



THE PLAYBOOK

# The Step Up

Becoming a manager for the first time, usually with no training.  
What changes, what you will get wrong first, and what you actually  
owe each person.

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## Promoted on Friday, responsible on Monday

Most people become managers the same way: they were good at the work, a gap appeared, and somebody asked. There is rarely training, and the handover is usually a sentence.

This is common enough to be the norm rather than the exception. The Chartered Management Institute, in research with YouGov published in October 2023 covering over 4,500 workers and managers, found that **82 percent of people entering management had received no formal management and leadership training**. The same research found only 27 percent of workers described their manager as highly effective, and around a third had left a job because of bad management.

Those figures are from the United Kingdom and the pattern is not unique to it. What matters here is the first one. If you are managing without training, you are the overwhelming majority, and the difficulty you are experiencing is structural rather than personal.

Nobody told you the job changed. That is the whole problem, and it is fixable in an afternoon of reading.

# You were promoted for the wrong reason

Not a criticism of whoever promoted you. A description of what usually happens and what it costs.

## THE SWITCH NOBODY ANNOUNCES

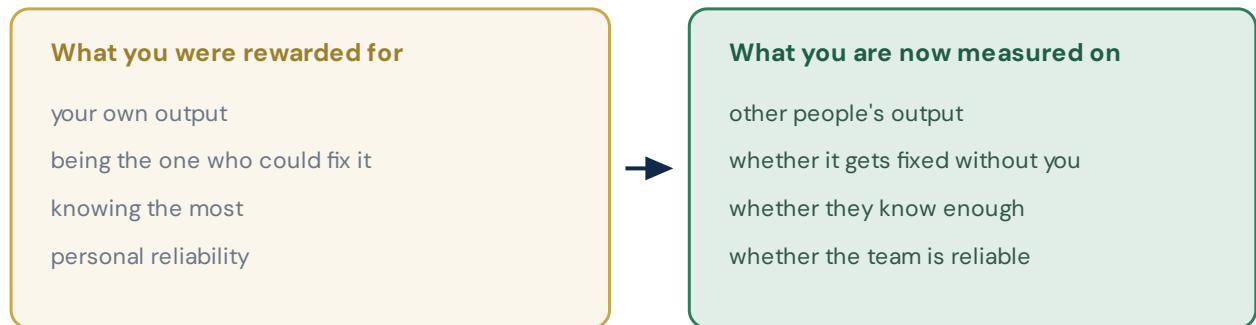


Figure: every row flips. Nobody sits a new manager down and says this, which is why the first six months feel like failing.

You were selected for personal output. You are now measured on other people's. Every row in that comparison flips, and nobody says so out loud, so the first six months feel like doing your job badly rather than doing a different job.

The specific trap is that **the behaviours that earned you the promotion now actively hurt you.**

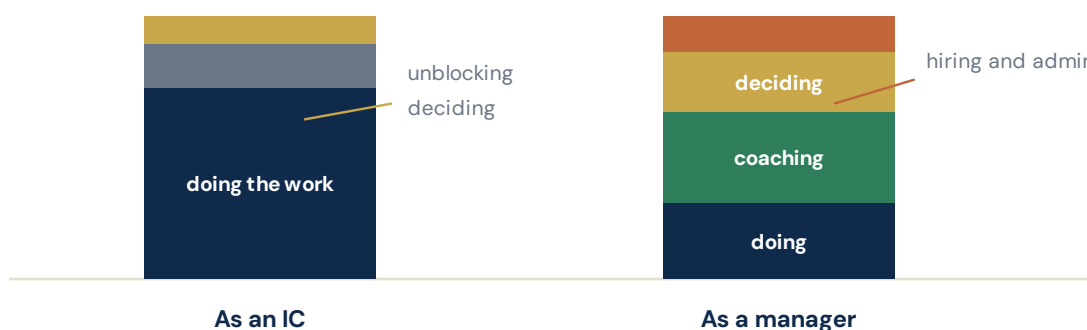
Being the one who fixes it means nobody else learns to. Knowing the most means everything routes through you. Personal reliability means you absorb rather than distribute.

