



Growing as a Manager

Growing into Your Position: Professional Skills
Managers Should Develop on the Job

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

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CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research. This CQ Dossier is part of the Evidence-Based Management Learning Team "Growing as a Manager: How can you improve your management performance?".

Executive summary

If you've risen to a management position, you have already demonstrated the ability to be flexible, assertive, and growth-minded. These attributes are not only needed to ascend the ranks into a management position; they're necessary throughout a manager's career. No workplace is static, and no industry is without challenge and change. Development of new skills is, therefore, necessary for survival as well as advancement.

But in an increasingly complicated, technologically supplemented world, which skills should a manager focus on developing first? Industrial-organizational research has uncovered the skills that significantly predict managerial success. This CQ Dossier will provide you with an initial guide of what those skills are, and how to go about acquiring them.

Communication and persuasion skills

Communication ability is, unsurprisingly, highly predictive of managerial success (Smith et al, 1994). Managers who communicate clearly and effectively are rewarded with more motivated, competent employees, fewer conflicts, and more productive working relationships. Often, the possession of strong communication skills is a key part of how a manager advanced into their position – however, even the most expressive, persuasive of managers still has room to grow. In particular, many managers can benefit from improving their emotional communication skills, and their persuasion skills (Block, 2016).

Emotional communication. Like it or not, the workplace will sometimes feature heated or emotional conversations. Whether it is helping a bereaved employee return to work following a loss, de-escalating an interpersonal conflict between peers, or discussing hot-button issues such as racial bias, managers will have to encounter, and deal with, passionate or distressed people from time to time. However, not all managers come into their positions with training on emotional intelligence, active listening, and social mirroring. Not having these skills can leave you feeling unmoored or uncertain when the need to engage emotionally with employees arises.

Emotional intelligence skills can be developed on the job. Assertiveness coaches and cognitive behavioral therapists sometimes offer short-term training in effective emotional communication, which managers and team leaders can benefit from taking. Alternatively, management coaches and consultants can also provide training in listening to your employees' emotional concerns, and dealing with heated feelings in a competent, compassionate manner (Mishra et al, 2014). It may also be beneficial to do some reading on the psychological principles of social mirroring, active listening, and mindfulness – a variety of research-supported guides on these subjects are available, including ones specifically tailored to working professionals.

Persuasive communication. If you have been working in management for a significant amount of time, you probably have developed the ability to be motivational and encouraging. Even with this personal expertise, you may not be familiar with the science behind being a persuasive speaker (Mishra et al, 2014). Social psychological research has identified several effective “routes” to persuasion – both verbal and nonverbal – and managers can benefit from familiarizing themselves with them. Reading the research on the “Elaboration Likelihood Model” of persuasion in particular can help you identify how to better frame your views, for the purpose of convincing employees (as well as those above you) to be receptive to your ideas and suggestions (Block, 2016; Worthington et al, 2015). Research into public health communications can also be useful to managers – if you are looking to change the behavior of your employees, examine the research regarding how public health officials altered public health behaviors using persuasive communication (for example, Shen et al, 2015; Brownson et al, 2015).

Quantitative skills

Many managers are quite adept at evaluating employee performance using holistic and qualitative means. But to fully understand the performance of the people you are managing, as well as your department, you also need to possess quantitative skills (Nimon, 2015). Most large organizations have access to large amounts of data on their productivity, performance, and employee attributes; managers who are quantitatively

savvy can harness this data to form meaningful conclusions and strategic policy changes (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Being a quantitatively-minded manager does not require deep, extensive **statistical knowledge**. All that is required is some basic familiarity and comfort with using numbers to answer questions. As a starting point, learn about scales of measurement, and the forms of data that can be collected by various means (such as surveys and HR records). From there, learn the basics regarding which types of analyses can be performed with each kind of data. For example, when you have detailed, numeric data on employee performance, you can calculate averages, and compare groups in terms of their performance; when the data you have is more descriptive or category-based, you can use pie charts, graphs, and other category-based means to compare and contrast people. Having a great deal of numeric data allows you to examine relationships between factors, and even form linear predictions, and so on (Nimon, 2015).

Once you have learned a few basic statistical concepts, it is time to examine the information you and your organization collect. Do you have sufficient data to examine relationships between pay and performance? Can you create a simple, linear equation to predict profits for the next quarter? Can you create profiles of employees based on their skills, education, or other attributes, and use those profiles to make greater sense of where individuals should be placed or which tasks they should be assigned? It only takes an introductory statistics education to examine such questions, but the value it can deliver to your organization and to your own management practice is massive (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Scientific thinking skills

A wealth of scientific information on evidence-based management is currently available. Unfortunately, few managers seek this theoretical and empirical knowledge out. Due to a mixture of lack of comfort with scientific information, and inadequate time, many managers fail to consume the scientific evidence that could help guide their management decisions and make them more effective (Walsh et al, 2015). However, simply acquiring a few basic scientific thinking skills can have a massive positive impact

on your consumption of information and your managerial decision-making (Waring, 2016).

Cause and effect thinking. The average non-scientist has a flawed understanding of cause and effect relationships. Most people presume that when two events are close to one another, they must be related, or that one must have caused the other. Managers also fall prey to this faulty logic, leading to them assuming that interventions are more effective than they actually are, as well as a number of other types of erroneous conclusions. But simply by learning the scientific philosophy behind cause and effect relationships, a manager can become much more effective at evaluating interventions and identifying problems within their organization (Waring, 2016).

Looking for alternate explanations. Scientists are skeptical by training. Even if an explanation for a phenomenon seem obvious and self-evident, scientists are forever on the lookout of alternate ways of explaining or predicting things. As a manager, you can benefit from adopting such an outlook. Read up on the science regarding “third variable problems” and “confounds” – both of which involve an observation (and its causes) being far more complex than it initially appears (Walsh et al, 2015). Learn to ask yourself if an event or observation is as straightforward as others perceive it to be. Practice looking for factors that other people are not considering – and always ask yourself, “is there another reason that this behavior could be happening, other than the reason people assume?”. This kind of skeptical open-mindedness can help you understand your organization, its outcomes, and the people in it with new levels of depth.

Key take-aways

- To remain effective, managers should continually acquire new skills in the areas of communication, quantitative ability, and scientific literacy
- Examine writing on persuasive communication and emotional intelligence to become more adept at meaningfully interacting with your employees
- Learn the basics of how data is collected and how it can be analyzed, so that you can use organizational information to form predictions and examine relationships
- Learn how to think like a scientist: understand how cause and effect relationships are found, and develop a keen sense of scientific skepticism regarding “common knowledge” assumptions that dominate your field

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