

MANAGING PEOPLE

# New Managers Should Focus on Helping Their Teams, Not Pleasing Their Bosses

by Karen Dillon  
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When I first became a manager — an unexpected promotion soon after taking a new job — I found myself feeling awkward about the fact that I had been [elevated above my peers](#). Still, my team was in the middle of a complex first-time project, so I wanted to impress my boss with my handling of it. My immediate instinct was to make it no one's problem but mine. I worked longer hours and assigned

myself all the tasks that I was afraid to ask my former peers to do. But soon I found myself roiled by the frustration that my colleagues weren't magically stepping up to the plate. Were they somehow waiting for — or worse, willing — me to fail?

In hindsight, I know that I assumed the new-manager mantle badly. I was almost apologetic about getting the promotion and, in those early days, exhibited almost no real leadership. I was too worried about what everyone, especially my boss, was seeing in me and not worried enough about what they *should* be seeing in me. Luckily, I righted course quickly.

The irony for most newly appointed managers is that the skills and qualities that earned them the promotion are very different from those that will serve them well as a leader, and they're often left to figure it out on their own, like I was — and not always successfully. You can't help but wonder how many of the managers at rapidly growing companies, such as Uber, had any management experience and training before they assumed positions of power. Harvard Business School professor Francis Frei, who was recently recruited by Uber to help with the company's leadership and sexual harassment scandals, points out that the instant conclusion might be that the transportation company has bad managers. But in reality, she told [Marketplace](#), those managers haven't been given the guidance they need. "It turns out we have not been giving leadership training to our managers," she observed. "So the managers haven't been set up for success."

Stanford academic Bob Sutton, author of *Good Boss, Bad Boss* and the forthcoming *The Asshole Survival Guide*, says the challenges that new managers face have a lot to do with where they place their own attention: "Your attention will naturally shift up — be directed up the hierarchy." This even happens in nature: The average baboon looks up at the alpha male [every 30 seconds or so](#) to see what he is doing. We do the same thing when we've been promoted, constantly looking up to make sure our boss is seeing and approving of us, which means we're paying less attention to the people we're now leading. And our former peers, for their part, are watching us more than they ever did before. What do our mood and expression suggest? Are we getting up from our desk more often? What are we spending our time on? Are we more or less friendly than we used to be? Who's in and who's out in the new hierarchy? This "asymmetry of attention," Sutton explains, is problematic for most new managers. You may be so eager to prove that you're the right promotion (or hire) to your own higher-ups that you unintentionally neglect the people who report to you.

So what should you do to counter this before you alienate your new charges and destructive patterns set in?

"It's uncomfortable to have the people who report to you watching you so closely," explains Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill, author of "[Becoming the Boss](#)," but it's never been more important to pay attention to them. You need your new team to be on your side, giving you their best performance and trusting you to lead them. As you and your direct reports recalibrate your roles, they'll be looking for evidence of three specific things in you, Hill says:

- It's likely that you were promoted because you were good at your previous job, but are you competent as a manager?
- Do you want to do the right things as a new leader?
- Will you have the right network, respect, and ability to get the job done?

“People will be collecting evidence from your verbal and nonverbal clues,” Hill says. “You need to pay attention not just to what you do but how you do it. Your words matter.” If you are conscious of signaling your competence in these three areas, you’ll go a long way to quelling your team’s concerns. Some of it, Sutton advises, is simply changing your mindset: Are you their ally? Are you concerned that they shine, not just you? Are you fair in how you make decisions?

Your team members will be looking at your every move for clues as to what kind of boss you’ll be and whether you have the trustworthiness, character, and influence to succeed. I made my share of mistakes in my early days of managing people by not realizing how much my behavior reverberated. For example, in trying to stay on top of my new job, I often sent or replied to emails late at night or on weekends. That served to relax me, knowing I had cleared my inbox and the ball was in someone else’s court. Until one of my brave direct reports called me on it, I had no idea that I was unintentionally signaling to my team that I expected them to be engaged on email 24/7. Since that wasn’t my intention, I started scheduling emails to be sent during office hours instead.

The experts recommend that you focus on demonstrating your vision, supporting and leading teamwork, and recognizing those who make significant contributions. You might, for example, make a point of listening more than talking to make clear that you value the expertise of your direct reports. When I finally focused on being a real leader, instead of a nervous new manager, I started asking my colleagues how we could best get the work done rather than simply figuring it out by myself. I think it signaled to them that I cared about their opinion and expertise, and that I was not assuming I was a one-man band. I also made a point of speaking well of them to my boss in private and in public, so they knew I was on their side. We won a top industry award the next year — an achievement I attribute to us finally pulling together as a team.

Just because you were a terrific producer before you were promoted doesn’t mean you’ll automatically be a terrific boss. Recognize that you have a lot to learn, and ask your own manager for help and guidance getting up to speed quickly. And cut yourself some slack as you progress on that learning curve. “You’ll probably be feeling pretty overwhelmed as a new manager,” Hill says. “You’ll need to make sure you take care of yourself emotionally too, so you can be available for other people.”

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