

Teaching moment: Managing former peers



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More than a few years ago I was called into my boss' office and told about an upcoming change to the organization.

A new team was being formed and I had been chosen to lead it. Since it was my first supervisory assignment, one might suspect that I would remember vividly the details of that life-changing conversation. All I remember was leaving the office rather terrified.

Although the new team would have only six members, half of them were very experienced and respected co-workers. In fact, some had been working at the company almost as long as I had been alive.

Numerous concerns flooded into my mind. How would they accept the new arrangement? How in the heck was I qualified to tell them what to do? (The latter question perhaps best summarizes how little I understood about leading and managing people at the time.)

Since I had a good working relationship with each of my new future reports, I met with each individually to see how they were feeling as soon as the forthcoming change was made public. Much to my relief, all were cool with it.

Even Roger, who previously had been an engineering manager, put me immediately at ease. "Look, I don't want all those people headaches; I just want to be an engineer. I've seen you manage projects and work with people. You're a better fit for this job than I am."

Whew!

Thus, I learned my first lesson on managing former peers. The assignment had not been granted randomly but after much thought and reflection by intelligent people who wanted the best for the organization. Even if the promotion didn't immediately make sense to me, it did to them and to my co-workers. There was no reason to apologize or feel guilty on my part.

With subsequent advancements I found that the resentment I initially imagined among co-workers was rarely a reality. In the few cases where it surfaced, it tended to be with glass-half-empty people who believed the world was frequently giving them the short end of the stick.

Managing such an experienced team on my first supervisory assignment was extremely fortuitous. It was immediately obvious that I would not add value through detail design solutions but rather by identifying and prioritizing the issues that required the team's attention.

Instead of making calculations, I was needed to address barriers that kept the team from doing its jobs, to serve the real engineers who were doing the real work. I learned that my job was to ask the right questions rather than provide answers.

Not everyone on my new team had gray hair. Three of the members were young pups like me and two

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were rather close friends. Those relationships had to be tweaked somewhat.

In the past each of us might have vented our work frustrations over a beer. Now I would listen and perhaps offer some suggestions over a walk around the office as my buddy vented, trying to avoid throwing gas on the fire by adding my frustrations. In short, we remained friends, but the relationship took on a slightly more formal aspect.

In addition to my new team of reports, there was a new group of peers to work with: My fellow supervisors.

Just as more experienced engineers helped develop my technical skills when I first started, this group was key in helping me learn the ropes of managing people. Thus, embracing my new peer group was both critical to my development and role modeled the value of teamwork that we were striving for within the organization.

A couple of decades later, I learned that a friend and peer was to become my new supervisor. I remembered how important Roger's acceptance and encouragement was to me years earlier. I hope I made him feel as welcome.



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