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Dos and don’ts for the first time line manager
How to maximize your chance of success

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ABSTRACT
Moving to a line management role can be a bewildering experience that will sooner rather than later put the new manager’s ability to lead, organize, communicate, and prioritize under great pressure. The manager’s own personality, background, and preparations can help to minimize that stress, but there are situations where a more deliberate strategy will be needed. In this paper, we will use real-life experiences as a point of departure to discuss some of the most common pitfalls and, more importantly, give best-practice examples on how we can prepare and approach these situations. In particular we will cover when and how to avoid falling back into patterns and behavior of the fledgling manager’s previous role, when to prioritize, how to implement a scalable approach to the different individuals in the team, communication, and how to get the most out of the team in an environment governed by SOPs, work instructions, and senior management objectives.

Introduction
Being promoted into a line management can be a disorienting experience for the new manager that will put the manager’s capability to lead, organize, communicate and prioritize under great pressure. This paper focuses on five aspects of managing a team of programmers. Although most of the examples and concepts can be generalized to pharmaceutical/biotech and potentially outside the pharma/CRO sphere, the examples we discuss stem from a CRO programming environment. There are countless potential pitfalls for the line manager, but we restrict ourselves to five sometimes overlapping, representative examples in order stay within the scope of this paper.

The first pitfall we discuss is the necessity to resist the urge micro-manage your team members, or to even compete with them, instead of leading or coaching them. We assume that no line manager would deliberately compete with his or her reports, but in stressful situations the risk of doing so increases drastically, and it’s important to be aware of the potential consequences of doing so, since this can be detrimental to both the project as well as to the relationship and dynamic between the manager and report, consequences that go beyond the critical situation you as a manager are trying to control.

Most functional managers in the middle management hierarchy do not have the option to say no to internal escalation meetings, to new initiatives to tools or processes, to management meetings, client calls, one-to-ones, or to many other (seemingly) urgent and important duties: these are all part of the job description. Nevertheless, it is difficult to perform well on all these different tasks, and chances are you are not going to have the kind of impact you would like to have if you don’t reduce your commitments to a few projects where you can really make a significant difference. The hard part here is to make a conscious decision to remove items from your continuously growing to-do list or at least to understand where your efforts are best placed. Most of the time only one aspect should really be driving the manager’s decision-making; where can the time and energy invested maximize the value for the team and the organization.

Thirdly, with the help of some real life examples, we will look at how a manager can approach non-systematic challenges by scaling the effort depending on the situation. Just because one programmer, new to the lead role, needs assistance in planning and delegating does not mean that all your reports need the same kind of supervision and attention. Even in what seems to be a homogenous team a manger needs to recognize when and how to approach individual team members when it comes to leadership and coaching.

Effective and transparent communication is crucial to one’s success in any function within a company but becomes arguably all the more important once you take on line management responsibility. For the team member, the one-to-one conversations with the manager will often be the most important source of information about what is going on in the organization; about short and long-term planning for the function you are supporting as a manager and the organization’s objectives. There will always be certain kinds of information and ongoing discussions that cannot be shared with your team for a variety of reasons, but most of the information can be shared and should be shared.

At first glance the role of the manager can be defined as messenger and auditor, ensuring that procedures are followed. That is only partly true; looking more closely, one can recognize plenty of room for a dedicated manager to make an impact and create value for the organization. In fact, the line manager might, on a different scale, have more influence than the company's CEO bound by board and shareholder expectations. In this section look at some examples specific for a programming team and how a manager can make an impact in what appears to be a straight-jacketed environment severely constrained by SOPs, sometimes confounding objectives, and financial restraints.

Do not compete with your team – lead your team

It probably goes without saying that managing and coaching coworkers is not the same as micro-managing their work, telling them how and when to do what. Still, it can be difficult to resist the impulse of giving (too) detailed instructions/commands and getting involved when things don't go as planned. Because the requirements are so familiar, the urge is understandable if you've just come from role that your reports are filling. But there are some obvious drawbacks of allowing yourself to fall back in the old role as programming lead, and some disadvantages that are maybe not that obvious. We are aware of the variety of co-workers in any given team so the example we use to illustrate this below is somewhat arbitrary, but it would be beyond the scope of this paper to try to cover several different scenarios depending on organization and personalities involved.

