

Six Tips for a New Manager

Akash Bhalla



It's been an interesting transition moving from the role of an individual contributor to that of someone who helps look after a team of people. Here are some of the things I've learned along the way.

1. Be a Zero

In the book *An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*, Chris Hadfield talks about the concept of how in any situation you can be either a “minus one,” a “zero,” or a “plus one.”

As a new manager joining a team, there will be an innate desire to try to prove yourself as immediately productive. This is often echoed as *conventional wisdom* because you try your hardest to be a +1 and make your presence felt.

However, the reality is that most of the time you won't have enough context of a new situation to be a positive influence, and despite your best intentions you end up being a net negative.

So, be a zero.

Listen and understand before you try to change something.

2. Learn to Say “Yes”

When I think back over some of the managers I've worked for, they've often carried an air of hurriedness around them, which created an invisible barrier. As time went on, I went to these types of managers less and less, and the gap between us widened.

As a direct result, I've made a conscious effort to always respond with a "yes" whenever someone asks for a minute of my time. Try your best to remove any conscious or unconscious barriers that you might be creating.

Caveat: This has a potential for being overwhelming, especially when it leads to uncontrollable context switching. If this is the case, replace "yes" with "yes, how about at {later that day}?"

3. Learn to Say "No"

There's a limit to how much any one person can do: trying to put more water into a full bucket isn't going to net you any more water than you already had.

It's tough, but you need to learn to say "no." Understand what the most effective use of your time is, prioritize your demands and then learn to say no to those whose issues don't make the cut, and don't forget to delegate. The alternative won't magically achieve these tasks, and ultimately damages your health, your team and your reputation.

4. Have One-on-Ones

Your most powerful tool as a manager is information; without it, you're screwed. Here's a brief set of tips for your one-on-ones:

- Schedule for at least 30 minutes every week or fortnight.
- Don't have anything immediately after, leave time for it to expand if needed.
- Don't have more than two or three in any one day; they can be mentally exhausting, and you're no use if you can't give your full attention.
- Don't use it as status update, focus on wider questions.
- You shouldn't be doing most of the talking.
- Keep it free form, but have some basic questions and points that you bring up.

5. Stay (Relatively) Technical

Your technical abilities and experience are a big part of what makes you an effective engineering manager. Keeping close to the code is essential to understand the context and to have relevant conversations. If you're anything like me, it's also essential for your own sanity!

However, it's also easy to fall into the trap of doing what's comfortable and familiar rather than what is actually needed. It can feel extremely satisfying and comforting making use of old skills. But there is an entire team of developers there who could do this job as good as, if not better than, you. There might be no other managers, though, and with no one else doing that part of the job, people will begin to suffer due to neglect.

You've made a choice to move your career toward management, which means making a sacrifice. Even though it's essential to stay technical, this is not the same as progressing as an individual contributor or becoming a technical lead. You're there to support.

6. Let Go

One of the most important lessons to learn as a new manager is that you can't do it all, but this is a very difficult lesson to learn. If you're anything like me, the only way to learn this lesson is the hard way.

It can be an extremely difficult transition, going from being a high performer and seeing immediate and tangible results of your work to being an inexperienced manager. You'll become stressed, you'll fall back into old patterns, and you'll question yourself.

Don't expect to avoid this trap; instead, do the following:

- Accept that you'll make this mistake
- Have the knowledge and awareness to try to recognize it when it happens
- Work on recovering when it does

You need to change the ways in which you perceive success. Shift the focus away from your individual contributions and instead measure yourself on the health of your team and their progress as a unit.