

*A Book Review of*

# **THE FIRST-TIME MANAGER**

*Sixth Edition*

Loren B. Belker, Jim McCormick, and Gary S. Topchik  
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## Introduction

I first came across *The First-Time Manager* in 2012, shortly after I was appointed as a manager in my previous company. As an engineer with a few years' team lead experience, I was wondering what new skills and mindsets I should acquire to best adapt to my new role. Fortunately, the content of this book had provided me a great start. Since then, I frequently referred to this book when I faced challenges in my job as a manager, and each time, I had more or less obtained some new insights from this very informational manuscript.

This book is divided into six parts, each covering a number of topics associated with one certain aspect of people management. With this structure, this book can be used as a guideline for training new managers as well as a handbook for more experienced managers. In next session of this book review, I will summarize the key points I have learned from each part of this book.

## Summary of the Book

### Part One: So you're going to manage people

In this Part, the authors first convey a very important message – *management skills are very different from those one needs to be a successful individual contributor; managers need to focus on people, not just tasks, and they need to rely on others, not just be self-reliant.* Therefore, becoming a new manager means a mindset change – from now on, my success will be measured by the performance of my team, not by my individual performance any more.

There are a few very useful advices to **new managers** who has just started out in their new positions:

- Refrain from immediately instituting changes in the method of operation (unless instructed by higher management due to the seriousness of the situation).
- Be honest to your subordinates. Don't be afraid of saying "I don't know" if you don't.
- Don't try to use your new authority as much as you can. Use it when it is really needed.
- Talk to each of your direct report within 60 days on the job. (But don't do so the first week because you want to give them a chance to get used to the idea that you were there). Make them know that you want to help them achieve their goals.
- If managing a large organization, limit the number of your direct reports to about 5.

**Building trust and confidence** is very important and it is a gradual process.

- Talk to a team member in private about an error. Don't make him/her feel inadequate.
- Involve your subordinates in some decision-making processes.
- Never insist on perfection. This can only shatter employee confidence.

It is important to show your **appreciation** for your employees' work. Be specific, describe the impact of the work, and don't overdo it.

Being an **active listener** is another crucial skill for managers. (Involve yourself in the conversation, make clarifying statements, ask questions, and summarize what you have heard.) Do at least twice as much listening as talking.

The manager's **major responsibilities** are also discussed in this Part, which include hiring, communicating, planning, organizing, training, monitoring, evaluating, and firing. The details of each responsibility are covered in the following Parts of the book.

In the last two sessions of Part One, the authors talk about how to better **deal with your managers** by understanding their personality styles (i.e., the monopolizers, the methodicals, the motivators, and the mixers), and how to choose your own **managerial style** (e.g., the autocrat vs. the diplomat, use the right amount of control and encouragement, management is situational).

## Part Two: Tackling your new duties

This Part focuses on how to build a strong team. The following topics are covered in depth.

### Building a Team Dynamic:

- A team dynamic is the willingness and the ability to work in an interdependent fashion where team members need to rely on each other to achieve their goals.
- 6 factors are essential for building a team dynamic: 1) open communication, 2) empowerment, 3) clear roles and responsibilities, 4) goal clarity, 5) an effective leader, and 6) a reward and accountability system (for individuals and the team).

### Managing Problem Employees:

- *Rehabilitation* (moving the problem employee to a new position that better fits his/her background) is okay if it's done with the full knowledge of everyone involved.
- For employees with *serious personal problems*, solve the work problem with them and point them to resources that can help solve their personal problems.
- To manage employees with *challenging behavior types* (e.g., the attacker, the comic, the deserter, the limelight seeker, the moonlighter, the not-my-jobber, the bleeding heart, and the complainer), tell them what behaviors they need to change and why, and then listen to them and monitor their progress. Use discipline actions as your last alternative.

### Hiring and Interviewing:

- Besides experience, qualification and education, *attitude* is another key ingredient.
- The screening process. (The authors provide a list of questions to ask and not to ask the candidate during a job interview, and what you can learn from questions asked by the candidate.)

### Training Team Members:

- As a manager, you must know what needs to be done, not exactly how it's done.
- To train a new employee, pick up a proper trainer (normally *not* the one who will leave the position the new employee will fill in), and set up a procedure with internal feedback, quality control, and final evaluation.

### Managing Change – Dealing with Resistance:

- Accept the change yourself. Be aware that most people are naturally resistant to change.
- The best strategy is to involve your employees in the change by explaining the reason and the benefits of the change and asking your employees how to implement the change.

