So, You're a New Leader…
Are You Ready to Lead?

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INNOVATIVE OUTCOMES CONSULTING INC.

AUTHOR
Marialane Schultz

CONTRIBUTORS
Vince Kiernan, Ph.D.
Faith Wold

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CONTACT
IOCI
(703) 665-0940
(877) 405-2955 toll free
info@ioci-consulting.com
www.ioci-consulting.com

So, You're a New Leader...

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40-80% of new leaders fail in the first year.

Victor Lipman has had enormous success in business, working for years in management positions in Fortune 500 companies. Today he writes and teaches about management issues. But you might not have predicted his meteoric career had you watched him in his first supervisory position.

"Like many new managers, I floundered," Lipman (2016, p. 3) wrote recently. "I avoided conflict. I wasn't firm enough when I should have been, and then I came on too strong to compensate for it. I was assisted largely by that great old teacher: trial and error." Fortunately for Lipman, he graduated from this school-of-hard-knocks supervisory training and proceeded to a stellar career in business. But his experience was far from unusual; most new supervisors struggle at how to be effective. Many fail.

Exactly how many encounter difficulty is unclear, but by all accounts it's a lot. Estimates of the number of new supervisors who fail in their first year range from 40 to 80 percent. Failure rates vary by industry and country, but this clearly represents a major problem. Victims include both the new supervisors—who have made an important change in their careers by becoming a supervisor, hoping that it would be a step up—for the employees they supervise, and for the companies where they all work.

IOCI's services can help new leaders like you avoid common pitfalls and help you soar in your first year as a new leader.

A struggling new leader can **negatively impact the company bottom line. . .**

Why is This a Problem?

Struggling New Leaders Are Problematic in Many Ways

For starters, a struggling supervisor imposes human and monetary costs on the company: The morale of line workers plummets when they are saddled with a poor supervisor; in a work environment poisoned by stress, employees become reluctant to ask questions, undermining the quality of their work; and a failing supervisor is unable to competently manage employees to help them bring out the best in their work. "Poor communication by managers places employees under a cloud of uncertainty and stress, which leads to decreased performance and an increase in gossip, rumors and turnover," one team of researchers has observed (*Longenecker, Neubert, & Fink, 2007, p. 149*).

A Low-Quality New Leader Has a Heavy Impact on Line Employees

One 2007 study of 57 health-care workers found that those "employees experience less optimism, happiness, and enthusiasm when they interact with supervisors than when they interact with customers, clients, and co-workers." But the study did offer a hopeful note: "Employees who report to supervisors who engage in transformational leadership behaviors, compared with those who do not, experience more optimism, happiness, and enthusiasm throughout the day, including during their interactions with customers and coworkers" (*Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007, p. 1363*).

"Poor communication by managers places employees under a cloud of **uncertainty and stress. . .**

The costs related to a struggling supervisor can skyrocket when the supervisor departs voluntarily or is fired, or if the employees reporting to an underperforming supervisor feel driven to leave the company. In either case, the company must suffer the cost and disruption of replacing the departed employees. Such turnover drains expertise from the company, degrades service to customers, harms productivity, corrodes staff morale, and tarnishes the company's image. The departed supervisor suffers too, of course. He or she experiences stress, must navigate a career disruption, loses benefits related to job seniority, and may absorb a major financial setback (*Phillips & Connell, 2003*).

Replacing a Failed New Leader is Costly

Companies rarely fully document the costs of turnover, but the Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University estimates that finding and training a replacement costs 50 percent

Three broad categories of reasons why new leaders fail in organizations undergoing rapid changes.

1 Deficits in skills and competencies

2 New leader personality traits

3 Workplace-level issues

of the position's salary (*Why 80 percent of front-line leaders fail, 2016*). Other estimates run as high as 75 percent of salary (*A crash course, 2013*). Yet another analysis has found that replacing a supervisor costs a company between 100 and 150 percent of the supervisor's annual salary (*Phillips & Connell, 2003*). The bottom line: Replacing a failed new supervisor and/or the employees failed by that supervisor is costly.

One New Leader's Failures May Lead to Other Losses

And out-of-pocket costs aren't the only cost from a failed supervisor. Originally, the company had chosen the individual to be a supervisor because of that individual's skills and promise. By permitting that novice supervisor to fail, the company also incurs an opportunity cost. When an individual flames out as a first-time supervisor, the company loses the benefits of the future accomplishments that the supervisor would have achieved as a successful supervisor. One's initial experience as a supervisor is only the first of six critical career transitions that may arise during an individual's career trajectory, such as becoming a manager of managers and eventually the manager of an entire enterprise (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). All those later phases of the new supervisor's career, and the benefit that the company might have derived from them, are off the table if the new supervisor fails.

