

Confessions of a First-time Manager

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When you have a certain degree of skill at a given task, people often assume that you will naturally be able to manage other people who do that same task.

That's how I first became a manager in the orchestra business, and I had absolutely no idea of what I was doing.

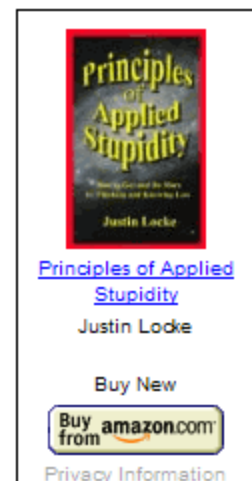
Through trial and error, I've come to learn a few important lessons to apply when you receive that important promotion that elevates you above your coworkers.

The most common problem in becoming a manager is that you suddenly find yourself socially excluded from your erstwhile professional peer group. You may see them every day, but things have changed. They may all be thrilled for you, but then again, some may resent your being promoted. Others may have issues with authority figures in general, they may just be suspicious, or they may just be overly cautious where you are concerned.

In any event, you do not "belong" anymore. A promotion can actually feel like you've been fired. In a way, you have.

Along with the sense of social exclusion, one of the biggest shocks for a first-time manager is that this may be the very first time you have power over other people. If this is the case, well, it's a little like getting a job at a candy store. Everyone has the best of intentions, but the temptations to abuse your power are enormous.

The first dark temptation laid before you is to wield your newfound power in an effort to reconnect with everyone. For example, as a professional musician, I often encountered conductors who would spend enormous amounts of rehearsal time on chitchat, trying to be "our pal." Of course, since conductors are all-powerful, we would indulge their need for personal/social connection, and we would smile, nod, and laugh at all of their jokes; but in reality we felt resentment for their abuse of power in forcing us to be their paid companions. We also had a generally low opinion of them for their waste of time and lack of professionalism.





Once you are promoted to management, you just have to accept the fact that a level of innocent belonging you once had is no longer available to you.

The next temptation of power is indulging in newfound politeness.

When you have the power to hire and fire, everyone is really nice to you. This is great until you realize that everything you hear is being filtered through a lens that essentially says, "how can I present this information to the boss in such a way that it will gain me the most reward?" (e.g., instead of an employee yelling "Fire!," you will hear something like, "I have some really exciting news that I know you will find to be extremely important, and I wanted you to know that the moment I heard it")

Granted, all this deferential bowing, scraping, and fawning over you is, quite frankly, delicious. Then again, so is chocolate cake. But you can't live on chocolate cake, and neither can you live on superficial smiles. You have to be careful not to get yourself imprisoned in an ivory tower of constant good news.

There is one handy and easy fix: In my experience, about 2% of employees possess a unique genetic mutation that actually compels them tell you everything that you're doing wrong – with a minimum of tact. (These people can be excruciatingly difficult to deal with on your first day.) Painful and annoying though they may be, it is important to cultivate and maintain these "court jesters." Otherwise you'll never hear bad news until it's too late.

In the midst of all the schmoozing, it is easy to overlook another kind of "managee," one that can best be called the "competent silent type." They believe that the quality of their work speaks for itself. They expect you to appreciate the work they do without them hyping it to you. It is easy to lose track of this kind of employee when you are completely inundated with self-promoting sycophants (many of whom are compensating for their lower-quality work). You may also interpret their silence as a lack of enthusiasm/commitment. It would be nice if they would bow and scrape too, but they won't. If you don't proactively show appreciation for their work, they will silently cut back to the level of everyone else, or more likely they will just disappear, and you'll be left wondering why productivity is down.

Yet another odd discovery is just how boring management jobs can be. If you have done your job well, there will be times when everyone else is working away and you will have absolutely nothing to do. You can feel very left out. The temptation is to find something to do, like sending out a memo, but bear in mind, people have to stop working in order to read your memo. Is that really what you want? . . .

With power, you will be surprised by just how much silent scrutiny is focused upon you. You won't notice it at first. Your managees won't feel like they can just chat with you any old time, so their respect for (and possibly fear of) you will lead to a level of careful deference that, unless you are carefully tuned-in, will feel very much like they are ignoring you.



Trust me, they aren't. When you have power to hire and fire, your managees focus 90% of their perceptions on your every move. The less you do and say, the less time employees will spend analyzing what you just did and said – which leaves more time for actual work. Warren Buffet has a rule about communicating to his subordinates: he does it as little as possible. That way, when they do get an email from him, they know it's important. Again, you may feel disconnected by communicating less, but you'll be training your employees to pay close attention when you do say something. The last thing you want is to train your employees to tune you out.

One thing that has surprisingly great symbolism is who you promote or hire. Specifically, if you hire a friend or relative ahead of the best candidate, you are sending a loud message that says you are content with, or even desire, less than the best.

I've seen many a manager slip a substandard crony onto the payroll and then convince himself that the other high-quality employees "didn't notice." Not so. Employees notice every little thing you do, and while no one will say a word to you, there is backlash every time, in terms of both morale and quality.

Beware of the belief that money alone will motivate top effort. When I was a professional bass player, the money motivated me to show up on time and give a fairly high level of performance, but to give my best effort – I admit it – I needed something more. When I toured with Henry Mancini, he had sumptuous feasts delivered to the musicians' lounge every night. The money got us there, but the unexpected free food made us feel like he appreciated us. We were eager to respond in kind by delivering something "extra" – and we did, night after night. Catered dinners are always nice, but you can get a similar effect with regular pats on the back. A small investment of praise costs you nothing, but the returns can be enormous.

When you are in the lonely and pressure-filled role of manager, it can be downright scary. It's easy to focus on your own problems first, not the least of which is occasionally feeling "left out." To regain that sense of belonging and connection, you must gain everyone's respect. The easiest way to do that is to resist the many aforementioned temptations, be mindful of the vulnerability of the people who work for you, and consistently demonstrate courtesy, courage, and fairness.



Use your power responsibly and conscientiously. You might not be one of the group any more, but that group will respect you as a good leader.

[Justin Locke](#) is the author of "Principles of Applied Stupidity," an amusing look at how to depart from the conventional wisdom. As a speaker and seminar leader, he offers fundamental techniques on how to divest yourself and your organization of industrial-revolution-era management methods.

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