



From Peer to Manager – A Whole New Ballgame

It has long been acknowledged that one of the more challenging and difficult situations for managers and/or supervisors is having to now lead the team on which they were an active member prior to their promotion. So specifically difficult is that situation, that Learning Dynamics offers specialized training for the newly appointed manager. It is not uncommon for the newly appointed boss to make costly mistakes by misunderstanding how the work relationships have changed and what that means for the leader.

The errant assumptions that the new boss makes are easy to understand and tempting to believe, especially in the early stages of the new relationship with the team. Can I still be friends with my former peers? Does the team support me as the new leader? Does the team expect specialized treatment from me due to my previous relationships with them?

It is an inevitable reality that the new supervisor will need to make decisions that might adversely affect members of the team or the team as a whole. We are familiar with a situation in which a new supervisor was appointed from within the department with a positive reaction from the department staff. While that staff had heard the rumors of a pending layoff, they felt that the appointment of one of their members to supervisor would protect them should a layoff occur.

That assumption is wrong in many instances. In fact, in the situation above, the new appointment was made expressly to have an inside view of who should go and who should stay. One of the

first assignments that the new supervisor received from senior management was to provide a recommendation for how to reduce the headcount in the department by 50%. The eventual staff reduction caused resentment, confusion and resistance from the staff and a loss of what to do next from the new supervisor.

There is great potential within this situation, given that the new leader is versed on how to access it. The skills and knowledge that the new supervisor possess are powerful assets in a smooth transition. Imagine how much longer the learning curve would be if the new boss were an outsider and initially unfamiliar with the department operation. At Learning Dynamics, we often suggest that the new supervisor begin working with a performance coach. In fact, some of our clients will begin that coaching relationship before the promotion is formally announced, so the new leader can hit the ground running.

There are several steps that can be taken to reduce the negative potential of promoting a team member to supervisor. Not surprisingly, the key will be based on communication skills. The senior manager can make a positive start to the transition if they meet with the department ahead of the formal announcement. The explanation of the whys and wherefores that went into the decision can significantly reduce the natural resistance to change.

Of course the most important voice in this scenario is that of the new manager. One supervisor we know who made the transition as smoothly as any we've seen started by gathering

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the team and telling them a story. He said:

“When I was a young kid playing Little League baseball, my father was asked to be the umpire for all of our home games. When I expressed my happiness in his new role, thinking I would gain advantage, he explained it to me far differently than I saw it. He said that everyone watching would be looking to see if he was favoring me or my whole team in his decision making. He said he needed to show that he was working fairly for both teams. So, he said ‘on any close play you’re involved in, be prepared to be called out’. For that’s the situation we’re in here. As much as I love this team, I will need to make decisions that may not please you individually, but I hope you will see that I seek to be fair when I do it. As always, I hope you will communicate with me on anything you don’t understand or agree with, but try to remember that I have a wider arena now than I did when I was a player on your team. I know we do good work and I will always support that effort and success.”

Another situation that often presents a challenge to the new supervisor comes from a team member who felt that he/she should have been chosen for the promotion. This is not an uncommon problem and, again, the solution to it rests with effective communication. A private, sincere, and encouraging discussion with the disgruntled team member is often the first step. Once it is explained that the new boss understands where the team member is coming from and that the new supervisor needs the assistance of the team member to achieve a smooth transition, recognizing the team member’s skills and contribution, further dialogue should be easier and more positive.

Whether or not the new boss can or should maintain friendships with former team members is an individual decision for the new supervisor. But regardless of how that relationship will be decided, it will be necessary for the team member to understand that the relationship is different now and the old relationship will need to be altered accordingly.

