

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

# Are You Sure You Want to Be a Manager?

by Joseph Grenny  
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Renowned restaurateur Danny Meyer likes to tell newly promoted supervisors that they have just been given the “gift of fire.” As a boss they now have a new and potent power, but Meyer wants to ensure they understand the appropriate — and inappropriate — uses of this gift. Fire, Meyer explains, can be used to warm and comfort. It can be used to illuminate darkness. It can be used to render food more nutritious and pleasing. When stoked into a campfire, it provides a place for people to convene. And every once in a while, it is used to scorch — as when a leader speaks painful truths to others.

I’ve sat with many recently promoted leaders over the years — newly minted supervisors, first-time CEOs, and even recently elected political leaders — some who wondered what they had gotten

themselves into. I've likewise participated in the deliberations of some who were ambivalent about taking on a new position and turning up the heat in their own lives. Here is some counsel on what to consider before you make the leap to manager.

**Count the cost.** It's fun to play on a bigger stage. More pay is nice. Taking on more complex problems provides new satisfactions. And learning to lead people is a novel opportunity for growth. But new responsibilities always require the surrender of familiar pleasures. Think about your future before you give up the present. The deepest regrets I've heard from those who took the job were the loss of *tribe* and *simplicity*.

- **Tribe.** When you become the boss your peers are no longer peers. This might unsettle valued friendships. Also, your new peers may be less to your liking. Examine them closely before moving up to their level. Likewise, when you are granted more power, you are implicitly agreeing that your loyalty from that day forward is expected to be more to the enterprise than to your colleagues. This may offend your former tribe. For example, if you argue against new ergonomic chairs that you formerly championed — because now you see a better and higher use of the funds — they may see you as a sellout. Verbally, or nonverbally, they'll express their disgust at the new airs you're putting on in an attempt to turn you back into a peer. You're not. And you never will be again. Are you okay with that? The extreme case of your tribal loss may be the need to dismiss one of your former peers. Could you? Would you? Would you dress them down if needed in order to uphold the interests of the enterprise? Would you give one of them an unattractive assignment if that's what the team needed done? Try the job on. Try to imagine the crucial moments you will face that may require setting new expectations and social contracts with previous peers. Are you willing to fully embrace the requirements of this new authority?
- **Simplicity.** The world is no longer as simple as *your* opinion — it's now about *our*. You will encounter a new set of tradeoffs. You don't get to sit in the cheap seats and blame "management" anymore — because you are now management. You can't take simple positions like "the customer comes first" because you have to balance cost, quality, schedule, and other factors. When you take the job you leave a world of value simplicity and enter one of value complexity. You will have to advocate positions that you may not totally agree with because you are now a part of a management team. Are you ready for that?

**Take counsel from your fears.** Fear is normal. If you aren't scared you shouldn't be trusted with fire. You've got two options for dealing with those jitters — you can cover for them or connect with them. Faking confidence doesn't work. If you're worried about failure or criticism, that's normal. Authenticity — first with yourself and then with others — is the path to legitimate serenity. For example, if you're being asked to lead a team of engineers — most of whom are smarter than you — the worst thing you can do is cover for your fear with some supercilious display of your wisdom. The ultimate display of confidence is a comfort with truth. Acknowledge your deficiencies without dwelling on them. Then focus on your strengths.

**Check your motive.** If you say yes to becoming a manager, think carefully about *why* you are saying it. Is your primary motive ambition or contribution? Is it about looking good or doing good? If you want power to gratify your ambition, your leadership will be all about you. You'll fail to cultivate the legitimate trust of your team. You'll guard your power jealously rather than being generous with it. You'll obsess over others respecting you rather than doing the right thing. And all of that will hobble your capacity to be bold and decisive. Danny Meyer says that the gift of fire isn't "power over" it is "power to." The organization is willing to grant it to you if your intent is to be a steward, not a monarch.

Leadership offers profound satisfactions – but only if embraced fully, willingly, and for the right reasons.

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