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Managing Managers

A manager who manages other managers is traditionally called a director. Changing from managing individual contributors to managing managers is not as dramatic as first-time management, but there are some differences. The focus and scale of their duties differ significantly. You are not so close to the work and have to rely on another management layer to get things done. Changes that you introduce take time to see the results. You're not in Kansas anymore. Directors need to adapt their approach and develop new skills accordingly.

Scenario

João has been managing his team for the past two years. He was responsible for overseeing the work and managing the performance and development of a team of individual contributors who executed tasks and projects.

As the business was doing well and more people joined, it

was decided to promote João to a group manager. This group comprised three teams with adjacent missions. Each team would have its own manager, and João would manage these managers. Two teams already had managers, and one member of the third team was to become its new manager.

As he wanted to remain on top of things, João attended as many team meetings as he could and contributed to helping the teams move faster. He also wrote comments on their chat channels to unblock. He worked on teams' tasks, reviewed their deliverables and often asked for updates.

In 1:1s with the managers, he directed them on how to behave and seemed to know the details of every topic. He soon started working 12-hour days to supervise the three teams and complete his own work. He caught up on chat messages and emails at night and on weekends and seemed to always be online. The managers escalated and brought more and more decisions to him, and they became a pipe of information rather than leaders of teams.

The Ineffectiveness

João was now responsible for overseeing and coordinating the efforts of multiple teams, each led by its own manager. The focus was on ensuring alignment, collaboration, and achieving broader organizational goals.

Knowing every detail, interfering with, and guiding the managers through every step made them redundant, and João's

workload was unsustainable. He also became a bottleneck, which slowed things down. If he left, the managers would remain without the tools needed to manage their teams.

Actionable Guidance

- Shift from tactical to strategic leadership: move out of the teams' day-to-day, let go of all the details and rely on your managers. Prioritize business impact and alignment over daily operations. If you offer support too frequently, it may be seen as you're trying to impose your ways.
- Focus on developing leadership capabilities in your direct reports by continuously building trust, setting your expectations, giving feedback, coaching and delegating, allowing them autonomy and their leadership style. They must adhere to basic guidelines like weekly 1:1s, giving feedback and coaching, but they must not do everything your way. Don't destroy their authority by overriding their decisions unless it's critical and irreversible. They are leading their teams and setting their own subculture.
- Ensure that your teams are aligned with departmental or organizational objectives. Drive a vision - what will your group look like in 18 months? How will you all get there? What might block the way?
- Set aside time for your own work and explicit strategic thinking rather than focusing only on putting out fires and removing blockers.
- Many basic practices for managing individual contributors are the same as managing managers: understanding the functional area, setting an environment for intrinsic

motivation, supporting direct reports to achieve goals, performance management, holding 1:1s, giving feedback, coaching, resolving conflict and accountability over the whole team.

- When you hear a question you believe they should be able to answer, ask for their opinion rather than giving them the solution. “What do you suggest we do?” Make frequent use of open-ended questions.
- When you are asked for permission to do something, tell them to change the language to reflect what they prefer to do: “I intend to X,” which will develop their self-reliance. There will be rare cases that you will have to overrule. This change, among others, helped the U.S. Navy captain David Marquet transform the worst submarine in the fleet into the best one. The full story is in his book “Turn the Ship Around! A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders.”
- While you’re expected to know a lot about your teams and projects, you don’t need to have all the answers and definitely not have them on the spot.
- In some organizations, peer directors become your “first team” or “immediate team.” You collaborate a lot and maybe even pair to achieve common goals. If this is the case, remind yourself that your first team is not the department you manage but rather the peers. Also, cascade this culture to your managers, clarifying that they are a team. If this is not the organization’s culture, you can try to promote this way of thinking, but do not fall on your sword for it.