Let's assume a programmer is leading a large and complex study. The newly minted line manager has started to notice a few things requiring improvement; lack of internal communication and lack of desired progress. Especially when the new manager is coming from a lead role, the line manager's initial instinct is to intervene and become active in the communication with the other stakeholders in the study team, to start making assignments directly to the support team (a task which in our organization would be the responsibility of the lead programmer). Now, no scientific studies will be presented to support this claim, but our own experience tells us that for one, the point of contact will move from the lead programmer to the line manager when it comes to communication with the external stakeholders (medical writing team, statistician, data management etc.) and the internal team (support programmer). Secondly, it will undermine the role of the lead programmer as the main contact for programming activities on the particular project. Consequently, it will reinforce the lead programmer's lack of engagement. The other aspect is that the line manager will all of a sudden have the lead programmer's tasks to deal with in addition to other daily obligations. For most line managers this would likely impact their work supporting the management team and the other reports they have, and of course the customer, be it internal or external.

To give universal advice on how to avoid this "trap" is not easy, but there are a few things that we believe will work for most line managers. But first of all, be clear in your communication regarding your expectations. For example, too often we assume others get our cryptic communication (sometimes they do, sometimes they don't, and we should try to aim for zero misunderstanding). When a situation arises that could potentially require management involvement, be clear about your expectations.

For example, the lead and study team used up all hours in budget allocated to SDTM programming, but there are still several domains unfinished. Focus on what is relevant to commence work and leave it to the lead programmer to dig in to the programming specifications, the half-finished datasets and discuss with the support team. Don't assume the lead won't be able to deliver the information so avoid telling how to do things, or worse starting to dig yourself going through specs or contacting support staff them yourself instead ask how "we can solve" a problem or "how do you think we can solve this". Sometimes it might feel as there is not enough time and to lure the solution out of a lead that doesn't feel engaged, but often enough patience pays off: Giving detailed instructions will most likely be more harmful in the long run. The aim for the line manager here is to be able to give the coworker, the lead programmer in this case, enough tools and support to come up with the right solutions on their own.

Prioritize – and say no

The initial experience as a line manager (and again, this will obviously depend on size of the team and responsibility) can be bewildering. The flow of information, e-mails, calls, meetings escalations, is likely to increase significantly and with time you will hopefully learn how to deal with the scope of the new role. Still, even with your productivity going up, as you are getting accustomed to the role, there are still limits to your concentration and ability to juggle all the requests coming in. Surely, there are some outliers, but for the majority of line managers, the weekly or bi-weekly face-to-face meetings, the team meetings, the client meetings, the occasional and unexpected firefighting, and the routine resource planning and budget tracking will keep most managers busy. On top of that it's not unlikely that you are expected to take part in initiatives such as reviewing SOP updates or taking part in bid-defense meetings. It's probably fair to assume this would fill most line manager's day, and some of these tasks will be done in hurry, not getting the attention they need.

It would be naïve of us to suggest that a line manager can has the authority to pick tasks as they see fit. That isn't possible, but on the other hand it isn't possible to perform well and deliver with high quality on all these initiative and tasks and at the same time manage a team of 8-12 direct reports. Therefore, it makes sense to take inventory regularly to get a better grip of what makes up the daily work as line manager., Most likely it will take some effort and discipline to free up the time it takes to go through that exercise. But doing so should give you a better understanding of what meetings/initiative/work groups you can cancel and where you should intensify your focus. The questions that then need to be asked are: Do I need to be part of the discussions on the implementation of a new system the data

management group is using to query issues, or did someone just invite me who wasn't sure how my function (and my team's function) relates to this particular software update? Do some of my lead programmers require less oversight and support and would it be enough to meet with them perhaps less frequently than others? Can one of the more senior programmers represent our function in a working group or does it need to be a manager?

If the line manager goes through the inventory and asks these questions he or she will most likely be left with assignments or tasks that cannot be ignored or delegated. Hopefully, these are the tasks where the line manager can make most impact. For example, if you are part of an initiative to build a library of inferential SAS macros and you happen to have the required statistical background paired with strong macro programming background, it makes sense to put more of your effort there than in that other initiative, like developing standard proposals for programming narratives which you have little to no experience.

