

# Managing people for the first time: Expert tips on how to succeed

March 7 2023, by Elena Doldor

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Getting a promotion that involves managing people for the first time is a milestone in anyone's career. It is a sign that your employer values your performance and skills and trusts you to lead projects and colleagues. This transition can also be a challenging and stressful experience—you may need to relearn what it means to do a "good" job.

It is somewhat paradoxical that employees generally get promoted into managerial roles based on strong performance in non-managerial tasks. While you may have succeeded so far on your expertise and technical abilities, managerial roles call for a different set of skills. You will have to learn to prioritize and allocate work to make sure projects are completed on time, monitor your team's performance, motivate the people you supervise and manage conflict.

These interpersonal skills are misleadingly labeled "soft" skills—they are rather hard to develop. Here are some things to keep in mind:

## **1. Get comfortable with power and politics**

It may feel particularly challenging to manage [team members](#) who are your friends, or who are much older than you. Having cordial working relationships is possible, even when managing others—but you still have to set priorities, tackle conflict and have difficult conversations.

A typical mistake among early career managers is trying to influence others by relying on formal authority. But having a new hierarchical position or job title will not automatically make it easier to get others on board. Effective managers are good at navigating the informal aspects of power that make up "office politics"—the conflicting interests and agendas in the workplace, and how people defend those interests.

Office politics might get a bad rap, but in my [research](#) I found that the ability to network, build relationships and influence others is [critical](#) when it comes to managing people. For instance, most managers understand that before formally announcing a big decision, it is important to have informal conversations with those who are affected or can influence the decision. This is not unprincipled scheming, but a way of doing your homework.

As a first-time manager, you will probably need to manage both downwards (with your team) and upwards (with more [senior managers](#)). Political tensions can arise, for example, when you need to pass down or filter difficult messages coming from the top, while keeping your team motivated. While you may find politics occasionally frustrating, the good news is that [managers develop political skill](#) with time and experience.

## 2. Focus on the team

Being a manager is not about your ego, it is about serving and empowering others to deliver results and to improve professionally. Your performance depends on the quality of work produced by your team, so it becomes essential to be able to delegate, provide work that stretches your team slightly beyond their current level of knowledge, and trust people to do it.

Trust is built by communicating openly and working specific, actionable, two-way feedback in regular conversations (not just formal appraisals).

If you are managing a team, remember that teams are more than the sum of their parts—they have shared goals, values, attitudes and practices. Similarly, organizations have established ways of working, that we sometimes accept unquestioningly and may need to challenge.

It is easy to think of under-performance as the fault of one person who "just doesn't work hard enough" or "doesn't have what it takes." It is harder—but arguably more useful—to ask questions about the broader context, and your own role in team processes and organizational culture:

- Am I communicating my expectations clearly?
- Am I providing good feedback to the people I supervise?
- Why might people be lacking motivation?
- What role am I playing in contributing to burnout?

### **3. Foster diversity and inclusion**

Managing people from different backgrounds in terms of gender, culture, race, sexuality, social class or age requires more than subscribing to generic corporate statements like "we value everyone." Your heart might be in the right place, but when it comes to inclusion, our behavior doesn't always align with our values—unconscious bias creeps into decisions, and systemic biases are weaved into the fabric of our workplaces.

Research shows that women and ethnic minorities need to demonstrate a higher standard of performance to achieve comparable performance ratings and credibility. My [research](#) found that [women leaders](#) receive less useful developmental feedback compared with their male peers. It is difficult to get the best out of your team if members are not equally trusted, developed and empowered.

As a manager, you form impressions and assess others continuously, and you will need to actively work to leave your biases at the (virtual) office door. If you are a woman or an ethnic minority, you also need to consider how your identity shapes your experience as a manager. Our societal ideals of leadership are still constrained by the "[think manager-think male](#)" phenomenon—the qualities we associate with managers are more commonly ascribed to men. Others might question your managerial credibility because of your gender, race, class or age.

It should not be only your responsibility to fend off entrenched biases. If your employer is genuinely committed to diversity and inclusion, ask how they support underrepresented employees taking on managerial roles.

### **4. Get the support you need**

Taking on extra responsibilities and managing people can be stressful—there is always a degree of discomfort in professional growth. Formal management training can be useful, and on-the-job experience even more so. But your growth as a manager will also be helped if you can learn from others who have been in your shoes.

Managers with thriving careers cultivate a wide range of [developmental relationships](#). Trusted mentors, coaches, line managers, peers or career sponsors can act as a sounding board, provide advice and different perspectives, validate and challenge you at the same time, and open doors for additional opportunities. Nobody travels this road alone, and neither should you.

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