting work for Corning.)

Why Women Bear More of the Burden

The lion's share of collaborative work tends to fall on women. They're stereotyped as communal and caring, so they're expected to help others with heavy workloads, provide mentoring and training to more-junior colleagues, recruit new hires, and attend optional meetings. As a result, the evidence shows, women experience greater emotional exhaustion than men.

One important solution to this problem is to encourage women to invest different types of resources in collaboration. In a 2013 Huffington Post poll of Americans, men and women estimated how often they contribute to others in a variety of ways. Men were 36% more likely to share knowledge and expertise—an informational resource. Meanwhile, women were 66% more likely to assist others in need—an action that typically costs more time and energy. By making contributions that rely less on personal resources, women can protect themselves against collaboration overload.

Managers must also ensure that men and women get equal credit for collaboration. In an experiment led by the NYU psychologist Madeline Heilman, a man who stayed late to help colleagues earned 14% higher ratings than a woman who did the same. When neither helped, the woman was rated 12% lower than the man. By improving systems for measuring, recognizing, and rewarding collaborative contributions, leaders can shift the focus away from the gender of the employee and toward the value added.

. . .

Collaboration is indeed the answer to many of today's most pressing business challenges. But more isn't always better. Leaders must learn to recognize, promote, and efficiently distribute the right kinds of collaborative work, or their teams and top talent will bear the costs of too much demand for too little supply. In fact, we believe that the time may have come for organizations to hire chief collaboration officers. By creating a senior executive position dedicated to collaboration, leaders can send a clear signal about the importance of managing teamwork thoughtfully and provide the resources necessary to do it effectively. That might reduce the odds that the whole becomes far less than the sum of its parts.

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The Power of Mattering at Work

by Zach Mercurio

For years, Jane was the live-in caregiver for a beloved family member. When he passed away, she felt purposeless. Faced with the prospect of losing her housing, Jane (not her real name) took a cleaning position at a local university. During her first few shifts, she struggled with intrusive thoughts such as, *Why couldn't I have done something more with my life?* And *I wish I were more than just a janitor.*

One day a supervisor noticed Jane was having trouble. He handed her a dictionary and asked her to read the definition of custodian: a person responsible for looking after something. "That's you," the supervisor told her. "You're responsible for and take 'custody' of this building and everyone in it."

Something shifted inside Jane that day. Later, when she participated in my study on how service workers experience meaning at work, she reflected on how it was one of the first times in her life that someone had made her feel worthy. Her mental chatter brightened after that interaction, and she stayed on the job for 18 years. Jane had felt the power of mattering at work.

Mattering—a mainstay concept in the fields of psychology and sociology for more than 40 years—is the experience of feeling significant to those around us because we feel valued and know that we add value. It is a primal need. When people know that they matter at work, they thrive. Mattering enhances self-esteem (“I’m worthy”) and self-efficacy (“I’m capable”) and strengthens motivation, well-being, and performance. This is critical for organizations to recognize: Employees who believe they matter report greater satisfaction, are more likely to be promoted, and are less likely to leave. In one study of 7,900 business units, teams in which people felt cared for and valued by a leader had higher levels of customer satisfaction, productivity, and profitability.[1]

If you’re thinking that I’m just talking about “belonging” and you’ve heard it all before, you’re missing a key distinction. Belonging is feeling welcomed and accepted in a group, whereas mattering is feeling *significant* to the group’s individual members. Mattering is an even more fundamental need than belonging.

Today polls show that 30% of people report feeling invisible at work, 65% feel underappreciated, and close to 82% of workers feel lonely. Many of the workplace challenges currently plaguing leaders—a 10-year low in engagement numbers, demands for dignity and equity, increased labor action, declining employee mental health, and a few years ago, quiet quitting and the Great Resignation—can be traced to a growing mattering deficit.

These trends persist despite investments in new engagement surveys and platforms, well-being programs, better hiring and retention initiatives, increased wages, and DEI initiatives. That's because mattering doesn't result from pay, policies, or perks. Guided by decades of research on what cultivates mattering, my team and I have worked with hundreds of corporate and public-sector groups—including teams at Marriott International, Delta Air Lines, and the U.S. Army—to uncover behaviors that foster mattering. We've found that creating a sense of mattering happens most fundamentally in the course of daily interpersonal interactions, like the one Jane experienced.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

Too many employees today feel that they don't matter. That sentiment lies at the root of many current business and societal challenges, including low employee retention and engagement, high rates of employee mental health struggles, and escalating labor disputes.

The Reason

Our reliance on brief digital communications and our condescension toward soft skills have weakened our ability to convey to others that they matter.

The Solution

In their daily personal interactions, leaders must demonstrate to their people that they are seen and heard, affirm their value, and show them how they are needed.

To be clear, creating a culture of mattering through individual interactions is not a substitute for paying livable wages, providing predictable schedules, and giving access to basic healthcare. But people are unlikely to feel they matter unless they experience an individualized approach.

In practice, that means leaders need to truly see and hear team members during daily interactions. They must also regularly affirm their people's significance. And finally, senior leaders need to scale these skills up to the organizational level so that mattering becomes a cultural norm. These behaviors may seem like common sense, but they've ceased to be common practice in a world of brief digital communications and condescension toward soft skills, and they're well worth relearning.

Seeing and Hearing Others

The first and most important step in cultivating a sense of mattering is to truly notice people. Noticing requires two skill sets: *seeing* people, which means acknowledging them and paying attention to the details, ebbs, and flows of their life and work; and *hearing* people, which means demonstrating a real interest in the meaning and feelings behind their words and inviting them to share their experiences, perspectives, and feedback within a climate of psychological safety so that they feel comfortable doing so. Remember how one small instance of having her struggles noticed changed the course of Jane's career.

Noticing people isn't the same as knowing them. You can know your best friend but fail to notice that she's having a hard time. You can know your team members but not notice that one is experiencing stress in another part of his life or feeling left out of discussions. We tend to think that seeing others comes naturally, but in today's rushed work world, that's far from the case. To notice others, try the following:

Make time and space. We're all busy, but it pays to set aside time to truly see people. In a 2014 study researchers compared employees who spent one hour a week or less interacting with their leaders with those who spent more than six hours a week interacting with them. Employees who spent more time with their bosses were more motivated and innovative and 30% more engaged than those who spent less time.[2]

Although you can't control your time constraints, you can control how you prioritize and plan relationship building. Schedule regular meetings with your team, don't let one-on-ones go by the wayside, and make the most of watercooler conversations or the moments before a meeting starts. Periodically check whether anyone on your team needs more of your time. (See "Conduct a Mattering Audit.")

Conduct a Mattering Audit

Perform an audit to find the gaps in mattering in your organization. You can do this by yourself or with your peers for a broader audit.

In one column list the names of your team members. (Or if you want to review a larger organization, list employee groups.) In the next column, note the things you do to see and hear that person or employee group. If you don't do anything, leave it blank. In a third column write what you do to affirm and show that person evidence of his or her significance. In the final column indicate what you do to show how that person is needed.

Once you've completed the audit, identify the gaps.

- Who might be feeling unnoticed? Why?
- Who might be underaffirmed? Why?
- Who might not experience feeling needed? Why?
- What practices can you implement?

Pay deep attention. Research shows that our ability to pay attention has decreased in the past decade. When interactions don't get our full attention, they become transactional rather than relational: We thank our delivery woman while we're on a call, and so we never learn her name; we speed through a meeting's agenda items without pausing to ask how people are really doing; we relay feedback without taking into account a team member's point of view.

Renew your intention to pay close attention to others. Begin by asking more-meaningful questions. We tend to begin conversations with "How are you?" or "How was your day?" These standard greetings don't give us any insight into the people we lead. Instead ask questions that are clear, open, and exploratory.

Clear questions have an object and a time frame. For example, instead of saying, “How are you?” you might ask, “What has your attention today?”

