

# New manager development for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Linda A. Hill

In the early 1990s, I began doing research on the process of becoming a manager. I focused on the transition from individual contributor to manager because there was considerable evidence that the first managerial assignment is a pivotal developmental experience for future executives. It is when an executive's basic philosophy and leadership style are shaped.<sup>1</sup> At that time, although we knew much about what effective managers did and what they were like, we knew much less about how they became that way. My ambition was to provide a forum for new managers to speak for themselves about what it meant to learn to manage. I followed nineteen new managers over the course of their first year in an effort to provide a rare glimpse into their subjective experience: What do the new managers find most difficult? What do they need to learn? How do they go about learning it? What resources do they rely upon to facilitate the transition and master their new assignments?<sup>2</sup>

The new managers provided surprisingly consistent accounts from which two themes emerged. The first was that becoming a manager required a profound psychological adjustment—a *transformation of professional identity*. First-time managers had to unlearn the deeply held attitudes and habits they had developed when they were responsible simply for their own performance. Prior to a managerial promotion, their contribution depended primarily on what they did personally, drawing upon their own expertise and actions. As managers, on the other hand, they had to come to see themselves as responsible for setting and implementing an agenda for a whole group. To use an orchestral analogy, new managers had to move from concentrating on one task, as an accomplished violinist does, to coordinating the efforts of many, like a conductor. To set the agenda for a whole group and to motivate and inspire others to accomplish that agenda were much more complicated than most people anticipated. As one new manager remarked, seeing himself as a network builder and a leader was a fundamentally differ-

ent way of looking at who he was and what he was supposed to do. It meant learning to frame problems in ways that were broader, more holistic, and longer term. It meant learning to cope with the stresses associated with his new position as well as discovering new ways to measure success and derive satisfaction from work. It meant evolving a new professional identity.

The second theme that emerged from my research was that becoming a manager was largely a process of *learning from experience*. New managers could only appreciate their new role and identity through action, not contemplation. They learned what it meant to be a manager and how to be one by facing real problems with real consequences. They grappled with four transformational tasks: (1) learning what it really means to be a manager; (2) developing interpersonal judgment; (3) gaining self-knowledge, and (4) coping with stress and emotion. Much to their chagrin, the reality of management differed from the theory of management. Understandably, the new managers focused first on their team of direct reports and the associated formal authority—the rights and privileges associated with getting a promotion. In fact, what attracted them to management was the prospect of having more authority and freedom. The new managers soon discovered, often the hard way, that “being a manager” meant not merely assuming a position of authority but also becoming more dependent on others, both inside the organization (seniors, juniors, peers) and outside it (suppliers, customers, competitors). Instead of feeling free, most felt constrained—especially if they were accustomed to the relative freedom of being a star individual contributor. They learned that management had just as much to do with negotiating interdependencies as it did with exercising formal authority, if not more.

The transformation experience was slow, difficult, both intellectually and emotionally, and often lonely even for the most talented. The new managers found that the transition between being an

individual contributor and manager was stark. Going into their new positions, they had anticipated that they would have to acquire new knowledge and skills, but they had grossly underestimated just how challenging it would be to develop the myriad technical, human, and conceptual competencies that they needed. But more importantly, they were ill-prepared and unnerved by the unexpected necessity to develop new attitudes, mind sets, and values—the transformation of personal identity demanded by their new positions. They came to appreciate that experience could be a harsh teacher.

The new managers found it easier to learn from experience when they had strong developmental relationships with superiors and peers. But developmental relationships were all too rare. In fact, many viewed their immediate superior as a threat to, rather than a resource for, their development. Given the complexities of their new responsibilities and all that they had to learn, the new managers, no matter how gifted, made mistakes and needed the support and assistance of others. But often they feared punishment for missteps and failures—two essential elements of any learning—and therefore were inclined to shy away from taking on tasks outside their comfort zones and resisted asking for help even when desperate for it.

