The 5 Myths & Realities of Leadership for New Managers

by Andrew Cooke, Growth & Profit Solutions

What are the myths that new managers and leaders believe, and what are the realities? This article explores them and how new managers and leaders effectively lead and engage their teams.

Your initial experience as a new manager and leader has two profound effects - one on you and one on the business you are working for. This experience can be fantastic or terrible, but it is an experience for which there is little support or assistance to help those entering those nebulous worlds of "management" and "leadership".

The key myths and realities that confront new managers were highlighted in Linda Hill’s article – “Becoming the Boss” in Harvard Business Review in January 2007. These are summarized below, and further on insights are shared on how to help new managers overcome the myths and achieve the reality.

### 5 Myths & Realities - Summary

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Why Overcoming the Myths is Hard

There are a number of key reason why people find this so hard, these include:

1. **Previous experience** – in their prior job (technical, not managerial) their success depended on their personal expertise and actions. As leaders they have not yet got the skills to set and implement an agenda for a whole group – they are not prepared for doing this.

2. Learning to lead is a process of **experiential learning** – learning by doing. You can’t learn this in a classroom, only through on-the-job experience. The risk here is that this may only be achieved through making costly mistakes – this can be mitigated, and more on this later.

3. **Learning from mistakes** – many star performers who have been promoted have not made many mistakes, so this is new for them. Furthermore, few new managers are aware that in the stressful, mistake-making moments, that they are learning.

4. **Need to Unlearn** – with all this the new manager has to unlearn a mind-set and habits that have served him over a highly successful early career. He needs to internalize new ways of thinking and being and discovers new ways of measuring success and deriving satisfaction from work. This is stressful.

**Compounding the Problem**

The difficulties involved in this transition are compounded by two factors:

- the new managers’ misconceptions about their role; and,
- the lack of structured support to help them through this transition

**Overcoming the 5 Misconceptions of New Managers**

These misconceptions and myths (as described above) are simplistic and incomplete, creating false expectations that individuals struggle to reconcile with the reality of managerial life. By acknowledging these misconceptions the new managers have a far greater chance of success. These misconceptions include:

**The 5 Myths of New Managers**

1. **Managers wield significant authority**
2. **Authority flows from the manager’s position.**
3. **Managers must control their direct reports.**
4. **Managers must focus on forging good individual relationships.**
5. **Managers must ensure that things run smoothly.**

Let's look at each of these in turn:
1. Managers wield significant authority

As described above the misconception is that managers wield significant authority and freedom to make things happen. The reality is that there is interdependency between their team and others. The people most likely to make a new manager's life miserable are those who don’t fall under her formal authority: outside suppliers, for example, or managers in another division.

Managers need to negotiate these interdependencies to lead effectively by identifying and building effective relationships with the key people the team depends upon; otherwise the team will lack the resources necessary to do its job.

2. Authority flows from the manager’s position.

Most new managers mistakenly believe their power is based on their formal authority. As such, many adopt a hands-on, autocratic approach, not because they are eager to exercise their new power over people, but because they believe it is the most effective way to produce results.

New managers soon learn, however, that when direct reports are told to do something, they don’t necessarily respond. In fact, the more talented the subordinate, the less likely she is to simply follow orders. Eventually they realize that the source of their power is, according to one, “everything but” formal authority. That is, authority emerges only as the manager establishes credibility with subordinates, peers, and superiors. The new manager’s previous expertise and track record are not important.

The 3 critical qualities that new managers need to demonstrate to create credibility include:

- **Character** - the intention to do the right thing.
- **Competence** - knowing how to do the right thing.
- **Influence** - the ability to deliver and execute the right thing.

3. Managers must control their direct reports

Most new managers fear that if they don’t establish this early on, their direct reports will walk all over them. This is questionable at best as compliance does not equate to commitment. If people aren’t committed, they won’t take the initiative. And if subordinates aren’t taking the initiative, the manager can’t delegate effectively. This means the direct reports won’t take the calculated risks that lead to the continuous change and improvement required for on-going survival and growth in today’s business environment.

To gain commitment new managers need to empower their teams, not order them, to achieve the team’s goals. Counter-intuitively the more power managers are willing to share with subordinates in this way, the more influence they tend to command. By allowing the team to take the initiative, the manager builds his or her credibility.
4. **Managers must focus on forging good individual relationships.**

Managing interdependencies and exercising informal authority is often achieved by establishing productive personal relationships. Rather than focusing on one-on-one relationships with members of the team, which can undermine this process, the new manager must figure out how to harness the power of a team to improve individual performance and commitment. By shaping team culture—the group’s norms and values—a leader can unleash the problem-solving prowess of the diverse talents that make up the team.

