

Leading, Managing, and Coaching

By David Antonioni



Executive Summary

Mid-level managers often end up in their positions because they were good at detail-oriented performance, not because they were trained as managers. But the skills that boosted them into management are not the ones they need to be successful in their new roles. The author describes the necessity of incorporating leadership and coaching activities into the repertoire of middle managers.

How can a mid-level manager be a manager, a leader, and a coach? Most workplaces present many opportunities for individuals to engage in each of these roles. However, juggling all of these responsibilities can seem next to impossible. Look at Joe*, for example, an experienced mid-level manager with eight people directly reporting to him. Joe knows that he should be addressing systemic issues that are contributing to operational problems in his department, but he is usually too busy putting out fires to begin making changes in established systems. While executives in his organization have talked about how managers should be empowered, Joe lacks the structure and the encouragement he needs to lead his own projects. Furthermore, he has two direct reports who are not meeting his or the organization's expectations. He knows that they could benefit from his coaching, but every attempt he makes at giving feedback ends up as an exercise in defensive communication. Thus, both Joe and his direct reports are developing an aversion to coaching. Joe's manager does not make a practice of coaching him, either, and Joe has not asked for coaching from his manager because he is concerned that his manager will think he cannot handle his position.

This article outlines the responsibilities that mid-level managers may take on as managers, leaders, and coaches. It focuses on the last two roles because these are the responsibilities that usually get pushed aside. We'll also look at suggestions for increasing the amount of time you spend in these roles. The article is based on knowledge gained from training more than a thousand mid-level manag-

* This scenario is based on a composite of responses given by mid-level managers to survey questions about leading, managing, and coaching.

ers from mid-size manufacturing and service companies and on the results of a survey these managers completed about managing, leading, and coaching. The managers surveyed reported spending most of their time on day-to-day operations and little or no time dealing with the larger picture. Generally, managers reported spending about 75 percent of their time managing, 15 percent coaching, and 5 percent leading. The results are not surprising; however, the challenge is helping managers expand and improve their leadership and coaching roles. What follows is a clarification of the responsibilities of managers, leaders, and coaches, a discussion of what prevents managers from taking on leadership and coaching roles, and recommendations to managers for enhancing their leadership and coaching strategies.

Let's begin by looking at what managers typically do. Traditionally, managing involves handling or controlling the work of other people, which generally means directing others so that their work meets the expectations of the organization's customers and thus maintains the organization's productivity and profitability. Textbooks on managing frequently list five main management responsibilities: planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and evaluating. In brief, managers plan the work, implement the plan, and evaluate performance.

Mid-level managers tend to focus most on operational procedures and details. The reasons for this are rooted in the way they are hired and the reinforcement they receive for certain activities. Individuals who perform well in technical jobs tend to get promoted to management positions. But the detail-oriented performance that won them the job is not the type of work that a successful manager needs to do. As managers, they are expected to increase the productivity of their work unit, which forces them to be work coordinators and administrators with an emphasis on meeting production goals while maintaining or reducing costs. This focus requires managers to devote time primarily to directing the work of others rather than addressing the system in which the work is processed. Furthermore, as managers work to get and keep the operation running, they frequently are called upon to put out fires that arise from crises. When managers are successful at putting out fires, they are rewarded with personal recognition, and this reward stimulates them to do more heroic management. Engaging in firefighting and focusing on operational details prevents managers from taking on leadership roles; they fail to address the big picture or the system in which the operation takes place. In addition, within this work atmosphere, coaching can seem like another attempt at heroic inter-



ence or can imply that a direct report has caused the “fire.” For all these reasons, then, leading and coaching force managers to leave their comfort zones and take calculated risks to improve large-scale systems and co-workers’ work behaviors. Overall, it is less risky to remain in the managerial role and maintain the status quo.

What it means to manage and lead

Leading means speaking up with new and better ideas that can require changing established systems. There is no question that leaders are in demand. CEOs want senior managers to be leaders, and senior managers want leadership from their CEOs. Executives want middle managers to demonstrate more leadership and vice versa. The problem is that most organizations have too many managers and not enough leaders. The study mentioned above revealed that most mid-level managers spend little time creating a shared vision with their direct reports, even though this is one of the main responsibilities of a leader. One reason for this oversight is that senior managers spend little time creating a shared vision with them. Mid-level managers stated that they were not directly involved with strategy formation and thus they were unclear about where their organization was headed, especially in post-merger situations. In addition, many managers reported spending time doing technical work similar to the people who directly reported to them. Usually, this happened because the organization’s workforce was lean. The problem was that managers were caught up in being workers and neglected being managers. Managers openly reported that they found it easier to do technical work than to deal with supervising people. Unfortunately, for many employees the primary route to increase compensation significantly is becoming a manager, even if they prefer to do technical work. Is it any wonder we have so many managers who are not leaders?