### **Disciplining the Employee:**

- Feedback should be given to the employee as quickly as possible if his/her performance is substandard.
- Never make it personal. What to be discussed is the performance, not the person.
- A simple performance-improvement tool can be created by using a single sheet of paper.
- Typical disciplinary techniques include zero salary increase, probation, etc.

### **Firing the Employee:**

- Sudden firings are nearly always wrong, except in cases when the employee is dishonest or violent. So putting the employee into an improvement plan is a good practice.
- If it is decided that the employee is not a fit for his/her position, try to find out if he/she can fit into another position in your organization or your company.
- If the dismissal is unavoidable, get well prepared for the final dismissal action.

## **Part Three: Working with people, building relationships, and managing risks**

This Part discusses a manager's role in creating constructive relationships and recognizing and managing opportunities.

Effective managers don't hold **unnecessary secrets** from their staff. People don't act upon the facts; they act upon their perception of the facts. If information is not passed down to the staff in time, they may act upon their false perceptions, which can lead them into the wrong direction.

The **Human Resources (HR) department** can be one of a manager's biggest allies, helping him/her in many of the areas including hiring, coaching, training, benefits, wage and salary administration, discipline procedures, promotions, appraisals, termination, etc.

In recent years, **loyalty** in business is considered out of fashion. However, maintaining a reasonable level of loyalty can still be beneficial for a manager. This means not criticizing your company in the community, not trashing the people you lead, etc.

**Motivation** is getting people to want to do what needs to be done, willingly and not by force.

- Self-motivation is the only motivation that really works. As a manager, you need to understand what motivates each of your employees (e.g., money, promotion, technical interests).
- Dovetailing: joining the aspirations of your team members and the needs of your organization.

Understanding your team members' **risk inclination** is important for your management work. A method for determining one's RQ (risk quotient) is provided in this Part.

Encouraging **initiative** and **innovation**:

- The way you respond to flawed decisions or actions of your employees is important.
- To promote innovation, you need to reward the effort as much as the outcome.

**Intelligent risk taking** is key to improving outcomes. It involves six steps: 1) identifying the risk, 2) assessing the likely outcomes, 3) improving the chances of success, 4) updating the assessment of likely outcomes, 5) conducting a disaster check, and 6) deciding and proceeding.

## **Part Four: Job descriptions, performance appraisals, and salary administration**

This Part deals with the administrative side of people management.

### **Writing Job Descriptions:**

- The three-tier approach: 1) technical skills and knowledge, 2) behaviors and 3) interpersonal skills.
- 2) and 3) can be greater predictors of an individual's success on the job than 1).

### **Doing Performance Appraisals:**

- Managers' responsibilities (7 tenets described in this chapter).
- During the interview, ensure no interruptions, set a tone of discussions, encourage the employee to share his/her aspirations, start with positives, and be cautious when bringing up negatives.
- Prepare an outline of significant items you want to cover by asking some questions.
- Don't fall into the trap of appraisal inflation (i.e., rating everyone satisfactory or better).

### **Salary Administration:**

- Salary recommendation and performance appraisals have an impact on each other. Sometimes it is better to separate the two procedures several weeks or months apart.
- To check the equity, it is helpful to list all the jobs in your department with the monthly salary next to each name. Do the salaries look reasonable?
- A too high salary raise can cause an "encore" problem, and a too low one can be considered an insult. Don't allow the employee's need to be an important factor for determining the salary raise.

## **Part Five: Improving and developing yourself**

This Part conveys a very important concept – to be a good manager, you need to use some of your ability to help others improve toward improving yourself.

### **Having Emotional Intelligence:**

- EQ is much more important than IQ on managerial success. Different from IQ, one's EQ score can change dramatically over the years.
- This chapter provides a simple method to do an EQ test by answering 10 questions.

### **Developing a Positive Self-Image:**

- Self-image is important for one's success as a manager (self-fulfilling prophecy).
- Strategies for improving self-image: visualization, win-win, and positive self-talk.
- After making a mistake, be completely honest with yourself and everyone around you.
- Use a variety of decision-making methods: solo, participative, delegated, and elevated.
- Authentic leadership: exhibiting the behavior you seek and matching your actions with your statement.

- Strategies for getting promoted to next level are discussed in depth in this chapter.