And these costs may repeat themselves. Some senior executives and organizations fail to learn from the experience of their first failed novice supervisor, and organizational conditions and practices that helped produce the failure remain unchanged. As a result, one after another newcomer may fail, compounding the human costs to employees and financial costs to the company (Barsoux & Manzoni, 2003).

Why Do New Leaders Fail?

There's a Pattern

Supervising is a highly complex behavior, and new supervisors can fail for all sorts of reasons. But certain patterns are apparent. Using focus group discussions with 1,040 managers from more than 100 organizations, one study identified three broad categories of reasons why managers fail in organizations that are undergoing rapid changes: deficits in skills and competencies, manager personality traits, and workplace-level issues. The focus group participants in that study pinpointed dozens of specific behaviors falling into those three categories. The most commonly cited

In an era of rapid change, strong relationships with workers and stakeholders are vital for the workplace to **react with resilience.**

Four aspects of the new leader experience:

Reality Shock

Role Ambiguity

Social Marginality

Feeling Inept

cause, named by 81 percent of participants, was ineffective communication skills and practices—that is, managers who do not communicate well with employees and teams and who fail to listen to concerns brought to them. The runner-up behavior of failed managers, listed by 78 percent of focus group members, was having poor working relationships; The third most common specific problem, cited by 69 percent of focus group members, was inadequate technical skills by the manager, again underscoring the need for the manager to be equipped to deal with a changing environment (*Longenecker et al., 2007*).

Making the Identity Shift

More fundamentally, successfully moving from being a line worker to being a supervisor requires the individual to make what social scientists call an "identity shift," or a change in how the employee thinks about himself or herself. An identity shift occurs when the new supervisor refashions his or her goals, priorities, and skills from those consistent with a line worker's to new ones more consistent with those of a supervisor. Although all supervisors shift their internal identities over time as their responsibilities change and their skills grow, the initial identity shift from supervised worker to first-time supervisor often is the most difficult for an individual to navigate, because it requires the new supervisor to transition from "buddy" to "boss."

Researchers have identified four aspects of the newcomer experience that companies should help newcomer supervisors navigate. One is reality shock, when the newcomer is confronted by the truth of the new work setting, with all its warts as well as its glories. A second is role ambiguity, which can be addressed by supervisors and stakeholders being clear and unambiguous in their expectations of the new supervisor. The third is social marginality—the sense of existing without a social-support network—which can be addressed by the newcomer taking time to build relationships. The fourth is a feeling of ineptness, or lack of knowledge about how to do things (*Adler & Stomski, 2010*). A 2007 meta-analysis, synthesizing data from 70 different samples of newcomer employees, found that job performance was positively associated with success in addressing role ambiguity, social marginality and ineptness (*Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007*). Clearly, companies should be investing time and energy in helping first-time supervisors navigate these developmental hurdles.

Adler and Stomski (2010) identify five categories of tasks for any employee adjusting to a new position: understanding the position's responsibilities; understanding the organization; building relationships within and external to the organization; understanding the organization's culture; and handling the tools used in the new position. Learning all this doesn't happen instantly. "Assimilation takes time; for each newcomer, there is a distinct learning curve (*Adler & Stomski, 2010, p. 165*).

Do's and Don'ts for New Leaders

Many of the items in the popular business press listing common "do's" and "don't" for new supervisors really reflect the imperative to accomplish the psychological work of making the identity shift to supervision. For example, one common symptom of a failure to make the necessary identify shift is failing to take a company-level perspective when considering issues and challenges. Another telltale sign is that a new supervisor fails to recognize that his or her relationship with supervisees has changed. A third error tied to failing to make the identity shift is when the new supervisor tries to continue to do the same production tasks that he or she did while a line worker *(Mancuso, Jones, Li, & Fulk, 2015)*.

What Skills Does a New Leader Need?

The set of skills that a supervisor must master can seem daunting for a novice. One popular self-help book aimed at new supervisors is broken down into no fewer than 39 chapters, covering topics as diverse as building trust, disciplining employees, managing risk, writing performance appraisals and coping with stress *(Belker, McCormick, & Topchik, 2012)*. Is it any wonder that new managers struggle to succeed?

