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by Amy Gallo

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When you're managing managers, your responsibilities are two-fold: you need to make sure they're producing good work (as with any employee) and that they're effectively supporting their teams. You might know how to do the former, but how do you do the latter? Do you need to provide training? Coaching? And how do you serve as a good role model?

What the Experts Say

In some ways, managing managers is similar to managing anyone else — you need to align their goals with yours, provide feedback, and help them advance their careers, says Sydney Finkelstein, professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business and author of *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Manage the Flow of Talent*. But there is one important difference — managing managers also requires leadership coaching: you have to coach “managers to develop the culture and capabilities

that their team members need,” says Linda Hill, professor at Harvard Business School and coauthor of *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*. This is especially important because moving from an individual contributor to a manager is an “often neglected transition.” In most organizations, “first-timers don’t get a lot of formal training,” says Hill. Here’s how you can fill in the gap and help your direct reports be great managers.

Model the right behavior

Finkelstein’s research with protégés of [superbosses](#) revealed a common theme: people learn how to lead from their bosses. But your direct reports don’t just learn from you when you sit down for your [one-on-one meetings](#). “It’s not particularly authentic to say I’m going to be a role model on Thursday from 4 to 5pm. People are watching all the time,” says Finkelstein. So be sure that you are managing your people in the way that you expect them to manage their own teams. “It’s useful to be deliberate and aware that people are paying attention,” says Finkelstein. So always walk the talk. For example, if you want your direct reports to give their team members autonomy, be sure that you are doing the same for them.

Change the focus of your coaching

You spend time with your individual contributors talking about the specifics of their work but with managers, you’ll also need to explore their relationships with their direct reports. Instead of asking, “How’s that project going?” you might ask “How are you working with Clara to get that project done?” or “How might you better support Clara on that project?” Talk directly about how they are coaching and giving feedback. “This sends a signal that these things are important,” says Hill. She suggests you ask them how much time they’re spending on coaching since they might be tempted, like many bosses, to give this activity short shrift, and you might regularly remind them: “We all have a responsibility to develop people.”

Compliment them in public

The people who report to your direct reports look to you for clues as to how they should feel about their managers. If you respect the person and the job she’s doing, they will too. “Give people opportunities to demonstrate their credibility in front of others. When you show that you value someone on your team and their direct reports are watching, it can really help,” says Finkelstein. Praise them publicly, ask for their advice in front of others, or assign them part of a presentation that lets them show off their expertise. And be careful: the same effect can work for negative comments. If you have criticism to offer, be sure to do it in privately.

Use an apprenticeship model

The best training for someone learning to become a manager is individualized attention from you, their boss. This shouldn’t just occur in meetings though. Finkelstein says you should “do real work together, looking for opportunities to explain what you’re doing and how you’re doing it.” This will allow you to not only teach them but also to observe them in action. You’re not going to sit in on all of their one-on-ones (hello, [micromanaging!](#)) but you should make time to do things like participate in their team meetings, watch them give feedback, or conduct job interviews. Whenever you’re

observing them, [give immediate feedback](#) as long as it's not in front of others in a way that undermines them.

Give them space

You don't want to dictate exactly how your employees do their job. "You have to allow that individual to lead in his or her own way," says Hill. They need to figure out what's authentic to them. This is especially important when there are differences, [such as gender](#), between you and your direct reports. For example, keep in mind that "a woman can't assert authority in the same way as a man and have the same impact," says Hill.

Go through the same training

Some organizations offer formal training for new managers or send up-and-coming leaders to executive education programs. If this is something you can do for your direct reports, select the same curriculum you went through. "Really good executive education programs teach a common language and that can be really valuable," for you and your direct report, says Finkelstein. If you participated in a class that you found particularly helpful, suggest that your managers do the same.

Get to know their team

It can be tricky to know how much you should interact with your direct reports' teams, says Finkelstein. On the one hand, you need to be familiar with the players so that you can give the manager relevant feedback and coaching. But, on the other hand, you don't want to undermine their authority. "Don't allow yourself to get into the situation where you're hearing things they're not telling their manager," Hill says. Any interactions should be above board with the explicit goal of trying to better understand the team and help the manager. "Be clear with everybody that you're aligned and there are no secrets," says Hill. But don't close off all communication. "If there is a serious concern, it's best to have an open door policy."

