

TECH TO EXEC

MAKING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION



What happens when a star technical staffer is suddenly promoted to management? Typically, expectations run high. A sense of excitement develops in the department. Senior management eagerly anticipates the results their new star will produce. And then reality hits...

Most newly minted managers find the transition from technician to manager to be considerably more difficult than imagined. The job duties are more complex than anticipated. Conflicts may arise. Projects frequently get delayed. And in the worst cases, morale issues develop and turnover escalates. What went wrong? And more importantly, how can you prevent these problems?

To ensure successful “tech-to-exec” transitions, first understand the failure points--those issues that most frequently derail new management careers. Then use this information to develop an effective process for successful promotions.

Failure Point 1: Selection

Why do new managers fail? Most often, it’s because they never really wanted the job, or more accurately, the responsibilities that come with the job. Making the transition from technician to manager requires the development and utilization of an entirely new set of skills. For most techs, the biggest challenges lie in having a higher level of accountability, and often (and of most difficulty for star techs) a willingness to give up control over project activities.

Before awarding a promotion, it’s essential to determine who really wants the job. This can be accomplished through the following steps:

1. Define the specs.

Create a description of the job duties and document all performance expectations. Define goals and objectives that are precise and measurable.

2. Conduct a formal interview process.

Treat promotions as you would any other direct hire. Have your techs interview for the job, and if appropriate, include behavior and skills assessments as part of the process.

During the interview, review the duties and responsibilities that come with the promotion and verify that your star tech really has the skills and ambition to produce the results you expect. Talent and the ambition to accomplish tasks are two very different issues. Many people have the skills needed but are unwilling to deviate from their current system of working in order to accomplish the expected goals.

3. Hire the best manager.

Not all techs are cut out to be execs. If your interviewing process determines that a management job would be a poor fit, work with your tech to develop a more appropriate and rewarding career path.

Failure Point 2: Getting Outside the Comfort Zone

Many technical professionals are used to working within a “tech bubble” in isolation from the rest of the organization. They may have only interacted with peers and a direct manager within the IT department. Their goals may have been entirely technology driven. Now, they are the manager, and they will be required to interact with other parts of the organization and answer to higher levels of management.

The key to a successful transition is getting techs to understand the needs, interests and challenges of people in other parts of the company, and then open the lines of communication. New managers looking to get out of their technical comfort zone can try these strategies:

1. Schedule start-up meetings with other supervisors, managers, and outside vendors.

Prior to beginning a project, schedule time to speak with outside parties who will be involved in project planning, implementation and evaluation. During these start-up meetings, review each party’s duties, goals and expectations. New managers should come to the meetings prepared with a checklist of information to gather, for example, the project goals, measures of success, and contact information for people who will be involved.

2. Plan de-briefing sessions.

Be a mentor to your new managers. After a new manager has a meeting with a non-technical executive, schedule a one-on-one de-briefing session. At first, many new managers feel intimidated or reserved around non-technical executives. These de-briefing sessions provide a “safe” environment in which to review project details, ask clarifying questions, and plan for project success.



3. Arrange after-work social functions.

An off-hours function can be a comfortable way for new managers to get to know the people they will need to work with on a regular basis, which in turn will help to open the lines of communication.

During these events, encourage new managers to talk about their social and personal lives instead of constantly focusing on their jobs. To further help break down communication barriers, encourage new managers to get involved in community activities that the company sponsors. This will make them feel like part of the team, while getting them out of their work setting into a more social atmosphere.

Failure Point 3: Training

Along with communication skills, new managers must develop a host of other skills to succeed. For example, new skills will be required to address the following types of goals:

- Improving the performance of the department.
- Identifying staffing needs.
- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of team members.

- Clearly defining goals and expectations.
- Keeping morale up during difficult and busy times.

To nurture these skills in your new managers, consider:

- Sending new managers to training seminars with other newly appointed managers.
- Hiring a management coach.
- Enlisting current managers to provide mentoring and training.

How you accomplish the training is far less important than having a plan to teach the skills. Effective management is not intuitive for most technical professionals. To ensure their success, invest in their skills.

Failure Point 4: Patience

Even though a candidate might have all the skills and drive necessary to be a great manager, there will certainly be a period of adjustment. Even the most qualified candidates will take a few months before they are comfortable with the new duties placed on them as technical manager. During the transition, your role is to be the coach, mentor, and occasionally, cheerleader.

Be aware, your new managers may have a hard time with the transition from tech to exec. While it takes time to get comfortable in any new role, the transition from star tech to neophyte exec can be particularly difficult. Provide support, offer guidance, and help to launch your techs on the path to fulfilling management careers.

SOURCES:

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