The reframe that helps: you are not being asked to be a more senior version of what you were. You are being asked to change what you produce. Your output is now other people being effective, and on the days when you personally did nothing you can point to, you may have done the job well.

# What your week has to become

The most common failure in a first management year is doing the old job plus the new one, at which point both are done badly and you are exhausted by month four.

## WHERE THE WEEK GOES, BEFORE AND AFTER



The work you were good at becomes the smallest block. That is the promotion, and it is why it feels like a loss.

Figure: illustrative, not measured. The shape is the point: the thing you were rewarded for shrinks.

The shape above is illustrative rather than measured, and the shape is the point. **The block you were best at becomes the smallest one.**

Three practical consequences.

**Protect time for the management half explicitly.** One-to-ones, thinking about who needs what, reviewing work. If it is not in the calendar it will lose every week to something urgent, and it will lose quietly.

**Keep some hands-on work, deliberately and less than you want.** Enough to stay credible and understand what you are asking for. Not enough to be on the critical path, because a manager who is a dependency cannot manage.

**Expect the discomfort.** Days spent unblocking and deciding do not feel productive if you have spent years measuring yourself in output. That feeling is not a signal that you are doing it wrong.

## Leading people who were peers

If you were promoted from within a team, this is the part that keeps people awake, and it is more manageable than it feels.

**Name it once, early, and then stop discussing it.** A short conversation with each person: this is odd, I know, here is how I intend to work, tell me if something is not working. Then behave normally. Repeatedly raising the awkwardness is what keeps it alive.

**Do not overcorrect in either direction.** The two failure modes are becoming distant to establish authority, and staying so friendly that you cannot say anything difficult. Both are attempts to avoid the same discomfort and both make it worse.

**Be even-handed about the friend.** If you were close to somebody on the team, everybody is watching how you treat them. Not because they expect favouritism, but because they are working out what the rules are now. Consistency is more reassuring than fairness announced.

**And accept that some things end.** You are no longer part of the conversation about management, and being excluded from that is correct rather than a slight. This is one of the genuine costs of the job and it is worth knowing in advance.

**You cannot be everybody's friend and also be the person who tells them their work is not good enough. Choosing early is kinder than choosing late.**

## The delegation you will get wrong first

Every new manager delegates badly in the same way, and it is not by delegating too little.

**You will delegate the task and keep the decision.** Somebody does the work and brings it to you to approve. You have created an approval queue and given yourself more work than before, while the other person has learned nothing except how to guess what you want.

The fix is to hand over a decision along with the task, however small. Not the whole thing at once. One category where their answer stands, even when you would have chosen differently.

**The second error: you will take it back the first time it goes wrong.** Which teaches everybody that delegation is provisional and that the fastest way to return something to you is to do it imperfectly.

**The third: you will delegate what you dislike rather than what they need.** Understandable, and it is visible from the outside. If everything you hand over is tedious, that is the message being received.

### THE TEST BEFORE YOU HAND SOMETHING OVER

What decisions inside this are theirs? If the honest answer is none, you have not delegated anything; you have asked somebody to do a task and check with you, which is more work for both of you than doing it yourself.

# What you owe each person

Four things, and they are the whole job in a small team. None requires a budget or an HR function.

## 01 Regular time that is theirs

A weekly or fortnightly one-to-one where their agenda comes first. This is the meeting people say they want more of, and it is the first thing most managers cancel.

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## 02 To know what good looks like

Most people are not underperforming; they are guessing at a standard nobody described. Show an example rather than describing a quality.

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## 03 To hear things early and specifically

Close to the work, about the work. Anything that surprises somebody at a review should have been said months earlier, and the surprise is your failure rather than their oversight.