Open questions give people the opportunity to share their experiences. Instead of asking, “Did the meeting go well?” you might ask, “What was the most important insight you heard in the meeting?”

Exploratory questions seek to understand, not evaluate. Instead of “What did you get done today?” you might ask, “Which parts of today’s projects were most challenging for you and why?”

Note what you learn from these exchanges so that you can follow up. One manager I worked with in a distribution center had trouble keeping track of the details of her large team, so every Friday afternoon she wrote down one detail she had noticed about each team member that week—nerves about an upcoming meeting, a struggle on a particular task, or a personal detail such as a child starting a new sport. On Monday she looked at her notebook and scheduled a three-minute micro-check-in with each team member, starting with, “I remember that last week …” and then asked about or commented on something specific. Her team consistently reported higher engagement than other teams in the center.

Listen for total meaning. As people share their perspectives, demonstrate a real interest in what they are saying and feeling. Active listening has long been touted as the ideal way to do this, but when it's applied to leadership, I've too often seen it diluted to mechanical advice to stay silent, make eye contact, and nod. Someone can be physically listened to and still not feel heard. Instead, participate in the conversation to draw out the other person's true perspective.

To do this, be alert to what the psychologist and active-listening theorist Carl Rogers called "total meaning"—not just people's words but also their demeanor, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues—so that you can understand and respond to their underlying feelings and attitudes.

Here are four techniques you can use to get at the deeper meaning behind your team members' words:

- Seek clarification by asking questions like "Can you tell me more?" or "What do you mean when you say 'fine'"?
- Explore by asking questions that elicit details, such as "When that was happening, what were you thinking?" or "Can you give me an example?"
- Paraphrase or "loop" by asking questions like "What I hear you saying is.... Is that accurate?" or "Let me make sure I understand: [paraphrase their message]. Is there anything I missed?"

- Help them articulate feelings by asking, “How did that make you feel?” and “What were you feeling when that happened?” or “When you say [specific phrase], what feelings are behind that?” And validate people by saying, “I can see that you’re feeling X,” or “I hear you, and it sounds as if you’re really X.”

Respond compassionately. The more closely you see and hear a person, the more often you will learn about his or her struggles —anxieties, stresses, challenges. Respond foremost with compassion. This seems obvious, but too often we normalize despair at work. “It’s just that time of year,” we say. “That’s the nature of our business.” “Everyone’s overloaded right now.” While these observations may be true, they don’t help the person feel noticed. A compassionate response can reduce someone’s response to stress, lower blood pressure, and increase trust. Being part of a compassionate culture at work can increase emotional commitment to the organization, productivity, work quality, and engagement.

Even small acts of compassion go a long way. Once I was in a virtual meeting with a leader checking in with his team when one member said that she was overloaded. He paused and said, “Hey, you know that standing meeting we have on Friday? Why don’t you skip that and get caught up?” *Everyone* visibly relaxed.

Follow up. What you do after the conversation matters. Research about the listening behaviors of employees at one bank, for example, showed that whether or not someone felt heard hinged not only on the listener's responsiveness *during* the conversation but also on what happened *outside* the conversation and in the following weeks and months.

The actions you can take range from checking back in on something you heard to making concrete changes to the business. Consider United Airlines. Before CEO Oscar Munoz took the reins, the company was plagued with abysmal operational performance, poor financials, fraught labor relations, and the lowest levels of customer satisfaction and employee morale in the industry. Munoz began his tenure by embarking on a listening tour. When a flight attendant named Amy became emotional during their conversation, he stopped and gently asked for more details. "You know, Oscar, I'm just tired of always having to say, 'I'm sorry,'" she said. "I'm sorry our food isn't good. I'm sorry our coffee sucks. I'm sorry you can't sit next to your child. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Munoz realized that the company needed to regain the trust of its employees to solve its challenges with customers and investors. Promising Amy that he wouldn't forget her words, he continued his listening tour and then made changes to address scheduling issues and improve working conditions. United catapulted into the top tier for airline customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and operational excellence, and the company's share price soared by 50% during his tenure.

Affirming People and Showing Them They're Needed

Once you fully see and hear people, you can affirm them meaningfully by showing them how they make a singular impact. Affirmation is not just thanking them for what they've done or who they are; it's about showing them their uniqueness. You can also help them see how they're needed by giving them evidence that people rely on them and that their efforts are indispensable.

Unfortunately, according to the data, most of us aren't very good at that. For example, 90% of people in a large survey by the John Templeton Foundation reported feeling grateful for people in their lives, yet less than half expressed that gratitude. A poll by the talent management software firm TalentLMS found that 61% of people say they don't get regular appreciation from their managers.[3]

Show people their unique gifts. People perceive their uniqueness relative to others. In a seminal 1977 study, psychologists told participants they would receive feedback on a personality test. The participants were each secretly given the same score, but half of them also got a "difference score" that indicated how distinctive their results were relative to their peers'. Those who were told they were unique reported more satisfaction and better self-perceptions than did the participants who weren't given a difference score.

This need to have our uniqueness valued is why we brush off generic feedback and why being told “thank you” at the same time every day doesn’t mean much. It’s also why awards, free lunches, incentives, and other employee recognition or appreciation programs are not a substitute for the interpersonal skill of affirming people. To feel that they matter, people must experience their unique significance through their relationships with others.

To affirm people’s significance, consider their strengths, purpose, perspective, and wisdom. Strengths are the overlap between what people love to do and what they’re good at. Purpose is the contribution a person wants to make in the world. Perspective is how people see the world, and wisdom is what they’ve learned from living their lives. By naming these gifts, showing their impact, and nurturing them, you help employees see how they matter.

Affirming people doesn’t mean ignoring areas that need improvement or avoiding critiques. On the contrary, affirmation plays an important role in addressing performance gaps. Your feedback is unlikely to matter to people who don’t first believe they matter to you. The psychologist David Yeager and his team call affirming feedback “wise feedback.” Using experimental studies, they found that people are more likely to improve when someone believes in them, reminds them of their strengths, offers support, and establishes trust before offering criticism or noting areas that need improvement.

Tell stories of significance. We tend to have a difficult time imagining the downstream impact of our work, especially those of us in roles several steps removed from an end user or customer. One way to remind people of the difference they make is to collect and share real, specific personal stories.

I was once hired to facilitate a discussion about purpose at work with a team of commercial plumbing contractors. They were exhausted after coming off a 14-hour shift, and they didn't do much to hide that they were just waiting for the right moment to sneak away. I began the session by showing a photo of my then-six-year-old son: eyes closed, stuffing his face at his favorite doughnut shop at a new plaza near our home. (Our trips there had become a special weekend tradition after his little brother was born.)

I asked the plumbers, "What do you see here?" It took a few moments, but one of the plumbers sat up and said, "We worked on that project!"

"Yes," I said, "Do you see that joy? That's because of you."

They spent the next two hours sharing stories of how their work mattered, from a senior center project to a research facility job. After the session a journeyman plumber told me, holding back emotion, "I've been doing this for 30 years. I've never thought about my job that way. I've never thought about the people who use these buildings."

Research by the organizational psychologist Adam Grant shows that hearing just one real story of how our work benefits someone else can increase motivation by upwards of 400%. So establish a process for collecting stories of significance and a cadence for sharing them, whether they're from customers and users or from peers and colleagues.

Show people how they're indispensable. One way to help people feel needed is to show them exactly how even their small tasks are crucial to a bigger goal or purpose.

A NASA janitor famously replied to President John F. Kennedy's question, "What do you do here?" by announcing his indispensability: "I'm helping put a man on the moon." That story may be apocryphal, but it's a fact that NASA deliberately showed all the people engaged in the moon mission—including some 300,000 dispersed contract workers—how their work mattered to achieving the ultimate goal.