Leadership is about inspiring others to produce desirable results because they want to, not because they have to. Individuals become leaders because of their competence, confidence, and ability to inspire and help others contribute to the common good of the organization’s stakeholders. Leaders need not be in a formal position of authority, but they do need to have goals and ideas to which their followers are committed. Fostering a commitment among followers means creating a shared vision of the right things to do, pioneering changes, taking calculated risks, and helping others participate fully and develop into leaders themselves.

Effective leaders generally do not have a coercive style. People follow positive leaders because they have a compel-

ling vision for the common good of the group — a vision that attracts and commits people to related projects. For example, a manager of 21 customer service representatives at a mid-size telephone company was able to increase the number of problems solved with one phone call from 13 percent to 41 percent within a year. He successfully painted a picture of the end results by clarifying what the department could do for customer retention, how customer service reps could increase their knowledge and skills, and how the internal improvements in processing would make their jobs easier to do. Furthermore, he did this by asking his direct reports to join him in this mission, not by forcing it on them.

In addition to envisioning goals, leaders must champion the changes that will allow them to accomplish their vision; therefore, leaders need to work with change agents to implement new strategies. New systems and strategies may require a change in the delegation of decision-making authority (a change in structure) or adjustments to the organization's performance measures (a change in the system). To implement changes successfully, leaders must keep their eyes on the big picture and address a number of factors. Effectively leading an organization or department through changes means communicating the new strategy on an ongoing basis, establishing a set of values that are shared among all organization members, and identifying necessary adjustments to established structures and systems. In addition, the staff will need to change their attitudes, behaviors, and skills in order to support the change, which means they need high-quality training that will help them readjust. By addressing all of these factors, a leader can develop a reputation for competence in initiating and implementing changes, and this reputation increases a person's ability to influence others. A reputation for leading changes does require a longer-term view and involves more effort than the heroic management style of putting out fires. The difference is that leaders have an internal passion for creating something new, and they must value this passion for change even more than their ability to solve last-minute problems.

Making changes almost always requires taking risks. The fear of risk-taking may be one reason why there are more managers than leaders. Strong leaders feel comfortable making decisions even when complete information is lacking or the environment is uncertain. They also have little fear of making mistakes and practice continuous learning and constant improvement. Survey results, however, suggest that only about seven percent of mid-level managers feel very comfortable making decisions under uncertainty. Furthermore, the majority of managers felt that they worked in organizations that did not fully support risk-taking. Leaders must meet the challenges by fully developing long-term goals and maintaining a focus on what is possible.

Having a strong vision does not mean micromanaging or bulldozing others. It does mean providing the group with

structure by clarifying its goals and explaining their importance. Effective leaders know how to think strategically and are able to articulate their ideas about what specific changes to the organization and its environment will look like in the future. Leaders also show consideration to others by trusting and respecting employees, and by involving followers in decisions that lead toward the group's goals. Only about 10 percent of the managers surveyed reported that executives in their organizations involved mid-level managers in the strategic thinking process. This oversight means missing out on valuable input. Middle managers, for example, can have important insights about the organization's strategy because of their familiarity with operations and the technical aspects of industry. Involving mid-level managers in the strategic thinking process is also motivational because it conveys respect and trust, and it involves people in decisions and changes that will affect them directly. The same holds true, of course, for mid-level managers' inclusion of their direct reports.

What it means to manage and coach

While managers report spending more time coaching than leading, coaching can still seem like a foreign concept in the workplace. Coaching is a partnership between a manager and an individual who reports directly to him or her in which the coach focuses on helping the direct report optimize his or her potential. In this partnership, the coach uses a non-judgmental style of inquiry and teaching to help individuals enhance their abilities, knowledge, and skills. Managing is by definition a judgmental task because managers are authorities with the power to hire, fire, and reward. Switching to a coaching role requires a manager to suspend judgment and take a non-fault-finding style. At the same time, coaches must find areas that need improvement, helping individuals see what they don't want to see and hear what they don't want to hear. This responsibility can be especially difficult when the individuals being coached do not want to be or know how to be coached. These are opportunities for coaches to learn how to remain calm and focus on helping the person become coachable.