Management is an art that cannot be taught in a classroom. Managers learn it by doing it, observing it, and interacting with others. When designing our new required leadership course at Harvard, we took seriously the notion that we could not teach the MBAs to manage—they had to teach themselves. Our primary ambition was to develop a course that would provide them with the critical resources that they would need to make the most of on-the-job learning experiences after leaving business school. We recognized, however, that we were still amateurs at helping individuals engage in personal transformation. As Scott Snook, a retired professor from West Point and one of my colleagues, points out, in the Army they understand that “there are certain things a leader must be, certain things that she must know, and certain things that she must be able to do.”<sup>3</sup> We have figured out how to change knowledge and skill, but it is the transformation of being—the identity, character, world views, and values—about which we still know the least.

### ***What We Know for Sure***

There is a popularly held belief that management, especially the leadership functions, cannot be learned. In part, many people confuse leadership

with charisma—which is just one source of power, admittedly a very potent one. Some also have a tendency to create heroes and celebrities out of those in positions of authority, rather than allowing them their human complexity and faults. But what we know for sure is that managers are mostly made, not born. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter put it at a conference on leadership, people want to believe that there are corporate stars “who walk on water.” But as she went on to say, if we looked beneath the surface, we would see there are large boulders holding up each individual, such as past experiences and mentors.<sup>4</sup>

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The good news is that we now know a great deal more about what experiences people need and how to help them take advantage of their experiential learning opportunities. The last decade has seen an exponential growth in the amount of research and writing on management development. For example, the work of McCall, Evans, and others has helped us identify more precisely what managerial lessons people can gain from different kinds of experiences (for example, the experiences a manager needs in order to lead a multinational team).<sup>5</sup> The most powerful learning experiences are stretch assignments that give people work somewhat beyond their current capabilities. For up-and-coming managers, assignments which offer some autonomy so that they have the opportunity to decide what to do (set an agenda) and how to do it (mobilize a network of people to get it done) are important preparation for their first managerial positions.

Not only do we understand more about what kinds of experiences managers need to have; we also know more about how to help them learn from those experiences. Because people are social learners, they need others to provide them with candid feedback and coaching. And recent work has begun to define what qualities effective coaches and mentors possess—among other things, they set high standards, provide supportive autonomy, adopt a joint problem-solving approach when the inevitable missteps occur, and encourage their charges to reflect on and consolidate the lessons of experience.<sup>6</sup>

While today’s line executives, human resource and training professionals, and business school professors have access to a vast array of information about how people actually manage and lead

and what they need to learn, they still struggle to bring that knowledge to life in practice.<sup>7</sup> For one thing, in this hypercompetitive world, balancing the tradeoffs between managing for current financial performance versus longer-term leadership development is a battle too rarely won. Yet there are signs of hope. Corporations are beginning to realize the financial and human costs of even one failed manager (e.g., for employees, customers, and organizational culture). They are taking seriously the growing body of evidence that exceptional managers produce disproportionately more value than their average counterparts. At the time of the first edition of *Becoming a Manager*, organizations paid little attention to the development of new managers. Instead, they focused much of their attention on senior executives. Research in the interim has made it clear that managers on the front line (usually the newer managers) are critically important to sustaining quality, service, innovation, and financial performance. Attracting and developing managerial talent is becoming a critical strategic challenge for organizations that hope to prosper in the years ahead, and there is growing investment in the development of even the most junior managers.<sup>8</sup>

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Companies renowned for the depth and breadth of their managerial talent have taken the research on management development to heart and have made the radical move from a sink-or-swim “selection of the fittest” to a “development of the fittest” approach,” as McCall so aptly puts it.<sup>9</sup> In short, these companies view management development as a joint responsibility of the new manager and the organization. They understand it to be a strategic endeavor to leverage the learning that individuals can gain from their day-to-day work and to provide managers (or future managers) with a portfolio of learning opportunities and resources through deliberate and careful career planning. Others writing for this Executives Ask feature have outlined best practices with regard to *how* people can most effectively learn to manage—admittedly the question that most intrigued me a decade ago. I would like to turn my attention now to the question of *what* new managers need to learn—my

current obsession. What are new managers finding most difficult, and what does it take to be effective in today’s competitive environment? These are questions I was compelled to consider in preparing the 2003 second edition of *Becoming a Manager*.<sup>10</sup>

### ***What Managers Need to Know in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

The work of management has become more complicated and vexing. Just consider the managerial challenges represented by some of the new terms that have entered our vocabulary in the last decade: 24/7, e-commerce, virtual teams, and euro, to name just a few. As organizations become leaner and more agile, managers are being asked to handle greater responsibilities earlier in their careers. Their direct reports have expanded from a handful to sometimes twenty or more. They often have multiple bosses to whom they are accountable as companies restructure to offer more integrated products or services.