The researcher Andrew Carton has found that NASA employees and leaders used various terms to describe this practice, such as building a "road to the moon" or "stepping stones." Owen Maynard, then NASA's chief of mission operations, wrote "ladder to the moon" on blackboards throughout NASA's Houston space center. At the bottom rung was the present task group. The next rung was the measurable objective the task made possible. The next was the measurable objective the previous objective made possible, and so on, until it connected to "putting a person on the moon by the end of the decade." Everyone could see exactly how each step led to the next.

Laddering links people and their input to a bigger output. Put a meaningful outcome at the top of the ladder—an organization's purpose, a department's values, or a team's vision—and the individual's input at the bottom. The more specific you can be, the better. Then work your way up each rung of the ladder to show how the individual's input is needed for a real, tangible outcome that connects to the ultimate outcome. People should see their ladder regularly to reaffirm their indispensability.

Scaling the Skills to Cultivate Mattering

Recently one of the largest retail-merchandising companies in the world asked me to help it scale up its "people first" culture. Although its executives could expertly recite the competencies, training systems, and measurement framework they had in place for tasks like creating store displays, when I asked what skills supervisors needed to ensure that people knew how they added value, the executives struggled to answer.

Spreading the basic interpersonal skills described in this article throughout an organization—which I've seen transform companies and their people in cultures worldwide—requires a focus similar to the one that we devote to other work competencies. It takes four steps.

Set the right intention and increase motivation. When we start talking about scaling up mattering in an organization, it's easy to begin thinking about employees as a means to an end—productivity, profit, success. But when people are just mechanisms of success, they cease to be human to us. Leaders who truly create mattering see and treat people as worthy ends in themselves, as humans who have vivid, complex, and important lives.

As you scale up mattering across the organization, it's imperative to keep in mind that the results of showing people how they matter are increased engagement, lower turnover, and decreased burnout—but you should not implement mattering as a tactic to achieve those ends. You should do it because showing people how they matter fulfills the basic human desire for dignity and the primal human need to be seen, heard, and valued. This difference may seem like a nuance, but understanding and internalizing it is fundamental to the process and makes it more likely that your efforts will be met with success rather than cynicism.

After you've set the right intention, create an emotional anchor to incite motivation. If you don't show people what it's like to experience mattering in their lives, they're unlikely to embrace the idea; they'll see it as just another initiative. The first exercise I do with a group of leaders is to have them answer these questions: When have you most felt that you mattered to someone else? What did it feel like? What did that person say and do? What skills did that person use? (For more detail, see "Identify Mattering Motivation.") The conversations that result are powerful. Leaders are inspired to foster the feeling of mattering in others, and they recognize that doing so requires learnable skills.

Identify Mattering Motivation

Leaders and managers are unlikely to embrace the work of mattering unless they are shown what mattering has meant in their own lives. To do so, ask the following questions, and share the group's answers.

When have you most felt that you mattered to someone at work? Choose a specific moment: When was it? Who made you feel that way? What did that person say or do?

What skills did the person exhibit? (For example, if you said, "My coworkers made me feel that I mattered when they sent me a thank-you email," you might say, "They knew how to write an effective thank-you, they found time to write and send it, they remembered what I did.")

How can *you* be the person in your story for someone else?

Develop and practice the right skills. Naming those skills and building requirements for their practice is a critical part of the process. The skills you choose should ensure that people feel noticed, affirmed, and needed, but they must be tailored to your organization. Ask yourself which capabilities described in this article your leaders need to develop. Ultimately, your organization might create a "leadership checklist" that defines how leaders must behave daily or a more comprehensive guidebook that communicates the company’s approach to fostering mattering.

Measure mattering. You won’t see improvements in these skills without measurement and accountability. One challenge of measuring people’s skill at noticing, affirming, and needing others is that we all tend to overestimate our efforts in this area. I recommend two methods for giving the organization and leaders themselves a more accurate picture of where they might improve:

- *Self-assessment*. I suggest doing this at least quarterly in a group setting so that there’s an opportunity for peer coaching. (See “Give your leaders a mattering self-assessment.”)

Give your leaders a mattering self-assessment

Use this questionnaire to get a sense of how well you and the leaders in your organization are building a culture of mattering. This isn’t an exercise to rank yourself or your people; it’s meant to build awareness and provide guidance on which skills to improve. Read the following statements and use a scale of 1 to 5 to rate how often you display the behavior described. (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Frequently, 5 = Always)

Questions	Score
1. I ask about and remember the details of others’ lives, such as the names of their family members and friends, values, interests, and personal goals and aspirations.	
2. I remember and check in on the details of others’ personal and work lives during routine conversations.	
3. I ask others for their opinions, listen to what they say, share that I value their voices, and follow up to ensure they feel heard.	

4. I notice others' moods, and when I sense someone is struggling, I seek understanding and offer to help. 5. I check on people's energy levels and emotions.	
Noticing total: Add your score for items 1–5. 6. I name others' unique gifts, such as their strengths, purpose, perspective, and wisdom. 7. I show people how they and their work impact others both inside and outside the organization. 8. When I assign a task, I first explain its purpose and the difference it makes. 9. I go out of my way to provide opportunities for others to use and develop their gifts. 10. I express gratitude verbally to others regularly.	/25
Affirming total: Add your score for items 6–10. 11. I tell others how I rely on them. 12. When people return from an absence, I tell them I missed them. 13. I remind people how I and the organization need them and their work. 14. I ask others for help. 15. I tell people how it's better when they're around.	/25
Needing total: Add your score for items 11–15.	/25

Reflection: In which area did you score the lowest? What is a skill in this area you want to develop? In which area did you score highest? What is one deliberate practice you want to deepen in that area?

- *Team assessment.* Self-assessments aren't enough, however, since we tend to be generous with ourselves even in the face of concrete, fact-based questions. Ask teams to rate their leaders on the same behaviors. (For example, the item "I remember and check in on the details of others' personal and work lives" becomes "My leader remembers and checks in on the details of others' personal and work lives.")

Optimize the environment. Frankly, many organizations make it difficult for leaders to cultivate mattering. If you're in a distribution center that tracks every minute of your day, taking the time necessary to show you care becomes nearly impossible. And even in organizations where it's possible to show appreciation, it's usually still left up to chance: There is no requirement to show care.

Formal or informal rewards are potent ways to influence human behavior. If we recognize, incentivize, and promote caring behaviors, we'll get more caring leaders. To create a culture of mattering, stop rewarding and promoting leaders for how much they get people to do, and start rewarding leaders for how they make people feel. Don't reward and promote high-performing people who treat others poorly. Reward, develop, and promote leaders whose assessments show that they dignify, include, respect, and affirm people while performing well.

I worked with American Express Global Business Travel and its senior vice president Mark Rude to introduce these ideas a year or so after Covid lockdowns ended. The pandemic had been brutal to the company's employees, many of whom were on the front line handling large companies' business travel. Attrition mounted as morale fell.

First I described the power of mattering, the costs of not mattering, and the centrality and purpose of mattering to the organization's leaders in various regions—including the United States, Ireland, and India. One leader volunteered that talking about her experiences of mattering with her peers “gave her permission to be human again.” The mattering concept resonated in every culture.

In phase two I divided the leaders into smaller groups where they brainstormed specific behaviors and skills related to noticing, affirming, and needing that would make sense at the firm. The behaviors included “be face-to-face and share your video on all calls and demonstrate active listening,” “proactively offer support when an employee discloses a struggle,” and “describe the ‘why’ before ‘what’ and ‘how’ when assigning tasks.”

After narrowing the behaviors down, we put them in a “How People Matter Here” blueprint that began with this statement: “We believe each employee should feel noticed, affirmed, and needed.” Each behavior was then accompanied by skills and implementation advice. This blueprint and the resulting strategy became the guiding curriculum for the organization’s leadership skills development, leader evaluations, and team assessments. The result has been a 50% reduction in attrition that’s persisted for a year and a half and a significant increase in employee engagement scores.

. . .

