

Getting a new manager started

Paul Matthews fits a pair of stabilisers to the wobbly bike of novice management

New managers are often left to sink or swim, and the water is deep. How can we support a new manager as they start their role so they don't drown?

Losing new managers as a result of drowning is really quite careless because it is easy to give them the support they need to stay afloat long enough to start swimming capably on their own, or decide that swimming is something they really are not suited for.

Think for a moment about what happens to someone when they get their first promotion to supervise a small team:

- excitement
- a touch of panic
- elation at the recognition
- energised, with new plans and ideas to make things better
- uncertainty about what to do next
- awareness of the need to learn, but not sure what
- trepidation about the consequences of failure?

Probably all of the above and more besides.

And then comes the growing awareness that this is a much bigger change than anticipated. Any new manager who wants to do well will soon realise how much he doesn't know and, even worse,

how much he doesn't know he doesn't know. This is when he starts looking around for support.

The need a new manager has for support reminds me of the small wheels attached to a bicycle to help someone learn to ride. In New Zealand, I grew up calling them training wheels but, in the UK, they are called stabilisers. An advert I saw for stabilisers had the following claim: "Get your children safely in the saddle and boost their confidence as they learn to ride with a set of stabilisers. Stabilisers will keep them sturdy and help to prevent wobbling while they improve their balance. They're easily fitted to your kids' bikes, and just as easily removed when the aspiring Chris Hoys are well balanced and ready to go it alone on two wheels only."

How can you add stabilisers to your new manager's role to help prevent wobbling and improve balance?

Just like learning to ride a bike with stabilisers, learning to be a manager takes time



The two most common ways that new managers get started are:

- no help other than 'here's your team. Get on with it'
- sent on a new manager training course for a few days, receive a dump of information that has little context for them, so is poorly retained or understood, and then 'here's your team. Get on with it'.

Those who are lucky have a line manager who nurtures the fledgling supervisor, and provides the support he needs. We all know that probably the

biggest factor of how well and how quickly a new manager 'gets up to speed' is how much support he receives while doing so. Of course, if he doesn't get enough support, he may never get up to speed at all.

If you have managed others, reflect back on where your knowledge and management skills came from. How much of what you needed to know did you learn from a formal training course, how much did you learn from peers or from your line manager, how much did you learn through experience, and how much did you learn through observing managers before and after you were promoted?

I would wager that most of your management skills came from conversations, observation and experience, not from training courses. Most of what we know in order to do our jobs we learn outside of the formal training channels and yet little attempt is made to leverage this insight when supporting new managers.

One of the problems with many formal management training courses is that we over-train. We have fought for budget and we have fought to get these people removed from their workplace and into a training room. We have them in front of us and, while we have them, we're going to give them everything we've got. It is not that the information is not trainable. It is just that it is too much information at once, and it is information delivered out of context because, in many cases, they have as yet little or no management experience.



The information needs to be drip fed naturally, in context, rather than force fed as if you're fattening a goose for foie gras.

Just like learning to ride a bike with stabilisers, learning to be a manager takes time. It is a process rather than an event. I would argue that it is our job in L&D to facilitate this process in a way that supports and stabilises the new manager while he finds his balance.

The new manager has a lot to learn, some of which will be unique to his role. If he is new to the organisation, he will have even more to learn than someone who has been promoted internally. He also needs to start establishing relationships with the people who can help him, and with the people who have an interest in his performance. He needs to find out where and how to access all the resources he will need to do his job. He needs to understand what he will be measured on. He needs to develop a plan of what he will achieve. He needs to establish himself as a valuable player in the game of work, and much more. And while he is doing all this, he will be expected to be actually doing his management job.

This is an overwhelming, elephant-sized list. The obvious way to tackle it is in bite-sized chunks with a plan on where to start and which bite to take next, and support and encouragement to keep going.

In any organisation, it makes sense to map out a new manager learning pathway that takes a manager week by week through the things he needs to know, starting with those things that have the highest priority, and then make sure he is supported while he travels that pathway. If you do this in a way that engages people

with the ways they learn most naturally, you will have far greater success than the sink-or-swim approach.

So how do people learn most naturally? You have probably heard of the Chinese proverb *tell me, I'll forget; show me, I'll remember; involve me, I'll understand.*

We learn best by doing and management, like riding a bike, is best learned in the saddle. In fact, like learning to ride a bike, it could be argued that the really important and lasting things any manager needs to learn can *only* be learned in the saddle.

This is a bigger mind shift than you might think as you contemplate moving away from traditional training as the primary tool for getting people ready for their jobs. As you think of reducing training in favour of this more organic, ongoing performance support, how do you feel?