Coping with the political realities of organizational life is becoming ever more demanding as the networks of relationships and interdependencies that managers have to navigate continue to grow. For instance, new managers can find themselves responsible for teams which include strategic partners’ employees (who are also competitors). It is no wonder that new managers are eager to learn more about how to develop power and exercise influence, especially with those over whom they have no formal authority. In addition, because managers have to figure out how to reconcile the competing interests that inevitably arise when managing multiple relationships, conflict management and negotiating skills are becoming key. To manage cross-organizational and extra-organizational relationships effectively, managers must learn how to maintain independence while also learning how to collaborate. They are expected to have the talent of a soloist but the temperament of an orchestra player—not an easy professional identity to acquire.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, new managers crave insight into building effective teams of diverse individuals dispersed across multiple locations. Thanks to globalization and demographic trends, many new managers are struggling to develop the skills it takes to motivate and inspire people of different backgrounds. Take for example the Argentine new manager who was heading a virtual team of Argentine and Russian software developers. Or consider a manager in her twenties, from the United States, who found herself heading a start-up team of local employees in Wuhan, China. In both of

these instances, the managerial challenges and stakes were considerable. If we think experienced managers are perplexed about how to handle such circumstances, imagine how overwhelmed a new manager feels.

As organizations become leaner, more find themselves “producing managers” who must continually upgrade and update their technical competencies. Given the dynamic nature of their business environments, new managers need more refined conceptual skills—the ability to make sense of and establish direction from overwhelming and often ambiguous (or conflicting) data. Without conceptual skills, new managers will be unable to develop the general management perspective required to manage multiple stakeholder relationships. Without conceptual skills, they are ineffective in scanning the competitive environment, thinking strategically, and setting appropriate priorities for their teams.

With the increased need to exercise influence without formal authority and build and lead effective teams capable of adapting and innovating, it is the human competencies required for management that have become especially important. For example, in order to figure out how to motivate those who are different from themselves, managers must develop their inquiry and empathy skills. In some ways, it is not surprising that in a remarkably short time we have all come to accept the notion of emotional intelligence and its significance to managerial and organizational performance. When I first started work on management development, I suspect it would have been hard to get our MBAs to take Daniel Goleman et al.’s work very seriously.<sup>12</sup> Now, they walk around talking about their “EQ,” and our alumni report to us that it is the “soft stuff” that differentiates the winners from the losers. As the research on emotional intelligence makes clear, managers must be prepared to learn about themselves (their identities, strengths, and limitations), be willing to make necessary changes, and be able to cope with the associated stress and emotions. There is no magic or quick fix. Only with self-awareness, empathy, discipline, and practice can new managers master the human competencies. At the time I wrote *Becoming a Manager*, the need for personal learning was rarely acknowledged in books or programs for managers. The recent influx of managerial books and self-assessment instruments in this vein is just one indicator of how necessary self-knowledge and personal transformation are to management and how difficult they are to attain.

Unfortunately, we still know too little about why people differ in their ability to engage in self-

development and to learn from experience. We have gained some insight into the question in the effort to figure out who is most “fit,” in McCall’s terminology, but there is clearly much more to be discovered.<sup>13</sup> Some people have more learning agility and are better protégés than others, thanks in part to their propensity for introspection and reflection. Among other things, they adopt an explorer’s stance in new situations, they are open to and invite new ideas, and they can incorporate diverse perspectives. They also have dialogue skills and are capable of seeking and using feedback from others.<sup>14</sup> But for sure, the most effective managers will be those who have an appetite for life-long learning. They will be entrepreneurial in taking charge of their development, seeking out experiences and relationships from which they can learn. People can only learn to manage and lead if they are willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of being and doing things. Learning, especially personal learning, involves making oneself vulnerable and admitting what one does not know.