Find out how you're doing

You will be most supportive to your direct reports if you understand how you're performing as a coach and mentor. Finkelstein says you can ask directly or use a 360 tool to [assess how you're doing](#). "Make sure that the questions get at indirectly and implicitly whether you're a good role model or not. Are you consistent in what you're asking for and what your expectations are?" he suggests. Also, don't wait for your annual performance review to ask for input. "Feedback has to be much more immediate and connected to the work you're doing," he says. So set up the expectation early on that you want to hear how you're doing.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Treat your direct reports in the same way you want them to treat their team members.
- Look for opportunities to observe them in action.

- Spend time getting to know their team members.

Don't:

- Dictate exactly how they should manage. Instead, give them advice and let them find their own authentic style.
- Criticize them in front of their team. You should be looking for opportunities to bolster their credibility.
- Wait until the annual review cycle to ask for input. Regularly seek feedback on how you're doing as their manager.

Case Study #1: Model the behavior you want to see

Matt Van Itallie, the vice president of customer support at a Maryland-based software company, took on a new role last December. He inherited a team of seven people, five of whom were relatively new managers. The company was going through a period of significant growth so Matt needed to help these managers “become as effective as possible as quickly as possible,” he says.

He started by doing a “person-by-person assessment” of what each manager needed and what they were working on. With that information, he put together personalized development plans that included a “small customized reading list” on key management topics, such as giving feedback and time management.

He also looked for opportunities to observe them in action. He attended their staff meetings and watched their frontline staff answer calls on occasion. He knew he was “walking a fine line” there. “I wanted to protect their autonomy but I was relatively new to the organization and needed a deeper on-the-ground sense of what was going on with the team,” he says. So he was above board with everyone about his intentions, making clear that he was trying to get up to speed himself and not looking over the managers’ shoulders.

Matt used an acronym to standardize the feedback he gave to his team: WW/?DD. He started his one-on-ones by discussing what was *working well* and then explored what they might *do differently*. But before recommending next steps, he’d ask questions (the meaning behind the question mark). “I wanted to emphasize curiosity rather than judgment,” he explains.

This practice was in itself a “role modeling exercise.” Matt wanted his employees to give the same type of feedback to their teams. And that’s what happened: “One of my managers pointed out in a staff meeting that she was using the same technique that I had used with her. She said, ‘I do this now because of you.’”

Matt’s work with his team has paid off and he’s proud of what they’ve accomplished together. “The managers showed real growth in their skills. And their teams have made a substantial improvement in all of their performance metrics.”

Case Study #2: Work closely together

Sarah Grayson, cofounder and partner at On-Ramps, the executive search firm that serves the social sector, has five people on her team, all of whom manage between two to four staff members. Helping her employees be better managers is one of the most enjoyable parts of her job, she explains. “I have some really strong managers who have been managing for years and I learn quite a bit from them but I’m also cognizant that they’re learning from me as well.”

There are several things she does to try to set her managers up for success. First, she gives hands-on advice and coaching. She focuses her weekly check-ins with each person on understanding how they’re doing but also getting feedback on how the team is doing. “The majority of our time together is spent problem-solving about their direct reports,” she says. “I’ll ask questions like ‘What does your direct report need to work on? How are they doing? Do you feel there’s trust there?’ and then we spend at least half the time talking about what they could try to help their direct reports.”

Her company also provides structured trainings on topics like active listening, diversity and inclusion, and management best practices, which all managers attend together.

She says that it’s critical that managers and direct reports also be staffed to the same search whenever possible. Without that opportunity to work together, “it’s very hard to have a handle on what they’re doing and the feedback is not as rich as it could be.” She’s currently working on projects with all of her managers and she encourages them to do the same with their direct reports.

In order to help her employees grow, Sarah also gives individual contributors an opportunity to try out managing on a project basis. “I try to match them up with the right person, someone who’s working on something that they also have experience in. This sets them up for small wins early on.” And then she checks in regularly. She doesn’t just ask about how the relationship is going — she also explores whether they are enjoying the role. “Being a manager isn’t for everybody and I want to be sure it’s something that’s motivating them, not bringing them down.”

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the [HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work](#). She [writes and speaks](#) about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).