Scalable approach

Throughout our careers both authors have independently noticed the tendency to implement systematic action to what appears to be non-systematic issues. For example, a study team delivers a define.xml package with obvious quality issues detected by the recipient, the client, or worse, the regulatory agency; or a lead programmer in your team fails to properly adhere to archiving processes and gets flagged in an internal audit, or worse in a sponsor audit;, or a programmer fails to complete programming of an output displaying least square means estimates for analysis of covariance. Note, that we are primarily describing the situations when the individual line manager is initiating such additional procedures, though we recognize that often these kinds of systematic measures, applied to broadly, often come from higher up in the organization. Those situations most be handled differently and are beyond the scope of what we can cover here; however, it's sensible to approach these initiatives with same kind of healthy skepticism that any other systematic process would be measured by, as they potentially can have the same negative impact.

Are these situations evidence of a systematic problem across the team or individual events? It might be easy to see systematic action as the only proper (and safe) mitigation strategy for the above problems we have observed. In the first example we would implement an independent review of the define.xml content prior delivery for all SDTM and ADaM data packages requiring a define.xml, regardless of the programming team's level of experience. Our most senior lead programmers and teams, who consistently deliver with highest quality on time must undergo the same scrutiny as the define files produced by the less experienced lead programmers and teams.

For the second example we would alter our archiving review processes to include additional QC steps of the archiving in question. Again, our experienced teams would undergo the same checks and procedures to ensure full compliance with archiving as the more junior teams. Finally, in the third example we would prohibit programmers, regardless of their educational background and experience, to produce anything that is more complex than means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximums.

The above actions might resolve some of the issues in the short term. But if the situations described above are not systematic, i.e. if they are isolated incidences occurring with only a few individuals, or within a certain study team or location, then these mitigation strategies might not be very helpful. In fact, they might even be harmful or at least ineffectual, as we have now imposed additional QC steps on top of our regular QC, like strict independent peer review even for our best performing teams and leads (and we would unlikely have any findings but the same effort as for the reviews where we potentially could have findings), or preventing individual programmers to conduct certain tasks they have been able to perform very well in the past. This will most likely result in less flexibility as the team potentially needs involve a statistician to complete certain outputs prior the review of the tables, and the uniform review approach to quality in define.xml and archiving will consume resource that could have been directed to the less experienced teams and leads in the group, supporting them with hands-on advice and guidance and training with the goal of archiving a uniform performance throughout the teams instead of inflexible QC processes.

Communication

An attempt to exhaustively classify even just workplace communication would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper. But for the sake of discussion, let us assume an organization large enough to imply at least a few levels of management with offices in several locations. It is fair to assume that we can intuitively divide types of communication into the categories corporate, departmental, line manager-team, and finally, line manager-report communication.

Corporate communication is not that frequent, usually lacking detail or specifics, and often focusing on overall objectives for the organization. Department-wide communication is of course much more valuable to the co-worker, but probably doesn't fill all the information gaps. Instead, usually fill the function of ensure that the entire group receives consistent information (for a role in the department is changing, or client/project "XY" is now our top priority). Although this type of communication is essential for distributing information consistently, we would argue that the communication between the manager and the team member, in particular the face-to-face conversations, is the most important source of information, not only for the report but for the manager as well, about what is going on in the organization.

A manager who focuses more on the technical aspects of the work than leading and communicating with the team reinforces a silo situation where team members are unaware of which projects other colleagues are supporting and are oblivious to upper managers' initiatives and short-term goals. And of course, such a line manager will not be sufficiently informed about the struggles or challenges his or her team is facing. Failure to encourage open and frequent communication can be very frustrating or even demotivating for the individual co-workers and for the team as whole: Co-workers will feel less engaged and less invested in the work and long-term planning of new projects and initiatives. Furthermore, without frequent exchange of information, in this example, the line manager and team will miss out on many opportunities to resolve problems related to resourcing and the dissemination of valuable knowledge, e.g. that VBA expert sitting two rooms away from the colleague struggling with a spreadsheet macro that could benefit from that colleague's expertise. Or a new project initiated by upper management to make production of ADaM datasets more efficient by building new macros might miss out on the opportunity to utilize the ADaM implementation expertise in the team as this information doesn't get distributed.