Coaches, like leaders, need courage, especially to engage in helpful, caring, candid conversations with individuals who need constructive feedback. Many managers have a difficult time coaching because they don't feel confident and relaxed

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giving and receiving constructive feedback. Seventy percent of the managers surveyed indicated that the most difficult part of coaching is giving constructive feedback, and 87 percent stated that they struggled with direct reports who get defensive with constructive feedback or deny their responsibility and accountability for their behaviors and work outcomes. Managers can build their coaching skills by seeking proper training and practicing coaching whenever it is appropriate.



anything that reinforces undesired work behaviors or performance. In performance management coaching, it is important to help direct reports understand the impact and consequences of gaps between current and desired performance. It is also important for the coach to ask the person directly whether she or he is committed to the goals and action plan, especially in challenging performance management cases.

Improving and expanding

your leadership role

Even though the benefits of leading and coaching are clear, managers find it difficult to spend quality time filling these roles. However, managers can redefine their jobs to spend more time leading and coaching others. Following are recommendations for managers to increase the time they spend as leaders and coaches.

- Attend a high-quality leadership training program that provides you with multiple source feedback on your leadership style. The training will help you understand your strengths and identify the areas that need improvement by giving you an outside perspective. As part of the training, you should develop and work on a leadership project. This action-based learning process provides coaching to develop your understanding and skills as a leader and is important in helping you experiment with leadership strategies.

- Every week, schedule high-priority time to engage in your leadership role. There are a number of things to do during this time to address big-picture issues. One issue that managers commonly focus on when working in a leadership role is improving cross-functional work processes. One manager in manufacturing took on a leadership project improving the new product development process. He used to complain about the new product development process until he realized that “If it is to be, it is up to me.” He successfully led the proj-

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Coaching can take place in two ways. The most common is called performance management coaching, and this occurs when there is a gap between an individual's current performance and the way she or he should perform. In these cases, the coach is always the one who initiates the conversation. Performance enhancement coaching, on the other hand, occurs when an individual is meeting performance requirements but wants to perform at a higher skill level or desires coaching to build a new skill. In this case, either the coach or the individual can initiate the coaching process. Unfortunately, most managers spend most of their time doing performance management, leaving little time and attention to help high performers enhance their skills. Eighty-three percent of the managers surveyed indicated that they primarily do performance management coaching. Using performance management coaching exclusively can make coaching seem punitive, especially when it is linked to periodic performance reviews.

Coaching is a process that works best when it occurs daily; it should not be a formal event that happens only a few times a year. It is not about giving a performance review, an annual appraisal, or a disciplinary action. Most coaching conversations are brief, lasting five to 15 minutes. Brief conversations have more impact, while longer conversations tend to open the door for issue jumping and excessive feedback that can lead to defensive conversations. Short periods of coaching are also more realistic to schedule because they leave time for other high-priority tasks.

Coaching involves seven primary steps: (1) making observations, (2) conducting an analysis, (3) giving feedback, (4) engaging in inquiry, (5) setting goals, (6) planning action steps, and (7) recognizing improvements. Step seven recycles into step one, with both parties either focusing on the original improvement goal or setting a new one. In step two, coaches must determine how the system may contribute to the gap between an individual's desired and actual performance. Frequently, coaches need to clarify performance goals and standards, provide the right kind of training, and eliminate

ect and now the handoffs from the new product development department to his department are almost seamless. Furthermore, his direct reports, peers, and managers now perceive him as a leader.

- Spend time biweekly with key executives. This means you may have to initiate appointments with your managing executive. Some managers reported successfully inviting executives into meetings so that executives could keep informed and respond to questions about strategy, organizational goals and performance, and the status of change initiatives.

- Express interest in the organization's overall strategy and inform yourself about the strategies that are relevant to your work unit. Discuss strategy in your biweekly meetings with your managing executive and become familiar with the strategic thinking of the executives in your organization.

- Inspire your direct reports by clarifying the department's and the organization's purpose and goals. Create a visual



one-page performance plan that includes the company's vision, values, mission, strategy, and key business goals. Frequently refer to the one-page plan in meetings and when coaching individuals to help create meaning and to align your work unit's goals with those of the organization.

- Model desired behavior rather than talking about it. For example, when change is initiated in your organization, rather than going through the motions of going along with it, be the change agent. If you have unresolved conflicts with a change, then actively pursue a resolution. Direct reports pay more attention to the character of their leader than to what she or he says. Model trustworthy behaviors and continually build interpersonal trust with others. Specifically, you might build trust by consistently sharing as much information as possible about the business, by practicing doing what you said you were going to do, by refusing to ask anyone else to do something that you yourself would not be willing to do, and by demonstrating courage by engaging in

timely, caring, candid conversations with the right people.