### **Managing Your Own Time:**

- Some good time management strategies are discussed, including setting smaller segments, making a daily to-do list, doing some certain tasks at certain times of a day, prioritizing the tasks and revising the to-do list when necessary, etc.
- Try not to be interrupted by something that *looks* urgent (e.g., emails, text messages).

### **Delegation:**

- Delegation has benefits of getting your employees more involved and motivated and freeing yourself up to do things that are a better use of your time and talents.
- Do not delegate tasks such as performance/salary reviews, discipline, termination, etc.
- A 5-step procedure for delegation is introduced in this chapter.

### **Managing, Participating in, and Leading Meetings:**

- Meetings have costs. Prepare the agenda in advance to best use the meeting time.
- Common mistakes: speaking too much (commenting on every issue) or too little (being silent), saying something uncomplimentary about someone on your staff, trying to compete with peer managers, following the boss' positions all the time, etc.
- More tips on how to effectively lead a meeting are provided in this chapter.

### **Public Speaking:**

- 3 specific ways to help you be an effective presenter: Toastmaster (a nonprofit organization), training classes, and presentation coaching.
- Some useful advices on preparing your next presentation:
  - Decide the purpose of your presentation and write it out in one sentence.
  - Develop your subject matter outline.
  - Before planning your talk, try to do an audience analysis.
  - During the presentation, watch your audience.
  - If using visuals like PowerPoint slides, don't talk to the slides, talk to the audience.
  - Practice, practice, practice.
  - Be ready to adapt to unexpected situations.

## **Part Six: The complete person**

This last Part of the book provides advices on how to support yourself in your challenging managerial career.

### **Coping with Stress:**

- Most of what seems stressful when you're new in management will seem ordinary later.
- React to the problem, not the stress. 7 suggestions: 1) don't make things worse, 2) take a breath, 3) first things first, 4) distribute the load, 5) seek advice, 6) be levelheaded, and 7) visualize wisdom.

### **Having Balance in Your Life:**

- You will be a more complete manager if you are a more complete person.

- Community work, outside reading, taking a health separation from work, etc. are helpful.

#### **A Touch of Class:**

- Class is “style and elegance in one’s behavior.” It consists of what is done, and often of greater importance, what is not done.
- In this chapter, the authors list 23 examples of what people with class do and don’t do.

## **Discussion**

As we know, leadership and management require two distinct sets of skills, and to be an effective manager, one has to master both skill sets. The majority part of *The First-Time Manager* covers the people management skills, while the class materials of ELPP mainly deal with business leadership. Therefore, this book can serve as a complement reading material for any ELPP students who want to improve their people management skills along with their leadership capacity.

On the other hand, some concepts and skills taught in our ELPP classes can be very helpful on handling some of the situations mentioned in this book. A few examples are list below:

- Chapter 13 of the book covers managing change and dealing with the employees’ resistance to change. The *Change Management* lecture of ELPP provides useful insights on this topic.
- In Chapters 21-23, the authors talk about risk and innovation management. The concepts we have learned from the *Lean Startup* lecture of ELPP are quite relevant to this part.
- In Chapter 36, the importance of public speaking for a managerial career is discussed in detail. The advices on *presentations* given by our coach Dave Yewman in ELPP are certainly valuable on this matter.
- As a manager, it is not uncommon to conduct crucial conversations such as performance/salary reviews (Chapters 26 and 27), interviewing (Chapter 11), disciplining/firing the employee (Chapters 14 and 15), etc. Therefore, the assigned reading material, *Crucial Conversations (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., K. Patterson, J. Grenny, R. McMillan, and A. Switzler)*, in ELPP is a vastly helpful guideline for any managers to handle those situations.

## **Conclusion**

Although the title of this book, *The First-Time Manager*, may suggest that it is an entry-level, introduction book for ‘rookie’ managers, it is indeed a very comprehensive and informational guidebook that can benefit managers at various career stages. I would like to recommend this book to any new and experienced managers as well as anyone who may be interested in shifting to a people management role. In addition, even for someone who wants to stay as an individual contributor, useful insights (e.g., what the main challenges their managers are facing, etc.) can be gained from reading this book, which can help improve the collaborations with their management for better career achievements.

To summarize what I have learned from the authors in one sentence, *management is about people, so a truly successful manager must be a complete person with class*. By trying to thrive in our managerial careers, we have made ourselves better people and have made people around us more successful in their careers. This is probably the most rewarding part of being a manager.