One trainer told me recently when his organisation was in the middle of a swingeing set of budget cuts: "Every time a training course is cancelled, somewhere a cute little training fairy dies." It took some coaxing to help him see that the training fairies were not dying; they were off doing new and better things.

The training fairies these days are focusing on what needs to be done to ensure that people are capable of fulfilling their role in the organisation. They are far less concerned with what people are learning and far more concerned with what

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people are capable of doing. They have realised that learning and capability are two very different things. They have realised that, for people to keep believing in fairies, the focus needs to be on what matters to people, and that is capability.

Stop and imagine for a moment that you have your own business. You need a new manager and I can offer you a choice of two candidates. One has been on many training courses, has learned a lot and has several certificates and qualifications. The other is capable of doing what needs to be done in your business. Which one would you prefer to have working for you?

Capability will trump learning, and the fairies know this.

So let's get practical about what it takes to enable a new manager to go from a standing start to a sufficient level of capability so that he can contribute effectively to the organisation in his new management role. Let's call this threshold capability. At this point the new manager still has much to learn but he is effective as a manager, and doesn't need the stabilisers any more.

The first thing to think about is time. How much time does it take in your organisation for a new manager to reach threshold capability? Three months? Six months? Nine months? Or even longer?

What affects this timescale? If someone is left to their own devices, the timescales will be longer. If they are supported and given a structured approach to developing their capability, the timescales will be shorter.

Of course, any organisation would wish to reduce this amount of time because there are strong commercial reasons for doing so. What is it worth to reduce this time to threshold capability by a few months? Is it worth enough to pay for some kind of structured and supported approach? Is it enough to pay for stabilisers?

And how much can you compress the time to this capability threshold without overwhelming the new manager and actually reducing his ability to reach threshold capability? What is a realistic minimum time?

This will depend on three things: the ability of the new manager to learn and to transfer his learning into new behaviours, the complexity of the management role and the quality and design of the stabilisers.

Given that we have selected a new manager and started him in a defined role, the variable we have control over is what we can provide as stabilisers. I have been working recently with Beryl Cuckney, who has developed an incredibly simple but effective way to do this.

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Stabilisers are bolted onto the new management role in two ways:

- a structured learning pathway that focuses the new manager on the key things he needs to be paying attention to and learning
- support from a mentor, preferably his direct line manager, who helps him take responsibility for his own development.

These two are a bit like the stabilisers attached to each side of a child's bike. You need both, and they work together. One on its own is much less than half as effective as two working in synergy together.

The structured learning pathway is a set of weekly briefings that cover the issues managers typically meet in the normal course of their jobs. Remember that this is alongside their work as a manager so it is not about huge amounts of content or management theory. It is about real things that matter and contribute to the new manager's growing capability.

Here are some examples:

- building relationships
- objective-setting
- team meetings
- managing conflict
- statistics and reporting
- keeping legal, healthy and safe
- holidays, sickness and other absence.

Consider the benefits if, each week, a new manager is presented with a short briefing, perhaps a page or two of content, on areas like these. In addition to the content, there are questions or tasks so the manager is encouraged to build on this briefing by discovering for himself things like where information is on the intranet, who he needs to talk to in other departments such as HR or accounts, who his stakeholders are, how the politics work and so on.

This uses a learn-apply methodology that will give a far better retention rate than the same information delivered in a training room. It also



teaches the new manager that he can use, and indeed should be using, a self-directed approach to his learning and career development.

Now add the other stabiliser wheel: a mentor. Each week, the mentor would help the new manager with an informal discussion about the week's briefing, and the week's questions and tasks. The mentor shares his own experience and offers encouragement and support where needed as the new manager goes through the inevitable ups and downs of gaining new skills.

Of course, anybody who knows what good management is would say line managers should be doing this anyway, but the sad fact is that they often don't. The structure of the weekly briefings makes it much easier for the line manager to commit this time to his direct report. The structure also gives both the new and the line managers a programme that will aid them in covering the essentials that will enable the new manager to reach threshold capability.

There are two desirable side-effects of having a line manager as the mentor. One is that he is likely to learn from the programme as well, or at least get up to date with the latest company information. The second is the establishment of a strong working relationship between he and his new direct report, and the importance of this relationship should not be underestimated.

We started this article by asking "How can you add stabilisers to your new manager's role to help prevent wobbling and improve balance?" You now have a simple and effective way to do this. Given the ideas outlined above, how are you now going to approach the induction of new managers? Will you make any changes? **TJ**

Most of what we know in order to do our jobs we learn outside of the formal training channels

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I'd like to acknowledge Beryl Cuckney for her work and research into a practical way to develop new managers.

