

First-Time Management Mistakes

Common pitfalls for new managers and ways to avoid them

Sure, you're promoted because you racked up more sales, landed more clients or crunched those budget projects like a wizard. But it's very possible that these talents won't necessarily translate into being a good, rookie manager. In the NBA, for every successful star-turned-boss success story like that of Indiana Pacers coach Larry Bird, there are countless accounts of failure: All-time player greats Magic Johnson, Dan Issel, Wes Unseld and Willis Reed compiled a combined coaching record of just 385 wins and 582 losses. Ouch.



And here's an alarming statistic to make first-time bosses even more queasy: Within the first 18 months on the job, 40 percent of all management newbies fail by either getting fired, voluntarily bowing out of the position or receiving a bad review, according to Manchester Inc., a business consulting group based near Philadelphia. In a survey of more than 825 human resources managers nationwide, Manchester found that the number one problem among newly promoted managers by far (as cited by 82 percent of the respondents) was a failure to build partnerships and teamwork.

So here are seven perennial, first-time manager mistakes and how to avoid them:

1. You flunk Office Poli-Sci 101.

In the Manchester survey, half of the respondents say that new supervisors lack needed political skills. "They cannot find out who is more powerful and who is less powerful," says Effy Oz, author of **The Manager's Bible** (Ivy League Publishing, 1998). "They want to avoid politics. That's a mistake. It's part of the game." Sure, it can be mind-boggling, figuring out who you need. When you're the new boss, there are countless incoming blips on your radar screen. "You need to avoid being captured by the wrong people," says Michael Watkins, who co-authored **Right From The Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role** (Harvard Business School Press, 1999) with Dan Ciampa. "When you first come in, people jockey to try to influence you. Some people can be very persuasive, but they have their own agendas. You can be isolated because of them and alienate good people." The lesson? Don't sacrifice coalition building because someone has a talent for getting face time. Conduct the appropriate due diligence to weed out self-serving employees before you commit.

2. You want your employees to be carbon copies of you.

Sure, you got where you are by being a star. But management is where many careers go to die. (Think of those NBA coaches.) Most employees aren't Top Gun talents, but try telling that to many former office hotshots now supervising them. "It's like Michael Jordan telling a player 'Why can't you dunk from the foul line?'" says Bob Rosner, business columnist for ABCnews.com and the New York Daily News, and author of **Working Wounded: Advice That Adds Insight to Injury** (Warner Books, 1998). "It's hard for a lot of people who are really good to relate to and inspire someone for whom things don't come together as easily." So you should accept mediocrity? Not a chance. You need to gain appreciation for week-to-week "baby steps" among improving employees.

3. You fail to communicate.

Many bosses don't lay it on the line to their employees quickly enough according to across the Boards columnist and career consultant Marilyn Moats Kennedy. "If you're deadline oriented, for

example, just tell them," Kennedy says. "Then those who blow deadlines will adapt or die . . . New bosses think the employee will pick up on it out of the air. They worked with them as peers, so they figure that they know them. Hell no, they don't." And to give this troubling sign a 1990s spin, outsourced work and on-staff employees serving multiple masters complicate these efforts. How do you convince, say, a pair of temps sharing a cubical that they should give all they got? Make it look like there's something in it for them other than a paycheck, says Ray Harrison, who heads up the leadership coaching that Manchester provides for more than 4,000 companies. "Do they feel that, by working for you, they'll learn and develop themselves?" he says. "Most people have an instinct to grow. If you make them feel like they can, they'll gravitate toward you."

4. You sprint out of the gate instead of pacing yourself.

Under pressure, some new team leaders inexplicably force multiple, marathon meetings that bog down productivity. They come up with a list of 99 goals to meet by EOD Friday, in trying to turn them into an immediate supervisory star. Bad move. "It's a matter of keeping your powder dry early on," Watkins says. "That's military-speak, meaning don't start firing in all directions."

5. You try to be Santa Claus to everyone.

Everybody wants something from you, but you only got so much in your bag. And you better believe employees are sharing insider intelligence on bonuses, pay hikes and those special 'little favors.' As the co-founder of Yack!, a popular guide to live Internet entertainment, 27-year-old Sean Malatesta has learned how to say "no" to employees looking for a quick elevator ride up. "Right off the bat, they want to be number one, two or three," Malatesta says. "They have visions in their head of being the next Apple Computer and being on top." Malatesta sets them straight. "I tell them 'This is what you're doing here. The senior management is already in place.' "

6. You think getting there is good enough.

As PowerBar Inc. prepared in 1993 to more than triple its \$30 million in revenue within four years, co-founder and President/CEO Brian Maxwell clearly spelled it out: You want to get ahead? Get an MBA. Many didn't take the hint, and now they're getting left behind. "Some people won't read the writing on the wall if it's in block-high letters," Maxwell says. Experts say too many new bosses fail to recognize that self-improvement is a continuous process. "Most just think management is some innate skill that's dormant in us, until we wake up one day and decide to get good at it," says Rosner, whose workingwounded.com Web site attracts more than 1,000 new visitors a week.

7. You're in a "glory daze."

It's classic. You miss the action. So you stop overseeing people and find comfort in doing what you did before. Nike's Jim Calhoun, 31, can understand. He left the official Best Job on Planet Earth to take on a management role a year ago. He led the good life as a liaison for coaches and athletes who needed Nike-designed uniforms and baseball caps. Coaches like Rick Pitino would buzz him on his office line. He'd hoist beers with Denzel Washington and other celeb fans on the VIP pass. Now the business director for Nike's basketball apparel division, Calhoun admits that he had a tough time parting with the glitz. "You lose some of the glamour," he says. "You have less cool stories to tell your friends and family." Calhoun's dilemma is common among new bosses who miss the front lines. "They still identify with the troops," Harrison says. "It's like making the transition from enlisted man to non-commissioned officer." There's really no magic solution. Some never get a handle on the problem and return to the action to regain their passion. And that's OK.