

# How To Avoid the Seven Most Common Management Mistakes

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“I’d rather stick a needle through my eye than be a manager,” lamented one very discouraged manager recently. “I had plenty of confidence when I was doing what I knew how to do. Now I doubt myself and my abilities.” This graphic comment echoes a theme familiar to new managers, experienced managers without formal training, and managers of growing companies and departments. The reward for technical competence, or organizational success, is frequently promotion to manager or being given an even larger staff to manage. The obvious problem inherent to this common practice is that it is based on the assumption that good technicians (regardless of the technical field) make good managers- *even absent additional training or development in the field of management.*

The fact is, most of us would not think of going to a tax accountant who does not have the required technical skills to do our tax return. No one would go to a physician who hasn’t completed the rigorous training required in his or her discipline. Even the local fast-food chain puts money, time, and energy into training its employees. Why then, do companies of all sizes around the globe take technically proficient performers and anoint them managers without providing them concomitant development to assure success? Untrained managers cost company’s significant amounts of money in terms of lawsuits, EEO charges, the low productivity that accompanies poor morale, and even attempts at unionizations (as the saying goes, “a company that gets a union, deserves a union and gets the kind of union it deserves”).

Through no fault of their own, most new managers, and not a small number of ones, often make one of seven mistakes that lead to untold nightmares. With some very simple changes, and one giant leap of faith, managing can be made easier. To illustrate, follow Jason, a top-notch engineer, through his first six months as a new manager. He provides a real-life example of someone who made every mistake in the new manager book because he did not know any better. Jason learned the hard way, making the seven most common management mistakes and discovering ways to remedy them.

## **MISTAKE 1. TIGHT FISTED CONTROL**

The most common mistake made by the novice manager is *overcontrol*. In an effort to prove himself worthy of his new assignment, Jason attempted to maintain control of everything and everyone around him. Initially, his reputation as a talented engineer with strong detail orientation, boundless energy, and superior interpersonal skills cut him a berth with his staff. They tolerated his constant questioning, second-guessing their decisions, and directing their most minute tasks-at least for a short while. Within months, however, Jason was perceived as more of an impediment to goal attainment than a help. He had everything going for him, and he let it slip through his fingers because of one common error: the need to maintain control.

Jason had inherited a team consisting of mostly peak performers. Nevertheless, he felt he needed to prove himself and did not realize that there were many ways to do so other than trying to maintain tight-fisted control. Jason began by insisting that every one on the team, including his most senior people who had been with the company considerably longer than he had, discuss every decision with him before taking action. This meant that company veterans essentially had to ask permission to take even routine action. Eventually, initiative declined, and people waited to be told what to do.

### **Remedy: To Be In Control, Give It Away**

Remember the paradox of control—the more control you have, the more you give away. Savvy managers know that in order to bring out the best in people, power and control must be shared. In *The Tao of Leadership*, author John Heider writes, “When I give up trying to impress the group, I become very impressive. But when I am just trying to make myself look good, the group knows that and does not like it.”

Giving up trying to look good does not mean relinquishing responsibility. As a manager, you are always responsible for what happens in your department. It means that you assess the capabilities of your team members, both individually and collectively, and give them as much control over the process as they are prepared to handle. For example, Jason could have told the high-performing veterans that he trusted their abilities, and, until he was familiar with what they were doing and how they were doing it, he would like to meet weekly or biweekly to discuss the status of their projects. In this way, he would have to be aware of what was going on and available to help, but not directing the processes of people who were quite capable of doing that themselves. Similarly, this would convey the message that the need to be involved was based on his short tenure in the position, instead of implying that others are somehow not competent enough to make their own decisions.

With staff members who were not performing to their maximum potential, Jason might have talked to each of them about the areas in which they felt comfortable operating independently and in which ones they perceived the need for his input. By so doing, he would not assume that they were more capable than they actually were, but likewise not ignore the need to develop their confidence and skills. Without being overly controlling, Jason could remain involved with those areas that required his expertise and allow independent functioning on others. He needed to differentiate who and what areas required his input from those that did not.

### **MISTAKE 2. EXPERTIZING**

Within the first several weeks of his tenure as manager, the division vice president to whom Jason reported asked him to develop a plan for restructuring the department so that client requests from various geographic locations could be more efficiently handled by the team. Jason believed that because he was the one recently promoted to manager, he must know what is best for the department. He did not see the need to consult with his team members who would be affected by the changes. After all, he was hired as the expert. Instead, he developed a plan independently and presented it as a *fait accompli* to the team.