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### ***What About Leadership?***

Learning how to lead is what new managers want to know these days. “Leadership,” “change,” and “diversity” dominate their concerns as a premium is placed on the ability to lead diverse teams through turbulent times.

Certainly, in the new millennium, new managers must move beyond the pervasive myth that their responsibility is to cope with the status quo. As John Kotter and other leadership experts note, effective managers must be prepared to cope with complexity (the work of management in his language) and change (the work of leadership).<sup>15</sup> They contend that in the 1980s and 1990s organizations were overmanaged and underled. Too often, managers focused only on execution and handling the complexity of their current assignments, neglecting their responsibilities for innovation and preparing for the future.

When I wrote *Becoming a Manager*, many advised me to entitle the book *Becoming a Leader*. But the new managers I studied in the 1990s did not devote much attention to their roles as agents of change; in fact they were hardly aware of them.

Instead, they saw themselves principally as targets of change, implementing the change initiatives of their superiors. Since organizations must continually revitalize and transform themselves to compete, there are just too many change initiatives required at any given time to leave change management to top and senior managers. Even junior managers must be effective change agents who understand how to overcome resistance to change, deal with the inevitable stresses associated with change, and implement appropriate change strategies. Given the growing scale and scope of organizations—even start-ups can be global—managers find themselves grappling with much more complexity. This has caused me to worry that, too often, organizations today are still underled and now undermanaged as well.

Of course, leadership—including the functions of setting direction and inspiring others to pursue it—is critical, especially in today's turbulent times. When I describe the work of new managers (people who find themselves for the first time with subordinates), I mean to include both their management (coping with complexity) and leadership (coping with change) responsibilities.

### ***What If We Rethink What It Means to Be a Manager?***

But I think it is time that we move beyond the conception of leadership as managing change. My current research is about what I am tentatively referring to as "*leadership as collective genius*." To bring into sharp relief my assumptions about leadership which reflect research conducted primarily in the United States and Europe, I am studying managers from around the world. In doing this work, I find myself moving toward a model of leadership as architecture. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I would contend that really effective managers are not going to simply ask, "Am I managing and leading?" Rather, they are going to grapple with the even harder question: "Am I creating the context in which others are willing and able to manage and lead?" Not only do managers need to develop the personal capacity to manage and lead, but also they must be able to create a context in which others are willing to learn and change so their organizations can continually adapt and innovate. In an ever more global economy, we need more research on how managers can inspire diverse others to embark on a collective journey of continual learning and leading.

This shift in emphasis is fundamental. It requires managers to adopt a new professional identity. It forces us to question some of our basic

beliefs. Who is the "leader" and who is the "follower"? Can ordinary people become extraordinary—is there untapped potential out there waiting to be released? Consider this provocative quote from Nelson Mandela:

A leader . . . is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.<sup>16</sup>

With some notable exceptions, until recently, we have focused on getting managers to "lead from the front," partly in reaction to the overmanaged, underled challenge of the late twentieth century discussed above. We sought managers who could "lead the charge" and act as visionaries and change agents. Now, I worry that this conception of leadership is too limiting and may bias us against the kind of leaders we need to be nurturing for the future. Mandela's quote reminds us that leaders must also be coaches and architects of their organizational cultures. At its core, leading from behind is a process of creating an organizational culture that allows people to capitalize on their unique talents. Managers need to learn what it takes to partner with others as they become self-directed learners able to take advantage of their on-the-job learning experiences. Fortunately, there is a considerable body of work from which we can learn about building cultures of learning and leadership. For instance, there is the work of Peter Senge and David Garvin on organizational learning.<sup>17</sup> There is growing interest in and research on managers as talent developers and coaches such as Noel Tichy's on "teachable moments."<sup>18</sup> "Soft" topics such as trust and psychological safety are gaining credibility, encouraging managers to think about the learning culture they are creating in their teams and organizations.<sup>19</sup>

In Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*, I believe we gain insight into the personal qualities and professional identity of individuals who lead from behind.<sup>20</sup> From my reading of his findings, what sets leaders of great companies apart is not so much what they know or do, but rather *who they are and how they conceive of their role*. The critical differentiating factors for individuals operating at Collins' Level 5 are their personal character and associated professional identity. Consistent with Collins' research, I am finding that the most effective leaders see themselves as builders and humanists. Because they can subjugate their egos for the collective good and see the extraordinary when most see only the ordinary, they willingly invest in

and share power with others. For them, as one Italian manager put it, their "leadership is about humanity, helping people get the very best out of themselves to make human progress."