“To be of importance to others is to be alive,” T. S. Eliot once wrote. By genuinely seeing, hearing, affirming, and expressing how we need and value one another across our organizations, we can do more than foster connection. We can reignite a sense of interdependence and bring our workplaces—and one another—back to life.

This article is adapted from *The Power of Mattering* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025), by Zach Mercurio.

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QUICK READ

Leading Is Emotionally Draining. Here's How to Recover

by Dina Denham Smith

You have to lay off a team member, deliver hard feedback in a tense meeting, or end the day absorbing the resignation of a top performer. No crisis. Just another Tuesday.

Each of these moments is emotionally taxing on its own. But taken together—and set against a backdrop of performance pressures, shifting workplace norms, and the unrelenting emotional labor of guiding and supporting teams through crises and global turmoil—they quietly add up.

Newly released Gallup data reflects this toll. In 2024 global employee engagement declined for only the second time in over a decade. Unlike the first drop in 2020, however, this drop wasn't driven by frontline workers. Instead, it was entirely due to declining engagement among managers.[1] In a March 2025 survey by Modern Health, 77% of managers reported that their role was more challenging now than ever before.[2]

Understandably, leaders focus on managing others through challenging moments. Faced with external expectations and a genuine desire to show up for their teams, they direct their attention and energy outward: guiding, steadying, and responding. But with that external focus and the nonstop pressure for results, it's easy for leaders to overlook a crucial step: processing their own emotional experience. Pressing on feels efficient, even the only choice to stay afloat amid all the demands on your time. Indeed, it can feel nearly impossible to process your emotions when you're in the thick of it at work. But over time, just powering through weighty situations without pausing to process your experience can come at a steep cost to your health, effectiveness as a leader, and relationships.[3]

Emotional depletion is a real and significant tax of modern leadership. Recovery is no longer a luxury. Instead, it's an imperative, critical for protecting your well-being and sustaining your capacity to lead over the long haul. After a challenging event or period, use these three proven practices to process your emotions and replenish your energy.

Reflect: Don't Just Move On—Make Meaning

While revisiting weighty times may sound undesirable, taking the time to reflect on them is key to moving forward. When we ignore or suppress our emotions, they don't disappear—they accumulate in the background, resurfacing later as increased stress, reactivity, and health issues.[4] Reflection helps us process and metabolize what we've experienced so that we don't unintentionally carry it around.

Idea in Brief

The Problem

You have to deliver tough feedback, lay someone off, deal with the resignation of a top performer, or face the failure of an important initiative. Emotional depletion is a reality of modern leadership. The ability to recover is no longer a luxury. Instead, it's a leadership imperative, critical for protecting your well-being and sustaining your capacity to lead over time. Your team needs to know you're in it for the long haul.

The Solution

Three proven practices can help you process your emotions and replenish your energy after a challenging stretch: Reflect, reframe, and restore. These steps will help you reset in the short term and build the emotional muscle to handle future challenges with steadiness and strength.

Carve out a few minutes after a challenging moment or day, and ask yourself:

- What am I feeling?
- Where do I feel it in my body?
- What are my emotions trying to tell me?
- What do they reveal about what matters to me?

Acknowledge and accept your feelings without judgment.[5] All emotions—even the unpleasant ones like frustration, sadness, and anxiety—offer valuable insights into our values, needs, and limits. Judging and resisting them only escalates the feeling and increases your reactivity.

Consider writing down your responses to these questions. Writing creates space between you and your emotions, allowing you to identify meaning and purposeful next steps. Furthermore, research has shown that writing about your feelings for just 20 minutes a day over three days can improve both mental and physical health, reduce anxiety, and even boost job performance.[6] If writing isn't your cup of tea, try leaving yourself a voice memo instead. What matters most is giving your thoughts and true feelings space to surface without editing or filtering.

Alternatively, share your experience and challenges with a trusted peer or other sounding board. Social support not only helps us make sense of and process difficult events but also enhances our resilience to stress, protects us from burnout, and promotes our mental and physical well-being. Leadership is often a lonely experience, and having trusted peers, mentors, and other supports can be a powerful source of connection and clarity.

Reflection doesn't require a lot of time. It just takes the discipline to pause amid the busyness. Even a few intentional minutes can help you build the self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience essential for effective leadership in today's complex and challenging world.

Reframe: Shift the Narrative

Reappraising emotionally taxing experiences can also speed recovery by reducing our distress and freeing up our cognitive resources.[7] Reframing doesn't mean you're ignoring the difficulty of a situation; instead, it's about shifting your perspective to find new meaning or possibility.

For example, after successfully leading a major turnaround, my client Jacob was blindsided by a reorg that reassigned his team and left his role uncertain. Understandably, he was both frustrated and stressed. But over time, Jacob began to see the situation differently: as a chance to recharge after an intense chapter, and an opportunity to stretch into something new. By finding a silver lining, Jacob shifted his emotional state and was able to show up with more steadiness and optimism while the organizational changes and his new role solidified.

On the backside of a tough event, consider asking:

- What are the possible silver linings in this situation?
- What are the potential long-term benefits despite the short-term costs?
- How can I grow from it, or use it to build something better in the future?

When you change the story, you change your experience—and you gain access to new energy, insight, and direction.

Sometimes, however, it's not just the situation that needs reframing; it's how you see yourself in relation to it. Many emotionally intense leadership moments involve performing "necessary evils," making decisions or taking actions that cause discomfort or harm to others, such as delivering tough feedback, letting someone go, restructuring a change-fatigued team, or implementing layoffs.[8] Even when these actions are necessary for the greater good, they can leave leaders feeling anxious or guilty, and questioning their self-image as a fair and moral person.

In these moments, self-compassion is a critical tool. It doesn't mean lowering your standards or avoiding responsibility. In fact, research shows self-compassion improves leadership, increasing emotional intelligence, composure under pressure, and resilience.[9] Further, it enhances our psychological well-being and increases the compassion we show to others.[10] Practicing self-compassion simply means treating yourself as you would a friend: acknowledging the challenge, recognizing that anyone in your position might feel the same way, and responding with kindness instead of criticism.

After hard moments, ask yourself: What would I say to a colleague struggling with this same situation? Then extend that same support inward. This quiet act of self-kindness will help you feel better, recover faster, and lead more effectively.

Restore: Replenish Your Emotional Reserves

When we push through emotionally difficult events without pausing to recover, we slowly drain our emotional and physical reserves. Over time, this can lead to emotional exhaustion and damage our mood, health, and effectiveness.[11] Just like athletes need rest after an intense game, professionals must replenish after emotionally demanding situations at work.

Without replenishment, the risk of burnout and long-term health issues climbs. Ironically, the more depleted you become, the less likely you are to engage in the very behaviors that would help. This is known as the recovery paradox: When you need a break the most, you're least likely to take one.[12]

Critically, recovering isn't just about taking time off. It's about engaging in the *right* kinds of experiences. Research highlights four that are particularly effective:

- *Detachment,* or giving your mind a true break. Resist checking email after hours and avoid replaying the workday in your head.
- *Relaxation,* or building in peaceful moments. Take a walk without your phone, listen to a calming playlist, or spend quiet time outdoors.
- *Mastery,* or doing something that challenges you in a positive way. Try a new recipe, pick up a hobby, or learn something unrelated to your role.
- *Control,* or protecting pockets of time where *you* choose what to do. That could even be just saying no to one more commitment.[13]

If you think you don't have time to relax or worry that it might seem selfish, think again. Research shows that when leaders spend time on hobbies, relaxation, or other enjoyable activities after work, both they and their teams feel and perform better the next day.[14]

Intentionally investing in recovering after an emotionally demanding stretch isn't just helpful; it's essential to leading today. Reflecting, reframing, and restoring help you not only reset in the short term but build the emotional muscle to handle future challenges with more steadiness and strength. Because your team doesn't just need you today—they need you to last.