Undoubtedly, there are many more examples to be given here, but we want to stress that the long-term effect of losing the team's engagement is one of the most significant risks for the organization.
Clearly, there will always be certain kinds of information and ongoing discussions that cannot be shared with your team for a variety of reasons, but most of the information can be shared and should be shared. Involving the team members and being transparent about the organization's objectives and your objectives will gain trust and make it more obvious to the team how they can also support you.

Be your team's CEO
Most, if not all, organizations; pharma/biotech companies and CROs are not different here, will have policies, rules, SOPs and work instructions etc., governing most of our daily activities. On top of that you will have annual company objectives and senior management initiatives. Considering that, at a first glance you might wonder where the wiggle room is for the line manager managing a small team of programmers. If you look more closely, though, one can recognize room for a dedicated manager to make an impact and create value for the organization and the team.

A concrete example based on experience. Upper management had put additional emphasis on reducing overburn on certain tasks related to programming activities as the current process doesn't give the necessary information early enough for upper management to be able to see the consequences of overburn and potentially also for the line managers to make changes or interfere to stop the overburn from increasing further. However, the financial reports produced by the company's finance department, and made accessible to the line managers, doesn't include the necessary granularity needed to spot overburn on specific tasks and by function, which, however, is the information upper management and you need to spot budget issues early and identify their cause in a timely fashion. To obtain this information various reports need to be copied and compared manually, an odious and arduous task, which becomes even more time-consuming as the number of projects you are responsible for grows. In order to make the information available faster the line manager creates (or most likely tasks the best VBA programmer in the group to create) a script to pull together the diverse sources to create his own consolidated report with the requisite granularity, showing not only hours burned by task and function, but also units accrued and left to be worked, traffic-lighting for each task whether hours remaining in each bucket will be sufficient at the current effort rate. Although the example might seem trivial we often see situations where we, and others, would benefit from "thinking outside the box" and utilizing the technical knowledge in the group to solve many of our daily problems instead of waiting for others to do that for us.

Another example related to people management. A programming team reporting in to the same line manager have been working long and intensely on a suite of projects in the same portfolio. The lead and the core support team are working long days and even weekends, getting more work from week to week. Looking carefully at the tasks the line manager notices that the team is using a lot of time, more than expected, on internal discussions. Not necessarily a bad thing, but the line manager also notices that the lead is slowly losing motivation and control over the task assignments and tracking out-of-scope requirements not in the budget. At the same time feedback is received from other functions about quality issues in the deliverables. In a situation like this the solution is to work with coaching and potentially making changes to the group dynamic by replacing team members that might perform much better on a different project. It might cause some disruption in the daily routines when team members are assigned new tasks or even assigned to new projects, and even if it's more time consuming to manage dysfunctional team the line manager should use this opportunity if the long-term results overweigh any potential short-term distractions.

The example above is of course not only applicable to the situation when the line manager needs to step in and actively change the constitution of the group to boost performance. We should also consider the opportunities we have, as line manager, to put together teams that can potentially perform above expectations.

Finally, it really takes effort and time to provide that kind of dedicated coaching to one or several team members but with proper planning and long-term goals you will be able to bring the best out of your team. If you as line manager can influence how the study teams are put together, working hours, flexibility of working from home a couple days per week etc., try to do so as often you can. It will impact the satisfaction and work ethic, and for that your team will be grateful to you and the organization.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have briefly looked at five sometimes overlapping problem scenarios facing the freshly minted functional manager: the tendency to unintentionally compete with or micro-manage your team; the failure to properly prioritize your own time; the danger of applying improperly scaled, generalized measures to specific, local problems; the implications of poor communication and finally, what benefits you could be forfeiting from failing to look beyond your organization's SOPs, working instructions, and policies by not taking on the role of your team's "CEO". We're aware that these five pitfalls aren't the only potential dangers lurking in the shadows for line managers but based on our own experience and what we have witnessed over the years, these are recurring themes. Whether new to the role or more experienced, we believe that if a line manager develops an awareness of these situations, it will be empowering: Rather than being at their mercy and passively reacting to them, the manager can make more conscious, proactive decisions that will contribute to the team's satisfaction and the manager's own success as a leader.

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