- Help others become leaders by delegating important joint decision-making projects to qualified direct reports. Joint decision-making helps teach others how to solve complex problems, how to take calculated risks when making decisions, and how to quickly learn from mistakes. This type of delegation helps you as a manager in two ways: You will have another respected leader ready to lead the group whenever necessary, and you will learn that by sharing control, you gain control.

- Finally, sincerely give others credit for accomplishing goals. Effective leaders know how to serve others and how to manage their egos. Leadership is all about enabling followers to attain meaningful goals, especially goals that are bigger than any single individual could accomplish alone. The best and most mature leadership is about selfless service, not about gaining power and control over people.

Improving and expanding your coaching role

- As with leadership qualities, it is important for managers to receive training to develop coaching skills. Critical skills include listening, interviewing, giving and receiving feedback, facilitating conflict resolution, negotiating, managing difficult people, and influencing and training individuals with different learning styles.

- Define your role and responsibilities as a coach. This provides clarity for you and your co-workers about what you do as a coach and why. It also makes it easier for you to signal others when you are going to coach them. One manager found it effective to use the phrase, "Allow me to coach" whenever it was appropriate to use it. Defining your role as a coach may also improve others' willingness to be coached. Some people may not want to be coached by you for various reasons. Find out why, don't take it personally, and mutually develop a plan for how the person will be coached.

- Determine how and when people would like to receive positive and constructive feedback. Coaches benefit from knowing each individual's preference for the sequence of positive and constructive feedback. An informal survey indicated that at least 80 percent of them want to hear constructive feedback first. Yet we assume that most people want to hear positive feedback first. Since performance management coaching involves giving constructive feedback, some individuals may get defensive because the feedback feels like personal criticism. In some cases, coaches need to develop strategies to help individuals learn how to accept constructive feedback in addition to developing an action plan for



improvement.

- Modeling ways of receiving constructive feedback can also help teach your direct reports to be coachable. It is common for individuals being coached to give constructive feedback back to their managers, usually about a systemic problem that is affecting their own performance. The best thing you can do in these situations is to listen actively and summarize the feedback in your own words to make sure that you have understood the feedback. Don't deny, defend, or

deflect the feedback. Simply summarize it and take ownership of your contribution to your direct report's performance problem and then make a commitment to change what needs to be changed. Then refocus the coaching conversation on the things your direct report will do to address his or her own contribution to the performance gap.

- Get a coach for yourself. Working on becoming more coachable yourself can help you in your coaching role in three ways: You become familiar with the process, you gain professional development in your own weak areas, and you learn by observing a model. If you trust and respect your manager, then ask him or her to coach you. Discuss the process of coaching and reach an understanding about the roles and responsibilities of a coach. This is good practice for your future interactions with your direct reports. Some managers have chosen to ask people other than their managers to coach them. This other person may be a manager in another department or, in some cases, the organization may hire a coach from outside the organization.

- Practice coaching daily by taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves. One key to success in coaching is practice. Through practice you will learn how to relax when giving constructive feedback, which helps reduce the anxiety normally associated with candid conversations, which in turn increases your ability to reach positive outcomes through your coaching conversations.

- Keep a journal to reflect on and record observations

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about your coaching experiences. Developing your coaching skills is a personal journey, and it is important to learn from your best and most difficult coaching situations. Try reflecting on three questions: What should you have done more of? What should you do less of? What should you keep doing?

- At least once a year, ask the people you've coached for feedback. Use a brief survey that you create yourself and include the questions listed above. Ask people to assess the outcomes of your coaching.

- Finally, as part of your performance evaluation, discuss your goals as coach with your manager. Indicate the average amount of time you spend coaching and the outcomes of this work. Managers who have discussed their coaching with their supervisors reported that they have increased their managers' awareness of the importance of coaching work and the positive outcomes associated with it. As a result, they received recognition and rewards for coaching. Unfortunately, the management of most organizations say that they want managers to coach, but then they don't back their talk up with recognition or rewards. If this is your situation, then you have an opportunity to demonstrate your leadership on this issue.

Leading and coaching have been stressed in this article because they are the two roles that most managers need to develop. However, leading and coaching are not more important than managing. A balance among the three roles is

needed. Managers may find it demanding to engage in all three roles because doing so requires the flexibility to switch from one role to another. In some cases an individual can act in all three roles within 15 minutes, moving the focus from operational details to the big picture to coaching. The roles of leader and coach require courage, and that can create enough anxiety to drive a person back to the comfort zone of acting like a manager. The key to success is to expand your comfort zone continually by setting developmental stretch goals of leading and coaching. Then get yourself a coach and take advantage of everyday opportunities to practice leading and coaching. ■■

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