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10

What Makes a Leader?

by Daniel Goleman

Every businessperson knows a story about a highly intelligent, highly skilled executive who was promoted into a leadership position only to fail at the job. And they also know a story about someone with solid—but not extraordinary—intellectual abilities and technical skills who was promoted into a similar position and then soared.

Such anecdotes support the widespread belief that identifying individuals with the "right stuff" to be leaders is more art than science. After all, the personal styles of superb leaders vary: Some leaders are subdued and analytical; others shout their manifestos from the mountaintops. And just as important, different situations call for different types of leadership. Most mergers need a sensitive negotiator at the helm, whereas many turnarounds require a more forceful authority.

I have found, however, that the most effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: They all have a high degree of what has come to be known as *emotional intelligence*. It's not that IQ and technical skills are irrelevant. They do matter but mainly as "threshold capabilities"; that is, they are the entry-level requirements for executive positions. But my research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader.

The five components of emotional intelligence at work

	Definition	Hallmarks
Self-awareness	The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others	Self-confidence Realistic self-assessment Self-deprecating sense of humor
Self-regulation	The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods The propensity to suspend judgment—to think before acting	Trustworthiness and integrity Comfort with ambiguity Openness to change
Motivation	A passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status A propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence	Strong drive to achieve Optimism, even in the face of failure Organizational commitment
Empathy	The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people Skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions	Expertise in building and retaining talent Cross-cultural sensitivity Service to clients and customers

Social skill	Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks An ability to find common ground and build rapport	Effectiveness in leading change Persuasiveness Expertise in building and leading teams

Idea in Brief

What distinguishes great leaders from merely good ones? It isn't IQ or technical skills, says Daniel Goleman. It's emotional intelligence: a group of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize their own *and* their followers' performance. When senior managers at one company had a critical mass of EI capabilities, their divisions outperformed yearly earnings goals by 20%.

The EI skills are:

- **Self-awareness:** knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others
- **Self-regulation:** controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods
- **Motivation:** relishing achievement for its own sake
- **Empathy:** understanding other people's emotional makeup
- **Social skill:** building rapport with others to move them in desired directions

We're each born with certain levels of EI skills. But we can strengthen these abilities through persistence, practice, and feedback from colleagues or coaches.

In the course of the past year, my colleagues and I have focused on how emotional intelligence operates at work. We have examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and effective performance, especially in leaders. And we have observed how emotional intelligence shows itself on the job. How can you tell if someone has high emotional intelligence, for example, and how can you recognize it in yourself? In the following pages, we'll explore these questions, taking each of the components of emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill—in turn.

Evaluating Emotional Intelligence

Most large companies today have employed trained psychologists to develop what are known as "competency models" to aid them in identifying, training, and promoting likely stars in the leadership firmament. The psychologists have also developed such models for lower-level positions. And in recent years, I have analyzed competency models from 188 companies, most of which were large and global and included the likes of Lucent Technologies, British Airways, and Credit Suisse.

In carrying out this work, my objective was to determine which personal capabilities drove outstanding performance within these organizations and to what degree they did so. I grouped capabilities into three categories: purely technical skills like accounting and business planning; cognitive abilities like analytical reasoning; and competencies demonstrating emotional intelligence, such as the ability to work with others and effectiveness in leading change.

To create some of the competency models, psychologists asked senior managers at the companies to identify the capabilities that typified the organization's most outstanding leaders. To create other models, the psychologists used objective criteria, such as a division's profitability, to differentiate the star performers at senior levels within their organizations from the average ones. Those individuals were then extensively interviewed and tested, and their capabilities were compared. This process resulted in the creation of lists of ingredients for highly effective leaders. The lists ranged in length from seven to 15 items and included such ingredients as initiative and strategic vision.

When I analyzed all this data, I found dramatic results. To be sure, intellect was a driver of outstanding performance. Cognitive skills such as big-picture thinking and long-term vision were particularly important. But when I calculated the ratio of technical skills, IQ, and emotional intelligence as ingredients of excellent performance, emotional intelligence proved to be twice as important as the others for jobs at all levels.

Moreover, my analysis showed that emotional intelligence played an increasingly important role at the highest levels of the company, where differences in technical skills are of negligible importance. In other words, the higher the rank of a person considered to be a star performer, the more emotional intelligence capabilities showed up as the reason for his or her effectiveness. When I compared star performers with average ones in senior leadership positions, nearly 90% of the difference in their profiles was attributable to emotional intelligence factors rather than cognitive abilities.

Other researchers have confirmed that emotional intelligence not only distinguishes outstanding leaders but can also be linked to strong performance. The findings of the late David McClelland, the renowned researcher in human and organizational behavior, are a good example. In a 1996 study of a global food and beverage company, McClelland found that when senior managers had a critical mass of emotional intelligence capabilities, their divisions outperformed yearly earnings goals by 20%. Meanwhile, division leaders without that critical mass underperformed by almost the same amount. McClelland's findings, interestingly, held as true in the company's U.S. divisions as in its divisions in Asia and Europe.

In short, the numbers are beginning to tell us a persuasive story about the link between a company's success and the emotional intelligence of its leaders. And just as important, research is also demonstrating that people can, if they take the right approach, develop their emotional intelligence. (See the sidebar "Can Emotional Intelligence Be Learned?")

Can Emotional Intelligence Be Learned?

For ages, people have debated if leaders are born or made. So, too, goes the debate about emotional intelligence. Are people born with certain levels of empathy, for example, or do they acquire empathy as a result of life's experiences? The answer is both. Scientific inquiry strongly suggests that there is a genetic component to emotional intelligence. Psychological and developmental research indicates that nurture plays a role as well. How much of each perhaps will never be known, but research and practice clearly demonstrate that emotional intelligence can be learned.

One thing is certain: Emotional intelligence increases with age. There is an old-fashioned word for the phenomenon: maturity. Yet even with maturity, some people still need training to enhance their emotional intelligence. Unfortunately, far too many training programs that intend to build leadership skills—including emotional intelligence—are a waste of time and money. The problem is simple: They focus on the wrong part of the brain.

Emotional intelligence is born largely in the neurotransmitters of the brain's limbic system, which governs feelings, impulses, and drives. Research indicates that the limbic system learns best through motivation, extended practice, and feedback. Compare this with the kind of learning that goes on in the neocortex, which governs analytical and technical ability. The neocortex grasps concepts and logic. It is the part of the brain that figures out how to use a computer or make a sales call by reading a book. Not surprisingly—but mistakenly—it is also the part of the brain targeted by most training programs aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence. When such programs take, in effect, a neocortical approach, my research with the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations has shown they can even have a *negative* impact on people's job performance.

To enhance emotional intelligence, organizations must refocus their training to include the limbic system. They must help people break old behavioral habits and establish new ones. That not only takes much more time than conventional training programs but also requires an individualized approach.

Imagine an executive who is thought to be low on empathy by her colleagues. Part of that deficit shows itself as an inability to listen; she interrupts people and doesn't pay close attention to what they're saying. To fix the problem, the executive needs to be motivated to change, and then she needs practice and feedback from others in the company. A colleague or coach could be tapped to let the executive know when she has been observed failing to listen. She would then have to replay the incident and give a better response; that is, demonstrate her ability to absorb what others are saying. And the executive could be directed to observe certain executives who listen well and to mimic their behavior.

With persistence and practice, such a process can lead to lasting results. I know one Wall Street executive who sought to improve his empathy—specifically his ability to read people's reactions and see their perspectives. Before beginning his quest, the executive's subordinates were terrified of working with him. People even went so far as to hide bad news from him. Naturally, he was shocked when finally confronted with these facts. He went home and told his family—but they only confirmed what he had heard at work. When their opinions on any given subject did not mesh with his, they, too, were frightened of him.