Supervisors use a wide array of skills, such as planning, job design, delegation, coaching, communication relationship management, and performance monitoring. These are not normally acquired by line employees, so new supervisors likely lack them *(Charan et al., 2001)*. Companies often do little to fill these gaps, because companies typically provide new supervisors with little training. Lipman, whose anecdote started this essay, estimates that he "received much more management training in the last five years [of his business career] than I did in the first 20 years—when I really needed it—combined" *(Lipman, 2016, p. 3)*.

McKinsey (2015) identified four behaviors that together accounting for 89 percent of leadership effectiveness at organizations: being supportive, operating with a strong results orientation, seeking different perspectives, and solving problems effectively. Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter and James Noel (2001) group the skills that a new supervisor needs into three broad categories: Defining and assigning the work that direct reports need to do; enabling the direct reports to accomplish that work; and developing relationships with direct reports, superiors and other stakeholders.

A line employee tends to focus on his or her own proficiency and accomplishments and that of the team of which he or she is a

Four behaviors that together account for **89 percent of leadership effectiveness** at organizations: being supportive, operating with a strong results orientation, seeking different perspectives, and solving problems effectively.

member. For example, the line employee's focus on workplace time tends to center on the employee's own time in and time out of work and meeting the employee's individual work deadlines. By contrast, a new supervisor must take an organization-level approach to the issue of time, instead concentrating on concerns such as planning schedules and reserving time for needed interactions with employees, customers, and stakeholders across the company (*Charan et al., 2001*).

"The biggest challenge for new leaders is to know which habits they relied on as individual contributors that they must let go to be successful leaders."

Marialane Schultz
CEO, IOCI

New Leaders Must Leave Old Habits Behind and Adopt New Ones

New supervisors also must learn new behaviors. Lipman (2015) himself lists 10 key behaviors for first-time supervisors to develop, such as knowing the business, knowing the employees, and leading by example.

Some new supervisors may need not only to learn wholly new skills and behaviors; they may need to relearn or revamp some habits and behaviors that they have been exhibiting throughout their prior careers as line employees, behaviors that were harmless or controllable as a line employee but potentially deadly to a supervisor's career track. Indeed, one team of scholars surveyed 79 business-school deans to identify problematic behaviors by a once-promising underling whose career had stalled. The analysis found that self-defeating behaviors such as procrastination, failing to trust others, and being overly critical were correlated with having stalled out as a manager (*Feruzan, Campbell, McCartney, & Gooding, 2013*).

One way that employers can ease the adjustment of new supervisors is by selecting new supervisors for the right reason. New supervisors often are picked because they are high-performing employees. This approach emphasizes a potential supervisor's technical skill and production value over management skill, and it creates an unfortunate situation in which the new supervisor is steered toward continuing to produce as a line worker, making it difficult for new supervisor to make the crucial identity shift described above (*Who wants to be a manager?, 2011*).

To succeed, the new leader must make that identity shift. . .

To succeed, the supervisor must make that identity shift, because the supervisor cannot single-handedly generate all the department's work. "Perhaps the most difficult of this transition is that first-time managers are responsible for getting work done through others rather than on their own," three HR experts wrote in The Leadership Pipeline. "Giving up the tasks and responsibilities that earned them a manager title in the first place is a tremendously difficult aspect of this leadership passage" (*Charan et al., 2001, p. 37*).

Sometimes the new supervisor simply fails to modify old habits, remaining focused on contributing to production, rather than developing new behaviors for managing others so that they contribute to production. Other companies promote this bad behavior by expecting the top performing line employee to be able to continue that yield after crossing the line into supervising. In this situation, the new supervisor is stretched more and more thinly, frustrating supervisees and dropping in productivity, a phenomenon that Thomas O. Davenport calls a "professional death spiral" (2011, p. 22).

What Is the Company's Responsibility Toward a New Leader?

Charan, Drotter and Noel (2001, p. 54) are unambiguous: "The direct responsibility for preparing first-time managers rests with managers of managers." Training by the HR department can be helpful but will not cover all needed skills and will not necessarily motivate the novice supervisor to apply the skills. Managers must fill in the gaps. Similarly, Maurer and London (2015) suggest that the company should provide support services and incentives that will encourage someone in leadership position to make the necessary identify shift.

The new supervisor's own supervisor should coach him or her on effective time management. New supervisors often devote too much time to administrative duties rather than relationship building with supervisees. Additionally, the company should help the new supervisor understand how the supervisor will be assessed and rewarded so that the new supervisor will avoid trying to function like a superhero line employee. This coaching will help the new supervisor accomplish the necessary identity shift (*Why 80 percent of front-line leaders fail, 2016*).