Needless to say, Jason's plan went over like a lead balloon. Team members tried to point out where the plan would not practically solve the problem, but Jason would not listen. He reverted to his over controlling style and insisted that the team accept his initiative. What he got in return was submissive compliance—staff members complied with his directions, but only half-heartedly and not enough to make it work. It was not *their* plan, they had no ownership in it, and therefore had little interest in assuring its success.

### **Remedy: Trust Team's Expertise**

Managers are not hired because they are experts at everything. This is a common misconception that only creates more pressure than necessary. Managers are hired because they can get the job done *through* others. Rather than attempting to be the hero, Jason might instead have used this as an opportunity to pull together the collective expertise of the team. Not only would it have been an excellent project around which the team could coalesce, but it also would have increased the likelihood of team support of the ultimate decision.

The fear that most new managers have is that if they open up a problem to the team, they may be opening up a can of worms. What if the team fails to produce an acceptable solution? What if they propose something that is far off base? Typically, this fear is unfounded, provided the manager clearly outlines the parameters. For example, Jason might have explained the situation to the team and asked team members to work together to solve it in a way that creates minimal disruption to the work flow, adds no new members to staff for 18 months, and produces measurable results in terms of increased profits. In short, he describes the playing field and the boundaries for his team of players and allows them to run with the ball.

### **MISTAKE 3. FAILURE TO BUILD A TEAM**

After three months, Jason had called only one staff meeting—and that was within the first two weeks of his promotion. Not only did he not see the reason for one, he was not sure he wanted everyone getting together. He was afraid they would use the time to gang up against him. He could feel the tension in the department, and he did not want to fuel it. He thought it would be better to deal with each team member one-on-one. As a result, the team spirit that existed prior to his arrival was now practically nonexistent—except for when they gathered together to complain about Jason. His plan was having the *opposite* effect of what he wanted.

Although Jason was on target about the importance of one-on-one meetings in helping managers to get to know individual team members, it is equally important for managers to build a high-performance team. Within a team exists a rich diversity of thought, expertise, and personality that, when combined, far exceeds any individual contribution. Seasoned managers realize this and use every opportunity to bring people together.

### **Remedy: Schedule Team Meetings and Encourage Participation**

Team meetings should be looked on as an opportunity to exchange ideas, assist one another with current problems, and inform members about significant company and

departmental events that affect their work. All too often, team meetings are used as a time for “show and tell,” with each person in turn reporting on the status of his or her projects. When this is the case, people begin looking for things to talk about and, at times, try to one-up each other with exaggerated accomplishments. This does more to damage camaraderie than help it.

From the outset, Jason should have established a regular meeting time (e.g., the first Tuesday of every month from 1 p.m to 3 p.m) and made it clear that the meetings were sacrosanct. Everyone should be expected to arrange his or her schedule so that there is full attendance. Additionally, establishing the ground rule that meetings will begin and end on time, whether or not everyone is present, increases the tendency of people to take them seriously and arrive on time. *Mining Group Gold* is an excellent resource for identifying ways to capitalize on the synergistic process.

The next thing Jason could do to make the meetings productive is to establish a formal agenda. Each meeting should provide sufficient time to cover regular topics such as a report from Jason as to what is happening in the company that affects the department’s efforts, a brief review of the status of major projects and concomitant problems or successes, and an assessment of how the team itself is doing (process observations). By using a project status sheet like the one included in **Exhibit 1**, reviewing every project in detail becomes unnecessary. A quick update with time devoted to unusual obstacles *and* recognition of achievements removes the need for team members to feel as though they have to prove the value of their work.

The third thing to ensure meeting success is to rotate leadership among the members. This way, everyone is equally responsible for making meetings productive. When this was recently suggested to one manager of a company that had grown significantly over the past two years, she resisted. She mistakenly thought that the leader should be the only one to speak—which was the way she typically ran her meetings. She said that it did not make sense for her to give all of the information she wanted to share to someone else who would then report on it. The manager did not realize that in effective meetings *everyone* participates, not only the meeting leader.

#### **MISTAKE 4. UNCLEAR BOUNDARIES**

Jason worked for a company that embraced the concept of homegrown promotions. They believe that good performance should be rewarded with promotional opportunities rather than going outside to fill management positions. It is a great philosophy, but absent training or at least discussions with the new manager that help to provide a transition to the next level, it can create problems, as it did for Jason. In his case, he had difficulty establishing a new set of boundaries that distinguished “Jason the coworker” from “Jason the boss.”