Enlisting the help of a coach, the executive went to work to heighten his empathy through practice and feedback. His first step was to take a vacation to a foreign country where he did not speak the language. While there, he monitored his reactions to the unfamiliar and his openness to people who were different from him. When he returned home, humbled by his week abroad, the executive asked his coach to shadow him for parts of the day, several times a week, to critique how he treated people with new or different perspectives. At the same time, he consciously used on-the-job interactions as opportunities to practice "hearing" ideas that differed from his. Finally, the executive had himself videotaped in meetings and asked those who worked for and with him to critique his ability to acknowledge and understand the feelings of others. It took several months, but the executive's emotional intelligence did ultimately rise, and the improvement was reflected in his overall performance on the job.

It's important to emphasize that building one's emotional intelligence cannot—will not—happen without sincere desire and concerted effort. A brief seminar won't help; nor can one buy a how-to manual. It is much harder to learn to empathize—to internalize empathy as a natural response to people—than it is to become adept at regression analysis. But it can be done. "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. If your goal is to become a real leader, these words can serve as a guidepost in your efforts to develop high emotional intelligence.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the first component of emotional intelligence—which makes sense when one considers that the Delphic oracle gave the advice to “know thyself” thousands of years ago. Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest—with themselves and with others.

People who have a high degree of self-awareness recognize how their feelings affect them, other people, and their job performance. Thus, a self-aware person who knows that tight deadlines bring out the worst in him plans his time carefully and gets his work done well in advance. Another person with high self-awareness will be able to work with a demanding client. She will understand the client’s impact on her moods and the deeper reasons for her frustration. “Their trivial demands take us away from the real work that needs to be done,” she might explain. And she will go one step further and turn her anger into something constructive.

Self-awareness extends to a person’s understanding of his or her values and goals. Someone who is highly self-aware knows where he is headed and why; so, for example, he will be able to be firm in turning down a job offer that is tempting financially but does not fit with his principles or long-term goals. A person who lacks self-awareness is apt to make decisions that bring on inner turmoil by treading on buried values. “The money looked good so I signed on," someone might say two years into a job, "but the work means so little to me that I'm constantly bored." The decisions of self-aware people mesh with their values; consequently, they often find work to be energizing.

How can one recognize self-awareness? First and foremost, it shows itself as candor and an ability to assess oneself realistically. People with high self-awareness are able to speak accurately and openly—although not necessarily effusively or confessionally—about their emotions and the impact they have on their work. For instance, one manager I know of was skeptical about a new personal-shopper service that her company, a major department-store chain, was about to introduce. Without prompting from her team or her boss, she offered them an explanation: "It's hard for me to get behind the rollout of this service," she admitted, "because I really wanted to run the project, but I wasn't selected. Bear with me while I deal with that." The manager did indeed examine her feelings; a week later, she was supporting the project fully.

Such self-knowledge often shows itself in the hiring process. Ask a candidate to describe a time he got carried away by his feelings and did something he later regretted. Self-aware candidates will be frank in admitting to failure—and will often tell their tales with a smile. One of the hallmarks of self-awareness is a self-deprecating sense of humor.

Self-awareness can also be identified during performance reviews. Self-aware people know—and are comfortable talking about—their limitations and strengths, and they often demonstrate a thirst for constructive criticism. By contrast, people with low self-awareness interpret the message that they need to improve as a threat or a sign of failure.

Self-aware people can also be recognized by their self-confidence. They have a firm grasp of their capabilities and are less likely to set themselves up to fail by, for example, overstretching on assignments. They know, too, when to ask for help. And the risks they take on the job are calculated. They won't ask for a challenge that they know they can't handle alone. They'll play to their strengths.

Consider the actions of a midlevel employee who was invited to sit in on a strategy meeting with her company's top executives. Although she was the most junior person in the room, she did not sit there quietly, listening in awestruck or fearful silence. She knew she had a head for clear logic and the skill to present ideas persuasively, and she offered cogent suggestions about the company's strategy. At the same time, her self-awareness stopped her from wandering into territory where she knew she was weak.

Despite the value of having self-aware people in the workplace, my research indicates that senior executives don't often give self-awareness the credit it deserves when they look for potential leaders. Many executives mistake candor about feelings for "wimpiness" and fail to give due respect to employees who openly acknowledge their shortcomings. Such people are too readily dismissed as “not tough enough” to lead others.

In fact, the opposite is true. In the first place, people generally admire and respect candor. Furthermore, leaders are constantly required to make judgment calls that require a candid assessment of capabilities—their own and those of others. Do we have the management expertise to acquire a competitor? Can we launch a new product within six months? People who assess themselves honestly—that is, self-aware people—are well suited to do the same for the organizations they run.

Self-Regulation

Biological impulses drive our emotions. We cannot do away with them—but we can do much to manage them. Self-regulation, which is like an ongoing inner conversation, is the component of emotional intelligence that frees us from being prisoners of our feelings. People engaged in such a conversation feel bad moods and emotional impulses just as everyone else does, but they find ways to control them and even to channel them in useful ways.

Imagine an executive who has just watched a team of his employees present a botched analysis to the company’s board of directors. In the gloom that follows, the executive might find himself tempted to pound on the table in anger or kick over a chair. He could leap up and scream at the group. Or he might maintain a grim silence, glaring at everyone before stalking off.

But if he had a gift for self-regulation, he would choose a different approach. He would pick his words carefully, acknowledging the team's poor performance without rushing to any hasty judgment. He would then step back to consider the reasons for the failure. Are they personal—a lack of effort? Are there any mitigating factors? What was his role in the debacle? After considering these questions, he would call the team together, lay out the incident's consequences, and offer his feelings about it. He would then present his analysis of the problem and a well-considered solution.

Why does self-regulation matter so much for leaders? First of all, people who are in control of their feelings and impulses—that is, people who are reasonable—are able to create an environment of trust and fairness. In such an environment, politics and infighting are sharply reduced and productivity is high. Talented people flock to the organization and aren't tempted to leave. And self-regulation has a trickle-down effect. No one wants to be known as a hothead when the boss is known for her calm approach. Fewer bad moods at the top mean fewer throughout the organization.

Second, self-regulation is important for competitive reasons. Everyone knows that business today is rife with ambiguity and change. Companies merge and break apart regularly. Technology transforms work at a dizzying pace. People who have mastered their emotions are able to roll with the changes. When a new program is announced, they don't panic; instead, they are able to suspend judgment, seek out information, and listen to the executives as they explain the new program. As the initiative moves forward, these people are able to move with it.

Sometimes they even lead the way. Consider the case of a manager at a large manufacturing company. Like her colleagues, she had used a certain software program for five years. The program drove how she collected and reported data and how she thought about the company's strategy. One day, senior executives announced that a new program was to be installed that would radically change how information was gathered and assessed within the organization. While many people in the company complained bitterly about how disruptive the change would be, the manager mulled over the reasons for the new program and was convinced of its potential to improve performance. She eagerly attended training sessions—some of her colleagues refused to do so—and was eventually promoted to run several divisions, in part because she used the new technology so effectively.

I want to push the importance of self-regulation to leadership even further and make the case that it enhances integrity, which is not only a personal virtue but also an organizational strength. Many of the bad things that happen in companies are a function of impulsive behavior. People rarely plan to exaggerate profits, pad expense accounts, dip into the till, or abuse power for selfish ends. Instead, an opportunity presents itself, and people with low impulse control just say yes.

By contrast, consider the behavior of the senior executive at a large food company. The executive was scrupulously honest in his negotiations with local distributors. He would routinely lay out his cost structure in detail, thereby giving the distributors a realistic understanding of the company's pricing. This approach meant the executive couldn't always drive a hard bargain. Now, on occasion, he felt the urge to increase profits by withholding information about the company's costs. But he challenged that impulse—he saw that it made more sense in the long run to counteract it. His emotional self-regulation paid off in strong, lasting relationships with distributors that benefited the company more than any short-term financial gains would have.