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## 04 A visible path

Career progression is the most consistently cited reason people leave. Pew Research found 63 percent of those who quit in 2021 named a lack of advancement opportunities. You may not control promotions. You control whether the conversation happens.

Notice what is absent: motivating people, being inspiring, and having answers. Those are not the job. The four above are the job, and doing them consistently is unusual enough to make you a good manager.

## Your own manager, and asking for help

New managers systematically under-ask, because asking feels like confirming they were not ready. This is precisely backwards.

**Ask for the standard.** What does a good version of this role look like in six months? Most new managers have never been told, and are inventing a target and then failing to meet it.

**Ask about specific situations rather than in general.** Not "any advice on managing?" but "one of my team is not raising problems until they are large, what would you do?" The second gets an answer.

**Ask what decisions are yours.** The most common source of first-year friction is a new manager who does not know their own authority, and consequently either over-escalates or oversteps. Get it in writing if you can.

**Find one person outside your reporting line.** Someone a level ahead in another team or another company. Much of what is hard about this job cannot be discussed with your team or, sometimes, with your manager. That is not disloyalty, it is a structural feature of the role.

And if your own manager is disorganised or unresponsive, that is a solvable problem rather than a fixed condition. It is the subject of a separate playbook on this site.

## The first ninety days

If you have just started, or are about to, this is the sequence. The card overleaf is the checklist version.

**Weeks one to four: understand, change almost nothing.** Meet each person properly. Ask what is working, what is not, and what they want to be doing in a year. Write it down. Resist improving anything, because you do not yet know why things are as they are, and the fastest way to lose credibility is to fix something that was deliberate.

**Weeks five to eight: install the basics.** Regular one-to-ones with their agenda first. A way of tracking what people committed to. A stated standard for one type of recurring work. Three things, not ten.

**Weeks nine to twelve: hand over one real decision each.** Something that matters, where their answer stands. This is the point at which you start producing through other people rather than around them, and it is the actual transition.

### ONE THING TO DO IN WEEK ONE

Ask each person: what should I know about how you like to work, that nobody would think to tell me? It is a better opening question than anything about performance, and the answers are usually specific and immediately useful.

# You are not behind

Four out of five people entering management get no training for it. If the first six months feel like doing your old job badly, that is because the job changed and nobody said so.

The change is simple to state and slow to absorb. You were rewarded for your own output and you are now measured on other people's. Every instinct that earned you the promotion, being the one who fixes things, knowing the most, absorbing the load, now works against you.

What you actually owe each person is four things: regular time that is theirs, a clear picture of what good looks like, feedback close to the work, and a visible path. None of it requires training, budget or a personality you do not have. It requires deciding that this is the job now.

The checklist overleaf covers the first ninety days. If you only take one line from it: **spend the first month understanding and changing almost nothing**. Nearly every new manager regrets moving faster than that, and almost nobody regrets waiting.

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## First ninety days as a manager

One page · tick as you go · v1

### WEEKS 1 TO 4 · UNDERSTAND, CHANGE ALMOST NOTHING

- ☐ Met every person one to one, asked what is working and what is not
- ☐ Asked each: what should I know about how you like to work?
- ☐ Written down what I was told, verbatim, without acting on it yet
- ☐ Asked my own manager what a good version of this role looks like in six months
- ☐ Established which decisions are mine, in writing

### WEEKS 5 TO 8 · INSTALL THREE BASICS

- ☐ Recurring one to one with each person, their agenda first
- ☐ A visible record of what people committed to and by when
- ☐ A stated standard, with an example, for one type of recurring work

### WEEKS 9 TO 12 · START PRODUCING THROUGH OTHERS

- ☐ Handed each person one real decision where their answer stands
- ☐ Did not take it back the first time it went differently than I would have chosen
- ☐ Found one person outside my reporting line I can ask for advice

The most common regret is moving faster than this. The second most common is delegating the task and keeping the decision.