5. **Managers must ensure that things run smoothly.**

Making sure an operation is operating smoothly is an incredibly difficult task, requiring a manager to juggle a number of different and often conflicting priorities. However, this is not enough. New managers need to identify, recommend and initiate changes that will raise the team’s performance. It is not enough to try to continue with the status quo – especially if it is flawed. New managers need to see themselves not as targets for organisational change initiatives, but rather as agents of change both within and outside their area of responsibility in ensuring their teams succeed.

**Summary of the 5 Realities**

So for new managers to succeed everything is focused on ensuring the team can perform, this includes:

- Establishing those *interdependent relationships* both internally and externally to the company to help the team;
- *Establish credibility* with their team by demonstrating character, competence and influence;
- Empowering and engaging the team to *create commitment* and motivation;
- *Develop the team and the relationships* as a whole, not piecemeal.

**Why Don’t New Managers Ask for Help?**

Very few ask for help, at the time when they need it most. There are a number of reasons for this including:

- The boss is supposed to have all the answers, so seeking help is a sure sign that a new manager is a “promotion mistake.” – experienced managers know no-one has all the answers, and that insights come over time and with experience.
They perceive the dangers (sometimes more imagined than real) of forging developmental relationships – when you share your anxieties, mistakes, and shortcomings with peer there is a risk that the individuals will use that information against you.

Risks of sharing with your boss – this is similar and reflects the inherent conflict between the roles of evaluator and developer is an age-old dilemma.

So What Do We Do?

New managers need to be able to access on-going, timely and effective support in a structured and safe environment in which they can learn experientially whilst handling real and relevant work issues and opportunities. Creating this allows them to quickly gain the skills and develop the insights. This enables new managers to obtain the necessary advice and get the assistance that might help prevent them from making mistakes – rather than being too cautious and avoiding taking the necessary risks and actions to enable the team to perform.

A real problem from many organisations is that solely depending on the senior managers in the company to provide this is doomed to fail for a variety of reasons including:

1. **Lack of time** to do this; and
2. **Lack of expertise** – senior managers often have not had a structured approach in developing their leadership and management skills. As such, poor process, habits and approaches can be passed on from one generation of management to the next compounding the problems.
3. **Ego** – the senior managers view it as the new manager’s problem, the “we appointed you, now you perform” approach. Again, there is the issue that if they feel their appointee may be failing then it is a reflection on them personally.

So How Do We Do It?

There is a need to develop a customized, structured approach for the new managers as a group and individually. They need to be able to learn experientially in a safe environment, where they develop a common understanding and approach to managing and leading people. These skills need to be built in-house creating a stronger “bench” of talent, and also a pipeline of future talent.

Realistically senior managers are unable to fulfill this role on an on-going basis, but they can be the catalyst for driving this type of initiative. Obtaining external support to do this, where the program and necessary support is customized around the business’ provides an objective and neutral environment where individuals can open up more freely, and the group can share ideas, insights and experience in establishing best practices as a group, and where individual one-to-one coaching can be provided to reflect their personal developmental needs and address their specific work, management and leadership issues.

If you are interested in finding out more about how Growth & Profit Solutions (GPS) helps to create successful new managers and how it can be leveraged for the success of the entire organization then please email GPS.
About Andrew Cooke and Growth & Profit Solutions (“GPS”)

Andrew Cooke

An experienced executive coach, business facilitator, and management consultant Andrew has more than 25 years’ national and international experience, working across a range of industries and businesses. He is passionate in helping people, teams and companies to unlock their individual and collective potential, enabling them to achieve their personal and business goals and, in turn, to help them unlock the potential of others.

Andrew has extensive experience in dealing with both blue-chip and start-up companies, and has had extensive international experience in the UK, the Middle East and Ireland across a range of industries.

He has post-graduate business qualifications with a Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) from the London Business School.

Growth & Profit Solutions (“GPS”)

Andrew runs Growth & Profit Solutions, working with individuals, teams, groups and corporate so they can unlock their potential, that of others, and create a life and a job they love and choose to lead.

Through customized development programmes using experiential learning, backed by group workshops, individual one-to-one coaching and on-going support the individual and group development needs are addressed, the skills and capabilities are unlocked and the people can grow and achieve both personal and business outcomes on a sustainable basis. His blog, Growth and Profit, can be found at http://growthandprofit.wordpress.com.

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