The signs of emotional self-regulation, therefore, are easy to see: a propensity for reflection and thoughtfulness; comfort with ambiguity and change; and integrity—an ability to say no to impulsive urges.

Like self-awareness, self-regulation often does not get its due. People who can master their emotions are sometimes seen as cold fish—their considered responses are taken as a lack of passion. People with fiery temperaments are frequently thought of as "classic" leaders—their outbursts are considered hallmarks of charisma and power. But when such people make it to the top, their impulsiveness often works against them. In my research, extreme displays of negative emotion have never emerged as a driver of good leadership.

Motivation

If there is one trait that virtually all effective leaders have, it is motivation. They are driven to achieve beyond expectations—their own and everyone else's. The key word here is *achieve*. Plenty of people are motivated by external factors, such as a big salary or the status that comes from having an impressive title or being part of a prestigious company. By contrast, those with leadership potential are motivated by a deeply embedded desire to achieve for the sake of achievement.

If you are looking for leaders, how can you identify people who are motivated by the drive to achieve rather than by external rewards? The first sign is a passion for the work itself—such people seek out creative challenges, love to learn, and take great pride in a job well done. They also display an unflagging energy to do things better. People with such energy often seem restless with the status quo. They are persistent with their questions about why things are done one way rather than another; they are eager to explore new approaches to their work.

A cosmetics company manager, for example, was frustrated that he had to wait two weeks to get sales results from people in the field. He finally tracked down an automated phone system that would beep each of his salespeople at 5 p.m. every day. An automated message then prompted them to punch in their numbers—how many calls and sales they had made that day. The system shortened the feedback time on sales results from weeks to hours.

That story illustrates two other common traits of people who are driven to achieve. They are forever raising the performance bar, and they like to keep score. Take the performance bar first. During performance reviews, people with high levels of motivation might ask to be "stretched" by their superiors. Of course, an employee who combines self-awareness with internal motivation will recognize her limits—but she won't settle for objectives that seem too easy to fulfill.

And it follows naturally that people who are driven to do better also want a way of tracking progress—their own, their team's, and their company's. Whereas people with low achievement motivation are often fuzzy about results, those with high achievement motivation often keep score by tracking such hard measures as profitability or market share. I know of a money manager who starts and ends his day on the internet, gauging the performance of his stock fund against four industry-set benchmarks.

Interestingly, people with high motivation remain optimistic even when the score is against them. In such cases, self-regulation combines with achievement motivation to overcome the frustration and depression that come after a setback or failure. Take the case of another portfolio manager at a large investment company. After several successful years, her fund tumbled for three consecutive quarters, leading three large institutional clients to shift their business elsewhere.

Some executives would have blamed the nosedive on circumstances outside their control; others might have seen the setback as evidence of personal failure. This portfolio manager, however, saw an opportunity to prove she could lead a turnaround. Two years later, when she was promoted to a very senior level in the company, she described the experience as “the best thing that ever happened to me; I learned so much from it.”

Executives trying to recognize high levels of achievement motivation in their people can look for one last piece of evidence: commitment to the organization. When people love their jobs for the work itself, they often feel committed to the organizations that make that work possible. Committed employees are likely to stay with an organization even when they are pursued by headhunters waving money.

It’s not difficult to understand how and why a motivation to achieve translates into strong leadership. If you set the performance bar high for yourself, you will do the same for the organization when you are in a position to do so. Likewise, a drive to surpass goals and an interest in keeping score can be contagious. Leaders with these traits can often build a team of managers around them with the same traits. And of course, optimism and organizational commitment are fundamental to leadership—just try to imagine running a company without them.

Empathy

Of all the dimensions of emotional intelligence, empathy is the most easily recognized. We have all felt the empathy of a sensitive teacher or friend; we have all been struck by its absence in an unfeeling coach or boss. But when it comes to business, we rarely hear people praised, let alone rewarded, for their empathy.

The very word seems unbusinesslike, out of place amid the tough realities of the marketplace.

But empathy doesn't mean a kind of "I'm OK, you're OK" mushiness. For a leader, that is, it doesn't mean adopting other people's emotions as one's own and trying to please everybody. That would be a nightmare—it would make action impossible. Rather, empathy means thoughtfully considering employees' feelings—along with other factors—in the process of making intelligent decisions.

For an example of empathy in action, consider what happened when two giant brokerage companies merged, creating redundant jobs in all their divisions. One division manager called his people together and gave a gloomy speech that emphasized the number of people who would soon be fired. The manager of another division gave his people a different kind of speech. He was up front about his own worry and confusion, and he promised to keep people informed and to treat everyone fairly.

The difference between these two managers was empathy. The first manager was too worried about his own fate to consider the feelings of his anxiety-stricken colleagues. The second knew intuitively what his people were feeling, and he acknowledged their fears with his words. Is it any surprise that the first manager saw his division sink as many demoralized people, especially the most talented, departed? By contrast, the second manager continued to be a strong leader, his best people stayed, and his division remained as productive as ever.

Empathy is particularly important today as a component of leadership for at least three reasons: the increasing use of teams; the rapid pace of globalization; and the growing need to retain talent.

Consider the challenge of leading a team. As anyone who has ever been a part of one can attest, teams are cauldrons of bubbling emotions. They are often charged with reaching a consensus—which is hard enough with two people and much more difficult as the numbers increase. Even in groups with as few as four or five members, alliances form and clashing agendas get set. A team's leader must be able to sense and understand the viewpoints of everyone around the table.

That's exactly what a marketing manager at a large information technology company was able to do when she was appointed to lead a troubled team. The group was in turmoil, overloaded by work and missing deadlines. Tensions were high among the members. Tinkering with procedures was not enough to bring the group together and make it an effective part of the company.

So the manager took several steps. In a series of one-on-one sessions, she took the time to listen to everyone in the group—what was frustrating them, how they rated their colleagues, whether they felt they had been ignored. And then she directed the team in a way that brought it together: She encouraged people to speak more openly about their frustrations, and she helped people raise constructive complaints during meetings. In short, her empathy allowed her to understand her team's emotional makeup. The result was not just heightened collaboration among members but also added business, as the team was called on for help by a wider range of internal clients.

Globalization is another reason for the rising importance of empathy for business leaders. Cross-cultural dialogue can easily lead to miscues and misunderstandings. Empathy is an antidote. People who have it are attuned to subtleties in body language; they can hear the message beneath the words being spoken. Beyond that, they have a deep understanding of both the existence and the importance of cultural and ethnic differences.

Consider the case of an American consultant whose team had just pitched a project to a potential Japanese client. In its dealings with Americans, the team was accustomed to being bombarded with questions after such a proposal, but this time it was greeted with a long silence. Other members of the team, taking the silence as disapproval, were ready to pack and leave. The lead consultant gestured them to stop. Although he was not particularly familiar with Japanese culture, he read the client's face and posture and sensed not rejection but interest—even deep consideration. He was right: When the client finally spoke, it was to give the consulting firm the job.

Finally, empathy plays a key role in the retention of talent, particularly in today's information economy. Leaders have always needed empathy to develop and keep good people, but today the stakes are higher. When good people leave, they take the company's knowledge with them.

That's where coaching and mentoring come in. It has repeatedly been shown that coaching and mentoring pay off not just in better performance but also in increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover. But what makes coaching and mentoring work best is the nature of the relationship. Outstanding coaches and mentors get inside the heads of the people they are helping. They sense how to give effective feedback. They know when to push for better performance and when to hold back. In the way they motivate their protégés, they demonstrate empathy in action.

In what is probably sounding like a refrain, let me repeat that empathy doesn't get much respect in business. People wonder how leaders can make hard decisions if they are "feeling" for all the people who will be affected. But leaders with empathy do more than sympathize with people around them: They use their knowledge to improve their companies in subtle but important ways.