On the one hand, he had an inclination toward over control and expertizing, and on the other he spent a great deal of time trying to be “one of the guys.” In an effort to let people know he was still one of them, he would commiserate with them about management and share inappropriate information about his relationship with his girlfriend. This sent mixed messages to his staff about the true nature of his position and responsibilities. People did not know from moment to moment whether he was going to pull rank or behave as a peer. As a result, their trust in him dwindled to practically nonexistent.

## **Remedy: Understand New Role and Align with New Peer Group**

Making the transition from peer to manager means remaining friendly with staff members but realizing that your new scope of responsibilities requires a different skill set in building those relationships. The mistake many new managers make is to expect the relationships to remain the same, when in fact they cannot. You must be supportive, objective, and available, but to expect the same of your former peers simply is not realistic. You are now someone who directs their work, evaluates their performance, and in other similar ways has a tremendous effect on their professional and personal lives. You may be their equal, but you are not their peer.

Your peers are now other supervisors and managers at your own level within the organization. This may at first be difficult because, in some cases, these people may have managed *you*. You must now spend time building peer relationships with your new colleagues. Although you *listen to* and address staff concerns about management, the team, or even personal issues, your own views should be shared only with your peers, not the staff.

Jason could have very subtly shifted his behavior without most people noticing a great difference. For instance, he will still have lunch with his team, be supportive of professional and personal concerns, or even participate in after-hours activities with them. The primary difference is that he will no longer expect his team to meet *his* personal needs—he is there to meet theirs. Some new managers complain that it seems like a one-way relationship, and in many ways it is. If Jason is to successfully align his team behind him, the team must view him as a true leader—not just one of the guys. The goal is to gain allegiance from the team through effective leadership, not using muscle or relying on their goodwill based on former relationships.

## **MISTAKE 5. LACK OF VISION**

Most managers experience a honeymoon period during which manager and staff get to know one another, learn about each other's work styles, and, in general, cut each other a bit of slack. Eventually, however, the staff expects leadership in the form of vision and direction. Without this, teams feel like they are marching in place and become demoralized with doing the same old things in the same old way. Like many new managers, Jason failed to work with his team to establish a vision.

Vision is what transforms groups from doing things routinely to seeing the possibilities in situations and cashing in on them for the benefit of the organization. In his book, *A Force for Change*, Harvard professor John Kotter defines "Vision" as being "specific enough to encourage initiative and to remain relevant under a variety of conditions." As a leader, former president George Bush derailed in part because he continued to do what he was used to doing and failed to take seriously what he called "the vision thing."

## **Remedy: Establish a Joint Vision**

As a manager, Jason could have used staff meetings to talk about the importance and value of vision and to work with them to develop a departmental vision. Not only would this have been a good joint project to pull the team together, aligning toward common

goals, but also it would have been the ideal use for staff meetings. By asking these three questions Jason could help his team develop a vision: (1) How do we want to be perceived by others? (2) How do we add value to this organization? (3) How do we want to personally benefit from our vision?

An example is this one developed by a team of corporate attorneys:

To develop a broad base of personal and professional skills that enable us to provide superior legal counsel to our clients that protects the company from unwarranted lawsuits and helps to create a working environment where creativity, job satisfaction, and productivity intertwine and flourish.

This vision, then, becomes the standard against which team members measure their own actions and the department measures its effectiveness.

## **MISTAKE 6. RESISTANCE TO FEEDBACK**

When it became clear that the way he was doing things was not working, Jason refused to listen to the direct and subtle feedback he was receiving from staff and colleagues. Rather than recognize that he may actually be contributing to some of the department's problems, whenever he received any negative feedback, he engaged even more in controlling and expertizing, which only exacerbated the problem. It became a catch-22 for him.

It is not uncommon for managers to rely on the same skill set that worked for them in the past when they were individual contributors. Even in the face of evidence to the contrary, they believe that "turning up the volume" on old behaviors, rather than acquiring new skills, is the answer to their problems. Jason was oblivious to the fact that his team was giving him feedback through their stony silence at meetings and failure to initiate new and necessary projects. When team members tried to talk to him about what may be going wrong, he wrote them off as malcontents. Jason failed to understand that the new position requires new and different behaviors.