Also, the new supervisor's supervisor should spend plenty of time with the new supervisor helping him or her understand the company's priorities as well as practical matters such as the performance measures used to assess performance of the company as a whole and the supervisor's workers. The supervisor's manager also should help the new supervisor understand the best ways to communicate upward through the chain of command. It's better for the supervisor's supervisor to invest time on these matters up front than to offer corrective feedback later. "Lack of investment and explicitness up front comes back to haunt both boss and new hire. All too quickly, they get dragged into a spiral of increasing malaise and decreasing performance" (*Barsoux & Manzoni, 2003, p. 5*). And new managers should be monitored carefully, using tools such as observing how they work with their employees, 360-degree feedback, and gap analysis to identify mismatches between what they think they know and what they really know (*Charan et al., 2001*).

New leader success is a shared responsibilty.

Investment and mentorship is key.

Companies Can Make the New Leader's Transition Easier

The company can make the new supervisor's transition easier by applying political acumen when making the appointment, particularly if the new supervisor is a line worker being elevated above his or her peers. "With rare exception, someone or everyone is going to get bent out of shape by this person's promotion, regardless of how well-deserved it might be," Chris Traynor (2008, p. 20) observes. To address these issues, management should deal with the news of the new supervisor in an an open and transparent fashion and with sensitivity to employee concerns.

“Tell me and I forget,

teach me and I

may remember,

involve me

and I learn.”

Benjamin Franklin

Coaching is an Essential Tool for Developing New Leaders

Companies can address these issues by effective training and coaching of supervisors, after their initial appointment and throughout their career arc. Tools and training should aim at helping new supervisors shift their internal identity from that of line employee to manager and should aim at giving that new manager the tools and information that he or she needs to carry out the supervisory tasks. Initial training for the new supervisor within the first 90 days should focus on concrete issues and tasks that the supervisor regularly encounters, such as legal issues and company policies. Training and mentorship should expose the novice supervisor to other supervisors in the company, both to facilitate the identify shift and to help the supervisor develop a strategic viewpoint that aligns with the company’s. Over time, formation of the new supervisor should evolve from focus on specific workplace skills to emphasis on leadership development through coaching and other developmental tools (*Tyler, 2003*).

A Mentor is Essential

A mentor is essential in many cases. “You need someone within the organization who is well-respected and aware of the organization’s political dynamic. You need someone who can guide you and share insights gained over time” (*Belker et al., 2012, p. 36*).

Adler and Stomski (2010) argue that effective onboarding has five stages. In the first stage, in which the newcomer is selected, the company should take particular pains to make sure that the newcomer will fit into the culture of the company and that the newcomer is able to learn and adapt. In the second stage, for one to two weeks prior to the candidate’s start in the new position, the onboarding team is assembled and charged with their duties in helping the newcomer; the team should include a mentor or buddy and a coach, and the coaching can begin at this stage, even before the newcomer has set foot in the new position. The integration phase covers the first 30 days of the newcomer’s work; during this time, the hiring manager expresses goals and objectives for the newcomer, a transition team assists the newcomer, and the newcomer invests significant time interviewing key stakeholders within and external to the organization. The settling-in phase lasts until the end of the newcomer’s first six months on the job. During this time, the newcomer should be provided with specific, detailed performance evaluations to prevent derailment, and a 360-degree review, to provide additional insight into the newcomer’s performance, may be conducted (*Adler & Stomski, 2010*).

Take an Action Learning Approach

A valuable approach may be "action learning," or learning through workplace experiences. This approach focuses on developing skills relevant to the individual learner. "Developing the ability of leaders to learn rapidly in real time is critical for the success of contemporary organizations" *(Leonard & Lang, 2010, p. 238)*. In the action learning process, the learner explores problems, draws insight from colleagues; considers feedback from them, tests an approach in the workplace, evaluates the outcome, and discusses the outcome with peers, before starting the cycle all over again. The approach has been successfully used to help new supervisors adjust to their position (*Butler & Leach, 2011*).

What Steps Can The New Leader Take?

Much of the responsibility for success rests, appropriately, with the new supervisor. The new supervisor should take steps toward successful management such as managing others to accomplish work rather than doing the work themselves (*Why 80 percent of front-line leaders fail, 2016*) and making wise tactical decisions such as avoiding overly sweeping immediate change with supervisees (*Expert advice for new supervisors, 2015*).