Social Skill

The first three components of emotional intelligence are self-management skills. The last two, empathy and social skill, concern a person's ability to manage relationships with others. As a component of emotional intelligence, social skill is not as simple as it sounds. It's not just a matter of friendliness, although people with high levels of social skill are rarely mean-spirited. Social skill, rather, is friendliness with a purpose: moving people in the direction you desire, whether that's agreement on a new marketing strategy or enthusiasm about a new product.

Socially skilled people tend to have a wide circle of acquaintances, and they have a knack for finding common ground with people of all kinds—a knack for building rapport. That doesn't mean they socialize continually; it means they work according to the assumption that nothing important gets done alone. Such people have a network in place when the time for action comes.

Social skill is the culmination of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence. People tend to be very effective at managing relationships when they can understand and control their own emotions and can empathize with the feelings of others. Even motivation contributes to social skill. Remember that people who are driven to achieve tend to be optimistic, even in the face of setbacks or failure. When people are upbeat, their "glow" is cast upon conversations and other social encounters. They are popular, and for good reason.

Because it is the outcome of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence, social skill is recognizable on the job in many ways that will by now sound familiar. Socially skilled people, for instance, are adept at managing teams—that's their empathy at work. Likewise, they are expert persuaders—a manifestation of self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy combined. Given those skills, good persuaders know when to make an emotional plea, for instance, and when an appeal to reason will work better. And motivation, when publicly visible, makes such people excellent collaborators; their passion for the work spreads to others, and they are driven to find solutions.

But sometimes social skill shows itself in ways the other emotional intelligence components do not. For instance, socially skilled people may at times appear not to be working while at work. They seem to be idly schmoozing—chatting in the hallways with colleagues or joking around with people who are not even connected to their "real" jobs. Socially skilled people, however, don't think it makes sense to arbitrarily limit the scope of their relationships. They build bonds widely because they know that in these fluid times, they may need help someday from people they are just getting to know today.

For example, consider the case of an executive in the strategy department of a global computer manufacturer. By 1993, he was convinced that the company's future lay with the internet. Over the course of the next year, he found kindred spirits and used his social skill to stitch together a virtual community that cut across levels, divisions, and nations. He then used this de facto team to put up a corporate website, among the first by a major company. And on his own initiative, with no budget or formal status, he signed up the company to participate in an annual internet industry convention. Calling on his allies and persuading various divisions to donate funds, he recruited more than 50 people from a dozen different units to represent the company at the convention.

Management took notice: Within a year of the conference, the executive's team formed the basis for the company's first internet division, and he was formally put in charge of it. To get there, the executive had ignored conventional boundaries, forging and maintaining connections with people in every corner of the organization.

Is social skill considered a key leadership capability in most companies? The answer is yes, especially when compared with the other components of emotional intelligence. People seem to know intuitively that leaders need to manage relationships effectively; no leader is an island. After all, the leader's task is to get work done through other people, and social skill makes that possible. A leader who cannot express her empathy may as well not have it at all. And a leader's motivation will be useless if he cannot communicate his passion to the organization. Social skill allows leaders to put their emotional intelligence to work.

It would be foolish to assert that good old-fashioned IQ and technical ability are not important ingredients in strong leadership. But the recipe would not be complete without emotional intelligence. It was once thought that the components of emotional intelligence were “nice to have” in business leaders. But now we know that, for the sake of performance, these are ingredients that leaders “need to have.”

It is fortunate, then, that emotional intelligence can be learned. The process is not easy. It takes time and, most of all, commitment. But the benefits that come from having a well-developed emotional intelligence, both for the individual and for the organization, make it worth the effort.

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Discussion Guide

Are you feeling inspired by what you've read in this collection? Do you want to share the ideas in the articles or explore the insights you've gleaned with others? This discussion guide offers an opportunity to dig a little deeper, with questions to prompt personal reflection and to start conversations with your team.

You don't need to have read the book from beginning to end to use this guide. Choose the questions that apply to the articles you have read or that you feel might spark the liveliest discussion.

Reflect on key takeaways from your reading to help you adopt the ideas and techniques you want to integrate into your work as a leader. What tools can you share with your team to help everyone be their best? Becoming the leader you want to be starts with a detailed plan—and a commitment to carrying it out.

1. What has been the hardest part of stepping into management so far (or if you haven't yet made the move, what aspects of your role do you expect to be the most challenging)? What does it look like to "lead through others" in the day-to-day work of a manager? What

misconceptions about leadership do you think most new managers start out with?

2. How well do you understand the unique strengths of each person on your team? How could you adjust people's roles or responsibilities to play more to their natural talents? What's one thing you could do this week to help someone on the team use their strengths more?
3. Who do you turn to for advice, support, or new ideas—and what does that say about your current network? How balanced is your network across the three types mentioned in "How Leaders Create and Use Networks": operational (which you need to get work done), personal (your source of emotional support), and strategic (which will help you work toward your future goals)?
4. How well do you understand the personalities and preferences of the people on your team? How could you work with your team to encourage respectful disagreement and productive dialogue? How can you make space for people to share how they like to work (and avoid the assumption that everyone works the same way)?
5. How would you define psychological safety in your own words? Think about your past work experiences: When have you felt safe to speak up, and how did your manager and/or the organization build a culture of psychological safety? When have you *not* felt empowered to share your

feelings or ideas, and how did you know it wasn't safe to speak?

6. What are the norms in your organization around raising ideas? If you aren't sure, how could you find out? If you had to make your case for additional resources or an innovative project tomorrow, how would you tailor your pitch to decision-makers? Who could you enlist in the process to strengthen your credibility or get your idea in front of the right people?
7. What are some examples of important moments at work when you've demonstrated good strategic thinking skills? In what ways could you work on strengthening your strategic thinking ability right now? What strategic insights can you extract from your last week of work, and how could you apply them going forward?
8. When have you given or received support that was really needed? How was providing that help different from micromanaging? What are some signs that someone is struggling productively and doesn't need intervention or, conversely, how do you know when it's time to step in and offer guidance? What could you do to avoid micromanaging your team?
9. In your experience, what has worked for your in-person, hybrid, or remote work arrangements and what hasn't worked? How could you build a shared sense of meaning

and purpose on your team? What sets apart the teams you've seen where everyone is energized, and what inspiration can you draw from them for your own team?

10. What makes a one-on-one meeting between a boss and direct report effective? How often should these meetings occur, and what practices do you want to avoid in your regular check-ins? When you conduct one-on-one meetings, how can you convey to your employee that the time is about them?
11. What are the differences between effective and ineffective feedback? Think of a time when you either gave or received feedback that could have been delivered better. What would have made the feedback more valuable to the person receiving it? How can you assure your team that you're open to hearing their feedback?
12. How widespread a problem is collaborative overload—or too much teamwork—in your organization? How can you ensure you don't overdo collaborative work and get spread too thin—or that you're not inadvertently rewarding "extra miler" behavior on your team that is unsustainable?
13. Reflect on times when a boss or colleague has made you feel appreciated or that your contributions or unique skills were valued—how did it make you feel and what impact did it have on your work? What small changes could you

make in your everyday interactions with people to signal that they matter?

14. Think of a time when you went through a stressful experience at work and didn't handle the emotions involved very well. What would you do differently now, or how could you reframe the event in retrospect to find meaning or growth? What recovery practices have helped you recharge your batteries in the past, and what activities do you think will be most helpful in building your emotional reserves for the challenges ahead as a manager?

15. Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence includes five elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Which of these do you lean on most naturally and which need intentional development? How could you get feedback from others on your strengths and weaknesses in these areas to check your own assumptions?

16. What other sources on making the leap to management have had a significant impact on your work? Were there voices or subtopics you missed in this collection? Were there voices or subtopics included that surprised you?

17. After reading and reflecting on this book and discussing it with people on your team, write down the ideas and techniques you want to try. Think of how you might

experiment and implement those in both the short term and long term. Draft a plan to move forward.

Notes

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