After I finished *Good to Great*, I kept wondering how it was that the Level 5 leaders turned out the way they did. What personal qualities and character made them "fit" to lead from behind? How were these cultivated—perhaps through crucible experiences early in life such as those identified by Bennis and Thomas?<sup>21</sup> What happened to them during their first years as a manager to shape the way they thought about leading others? What resources—experiences, role models, coaches, and mentors—did they have to start them on the journey to Level 5 leadership? Those best suited to lead from the front may not be as well suited to lead from behind or to help others learn how to do so. That said, how do we help the new managers of this century transform their professional identity into leaders who are comfortable doing so from behind? We still have much to learn. And perhaps most importantly, if Mandela is correct, there are many more "fit" people out there to be developed than we realize. In light of the challenges we face in our organizations and communities, we can ill afford to squander such a precious resource.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. 1988. *The lessons of experience*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, L. 1992. *Becoming a manager: Mastery of a new identity*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>3</sup> Presentation made by Rosabeth Moss Kanter on March 14, 2002, at a leadership conference at Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, McCall, M., & Hollenbeck, G. 2002. *Developing global executives: The lessons of international experience*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; and Evans, P., Pucik, V., & Barsoux, J. 2002. *The global challenge: Frameworks for international human resource management*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Thomas, D. 2001. The truth about mentoring minorities: Race matters. *Harvard Business Review*, April: 98–112; and Tichy, N. 1997. *The leadership engine: How winning companies build leaders at every level*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of business school education, see, for example, Mintzberg, H., & Gosling, J. 2002. Educating managers beyond borders. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1: 56–63.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Michaels, E., Handfield-Jones, H., & Axelrod, B. 2001. *The war for talent*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>8</sup> McCall, M., Jr. 1998. *High flyers: Developing the next generation of leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. For

examples of best-practice firms, see, for example, Kerr, S. 2001. Boundaryless. In Bennis, W., Spreitzer, G., & Cummings, T. (Eds.). *The future of leadership: Today's top leadership thinkers speak to tomorrow's leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 59–66; and Lawler, E. 2001. The era of human capital has finally arrived. In Bennis, Spreitzer, & Cummings (Eds.), op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Hill, L. 2003. *Becoming a manager: How new managers master the challenges of leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Murnighan, J., & Conlon, D. 1991. The dynamics of intense work groups: A study of British string quartets. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36: 165–186.

<sup>11</sup> Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. 2002. *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bennis, W., & Thomas, R. 2002. *Geeks and geezers: How era, values, and defining moments shape leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; Briscoe, J., & Hall, D. 1999. Grooming and picking leaders using competency frameworks: Do they work? An alternative approach and new guidelines for practice. *Organizational Dynamics*, 28: 37–52; and Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Argyris, C. 1991. Teaching smart people how to learn. *Harvard Business Review*, May–June: 99–109; and Schön, D. 1990. *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design of teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kotter, J. 1990. What leaders really do. *Harvard Business Review*, March: 103–111; and Kotter, J. 1996. *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>15</sup> Mandela, N. 1995. *Long walk to freedom*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.

<sup>16</sup> Senge, P. 1990. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency; and Garvin, D. 2000. *Learning in action: A guide to putting the learning organization to work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>17</sup> Tichy, N. 1997. *The leadership engine: How winning companies build leaders at every level*. New York: HarperCollins; and Tichy, N. 2002. *The cycle of leadership: How great leaders teach their companies to win*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>18</sup> For an example, see the research on psychological safety by Edmondson, A. 1999. Psychological safety and learning in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44: 350–383.

<sup>19</sup> Collins, J. 2001. *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap . . . and others don't*. New York: HarperBusiness.

<sup>20</sup> Snook, S. 2004. Be, know, do: Forming character the West Point way. *Compass: A Journal of Leadership*, 1: 16–19, 38.



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