New supervisors often grapple with issues regarding the use of authority. Supervisors exert wide authority over supervisees, assessing their work quality, determining raises and incentives, and shaping work schedules and time off. Some new supervisors are uneasy about this newfound authority and may feel unsure about their ability to wield it appropriately, making them reluctant to make appropriate decisions and seeking reassurance from staff members, leading to complaints that they are uncertain leaders. On the other hand, other novice supervisors may be overeager to use their new authority, leading to complaints that they are drunk with power (*Belker et al., 2012*).

Success rests, appropriately, with the new leader.

Because they are now responsible for others and not just themselves, new supervisors must learn to manage their own lives and stresses so that they remain effective. Even something as seemingly basic as getting too little sleep can make a leader—including a newcomer to supervising—irritable and impatient with others (*Barnes, Lucianetti, Bhave, & Christian, 2015*). This may be particularly common among first-time supervisors who worry that they must work increasingly longer hours in order to show results.

A new supervisor should scrupulously avoid showing favoritism, whether intentionally or unintentionally. "It is obvious that you shouldn't have to give up your friendships simply because you've received a promotion. However, you don't want your friendships to hurt your performance or the performance of your friends" (*Belker et al., 2012, p. 13*).

The most effective leader-follower relationship is one of **Partnership.**

To motivate workers, the new supervisor should enunciate a vision for the team. "You can share the vision of the organization and the department with your team members. Doing this gives them a clearer picture of what the goals are and how they are helping to meet them" *(Belker et al., 2012, p. 19)*.

And the new supervisor should emphasize active listening rather than talking. "Many managers, both new and experienced, do too much talking and not enough listening. You learn very little while you are talking, but you can learn a great deal while listening" *(Belker et al., 2012, p. 25)*.

In the end, of course, the goal for the new supervisor is forging healthy, productive relationships with both superiors and line employees. "The most effective leader-follower relationship is one of partnership. In true partnerships, competent people join together to achieve what they could not achieve alone" *(Payne, 2005, p. 10)*.

"Leadership is a mindset including empathy, empowerment and a focus on what is greater than ourselves."

Marialane Schultz
CEO, IOCI

In Conclusion

New supervisors often struggle with being successful, with unfortunate consequences for them, their supervisees and their company.

These problems arise from skill deficits and personality trait mismatches and a failure of new supervisors to make the essential psychological jump to thinking and acting like a supervisor rather than a line worker. Companies should assist new supervisors to make this identity shift; some ways in which companies can provide this support include training, an effective onboarding process, and coaching by supervisors and/or mentors.

New supervisors also share responsibility for their own success, and they should develop appropriate behaviors and break habits that lead to self-defeating behaviors.

FACT:

80% of new leaders fail. Learn why. #spiritedbusiness

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Key Takeaways

How an organization can promote leadership development:

State performance standards for leaders

Offer rewards and recognition

Provide training

Allocate funds and time to support leadership development

Offer encouragement

Source: (Maurer & London, 2015)

Five essential skills for first-level leaders leading and motivating workers

Leading with impact and influence

Leading workplace teams

Understanding the organization's competitive business environment

Planning and managing change

Source: (Payne, 2005, p. 3)

Top 10 causes of managerial failure in rapidly changing organizations

Ineffective communication skills/practices

Poor work relationships/interpersonal skills

Person-job mismatch

Fail to clarify direction/performance expectations

Failing to adapt and break old habits quickly

Delegation and empowerment breakdown

Lack of personal integrity and trustworthiness

Unable to develop cooperation/teamwork

Unable to lead/motivate others

Poor planning practices/reactionary behavior

Source: (Longenecker et al., 2007, p. 148)

About IOCI

We help our clients build leadership readiness and solid business capabilities that position them for sustained relevance and success. We believe in Spirited Business™ as an enabling force behind all we do. We aim to help our clients build spirited cultures by cultivating empowering, passionate and purposeful environments. If you are ready to position your organization for impact and to create spirited cultures, contact us!

Author

Marialane Schultz

Marialane Schultz is the founder and CEO of Innovative Outcomes Consulting Inc. and brings more than 25 years of successful leadership and employee development experience to the company. As a respected business executive, she has been responsible for major business operations, strategy and policy in Fortune 100 and defense organizations. As a key leader in these organizations, she has a track record of success in delivering results and leading employees through complex changes.

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IOCI®
INNOVATIVE OUTCOMES CONSULTING INC.

(703) 665-0940
(877) 405-2955 toll free

info@ioci-consulting.com
inquiries

www.ioci-consulting.com
web

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