### **Remedy: Solicit and Respond to Feedback**

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch had the right idea with his familiar refrain, "How am I doing?" Without even asking for it, you are given feedback all the time. Through people's body language, tone of voice, and other behaviors, they tell you what they are thinking. Good managers look for the nonverbal as well as verbal clues given them by team members. Consider what might have happened had Jason called everyone together and asked, "I feel certain tension in the department. I'd like us to talk openly about it. Is there anything going on that I should know about?" and then waited until someone (and someone who cannot stand silence inevitably does answer).

The caveat here is to listen openly to what is said next. All too often managers get into a spitting match by arguing with what they hear, which only confirms the fact that no one should speak up. They explain and defend their behavior rather than look at the feedback as an opportunity to grow. When caught off guard, or made to feel defensive, good managers revert to using simple listening techniques to probe into how people feel, why they feel that way, and what suggestions others may have for improving the situation.

Getting feedback in other ways can be as simple as asking for it. In one-on-one meetings, a manager can ask team members what they need from him or her in order to be more effective. Or 360-degree feedback instruments can be used. How you do it is not nearly as important as finding out what you may be doing that contributes to team problems. It may sound easy, but it is impossible to do when you set yourself up as the “omnipotent boss.”

## **MISTAKE 7. BLIND ADHERENCE TO RULES**

Rules and policies are important in establishing order in most organizations. The seasoned manager, however, knows that the rules must serve both the organization and the staff member in order to be truly effective. Otherwise, people spend inordinate amounts of time figuring out ways to get around the rules. Jason viewed his management role as enforcer of the rules, rather than more broadly as interpreter of them.

There was a gay man on Jason’s staff whose longtime companion died of an AIDS-related illness. The man had used up all of his vacation and personal time caring for his companion in the last months of his life. He asked Jason for one day more than the allotted three days of bereavement time so that he could attend to all of the arrangements for the funeral, which was being held across the country. Pointing to the policy manual, Jason informed the man that the rule was three days and no more. The man, normally an above average performer, wound up taking the additional day without pay and returned to work as someone who “worked to rule”—did what was asked of him and nothing more. Jason received back from the employee what he gave him: conformity.

### **Remedy: Be a Creative Problem Solver**

When it comes to managing people, what you give is what you get. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, “Fail to honor people, they fail to honor you.” Jason would have bought a lot of goodwill, with not only this man, but his other staff members as well, had he shown more compassion and used greater creativity in solving the problem. He could have begun by going to his human resources manager and asking if there were any exceptions to the rule. If not, he could have recommended allowing the man to borrow from next year’s vacation. Another idea might have been to allow the man to make up the time at some point in the future by working a Saturday or overtime.

Of course there are downsides to any one of these solutions. There are labor laws, consistency of application, and perceptions among coworkers to consider. And there are people who will try to take advantage of the situation. Weighing the real risks of making a decision like this one against the human factors involved must be taken into account. The manager who goes the extra mile for each of his or her staff members (not just a select few) by exhibiting a willingness to take a calculated risk when appropriate is rewarded with loyalty and productivity that money cannot buy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The director of human resources at a large manufacturing company once said that the adage many of us learn in childhood, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” should be changed. Instead, she believed, it should be, “do unto others as they

would like to be done unto.” It is a wise rule of thumb to use in managing. What works for one person may not work for another. In fact, what works for you may not work for your staff.

You can avoid the seven management mistakes described above by reassessing your beliefs about your role as a manager and learning as much as you can about managing through training programs, books, and mentors. When problems arise with a team or individual players, always first ask yourself the question, “What am I doing that contributes to this problem?” Only after you have answered it should you begin searching elsewhere for causes and solutions. Less inevitably proves to be more when it comes to managing.

## **REFERENCES**

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**Project Status Sheet**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Point Person</b>	<b>Anticipated Date of completion</b>	<b>Current Status</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Actual Date of Completion</b>
New employee orientation program	Peter	1-Oct-96	Conducting surveys of new hires over past 12 months.	Awaiting input from last three hires. Move completion date to October 15, 1996.	
Online systems conversion	Allison	15-Mar-97	Soliciting bids from outside vendors.		
Hire department administrative assistant	Gwen	1-Nov-96	Interviewing final three candidates.	Need salary analysis from HR.	
Marketing campaign for new product line	Thalia	25-Sep-96	Final mailers and ads completed September 27, 1996.	Conduct effectiveness study May 1997.	1-Oct-96
New building signs	Jorge	1-Dec-96	Reviewing proposals from vendors.	Final approval from city council due November 1.	