

I'm an Experienced Programmer: Why Would I Want to be a Line Manager?

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ABSTRACT

The majority of statistical programmers enjoy writing code and wish to develop their careers within the field of programming. As a result, there is often a reluctance to consider moving into a line management role and companies often find it difficult to recruit full-time line managers with a good technical background. Programmers, on the other hand, would generally rather have a line manager who understands the technical aspects of the role.

This paper is aimed at experienced programmers who are keen to develop their career but may have previously thought that a line management role was not for them. The paper will discuss why programmers make good line managers and the benefits of moving into such a role. It will also give an overview of the different types of line management roles, how to develop the required skills and the potential responsibilities of such a role.

INTRODUCTION

Statistical programmers are generally data driven, detail orientated people who like working directly with clinical data. You may well identify with this and hence have been inclined to look at career progression as moving to a more senior programming role where you can continue to do hands on programming work and stay within your comfort zone. You will have some idea what a line manager role involves, both from your experience with your own manager and also from observing other managers in companies you have worked for. As a result, you may well see it as a role so different from your current skills and expertise that it's not a career move you feel qualified to do or even that you would want to pursue. In reality, many programmers make excellent line managers and not just because they have a good understanding of the role their direct reports do. The topics discussed below apply whether you are based in a pharma company or work for a clinical research organization.

THE ROLE OF A LINE MANAGER

According to the Cambridge dictionary the definition of a line manager is:

The person who is directly responsible for managing the work of someone else in a company or business, and who is one level above that person

The word 'managing' conjures up all sorts of things, such as having regular meetings with direct reports, sharing feedback with them and figuring out who should be promoted or even terminated. This all makes the role sound quite boring and unattractive as a career move to many people.

In reality, the line managers job involves much more than this and they are critical to the successful day to day operations of a Statistical Programming group. In the global environment that the majority of us currently work in, with staff located in time zones and even different continents, it is really important to have experienced managers who can provide leadership and support to the group and help coordinate and project manage the workload.

In her book 'The Making of a Manager' ¹, Julie Zhuo, candidly details her experiences working for Facebook, moving from a design engineer role into line management. She noted how her views of what a manager's job entails changed radically once she had been doing the job for over three years. She then realized that it encompasses not just the more boring administrative related tasks, but also building a team that works well together, supporting members in reaching their career goals and creating processes to get work done smoothly and efficiently.

Within a statistical programming group, managers can get involved in all sorts of additional activities such as recruitment, including defining recruitment strategies and hiring new talent into the group, taking an active part in bid defence meetings and working with budgets.

A key element of the line manager role is leadership. You can be a leader without being a line manager but if you are a line manager you need to actively demonstrate leadership. Managers need both managerial skills as well as leadership in order to meet targets and deadlines. Leadership is the particular skill of being able to guide and

influence other people¹. In his book, 'Leaders Eat Last'², Simon Sinek states that:

"What makes a good leader is that they eschew the spotlight in favour of spending time and energy to do what they need to do to support and protect their people"

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ROLE

Traditionally, moving into line management was seen as one of the only ways to grow your career and salary, but that is not necessarily the case anymore as there are often opportunities to develop further on the technical side. It is more important than ever to ensure that experienced programmers understand what a critical role line managers play and why it can be a good career move.

Line managers play a crucial role in staff retention as one of the main reasons why people resign from their job is because of their boss. They have the most immediate control over your staff job satisfaction and your sense of purpose and belonging. If that relationship fails, then you are unlikely to stay in your current role for long. As Richard Branson stated³:

"Take care of your employees and they will take care of your business. It's as simple as that".

Research from the University of California found that motivated employees were 31% more productive, had 37% higher sales, and were three times more creative than demotivated employees. They were also 87% less likely to quit, according to a Corporate Leadership Council study on over 50,000 people. Gallup research shows that a mind-boggling 70% of an employee's motivation is influenced by his or her manager. It's no wonder that employees don't leave jobs; they leave managers. (Travis Bradberry, world economic forum, 2016)⁴.

An employee's relationship with their manager sets the tone for their level of commitment to the organization's success. Disengaged employees can cost companies millions of dollars from lost productivity, damages from employee negligence and negative publicity due to poor customer service. Organizations know how important it is to have motivated, engaged employees, but most fail to hold managers accountable for making it happen (Brigitte Hyacinth – Loyal employees are your most valuable asset – LinkedIn)⁵

A line manager may not directly contribute to the programming deliverables for clinical study reports and electronic submissions, but they do play a critical role in supporting the programmers who do this work.

THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD LINE MANAGER

A good line manager understands that they are not perfect, but they can learn and adapt and they can help their people do the same. They also have to be confident in their own abilities such that they can support and help their direct reports without feeling threatened by them.

There is no right way to manage people, it's about finding your own style and the way you personally get results. Getting results is about developing confidence in your own style. You need to adapt your style, where necessary, to suit the different types of people you manage. According to the Great Place to Work, 2015 Population Survey the top ten qualities and competencies demonstrated by great managers are:

- Active listening
- Honesty
- Open communication
- Approachability
- Fairness/impartiality
- Trust
- Understanding
- Knowledge
- Helpfulness
- Recognition

Let's look in more detail at the top 5 qualities and see how these qualities are important for a line manager of statistical programmers.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening means fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker. In order to do this well, it involves building trust and establishing a good rapport with your direct report, demonstrating concern and paraphrasing to shown understanding. If a Programmer had a personal issue that was

directly affecting their work, they would hopefully feel comfortable to come and discuss it with their manager and between them work out what to do.

HONESTY

Honesty means speaking the truth and acting truthfully as well as being trustworthy, loyal, fair and sincere. An honest person doesn't do things that are morally wrong. If a line manager receives a complaint about a programmer, it's important that they investigate it thoroughly and fairly and that they then share detailed feedback with all parties involved.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Open communication occurs when all parties feel comfortable to express ideas to one another. The benefits of open communication include increased transparency and a positive impact on team building. By facilitating open communication, a manager allows their programmers to feel more engaged and understand that what they do matters to the success of the business. This is likely to result in increased productivity

APPROACHABILITY

Approachability is about being accessible, consciously breaking down perceived barriers, having appropriate body language, and using the right verbal communication and listening skills. A manager who is perceived to be approachable and hence makes time to have informal conversations is more likely to pick up on any underlying issue or concerns that a programmer may have (particularly when they are working remotely) and hence deal with it efficiently and effectively. Just because a direct report says they are 'fine' doesn't mean they are – it may just be easier to say that as they are reluctant to discuss an underlying issue. It's important to gain their trust so when you check if they really are 'fine' they will talk openly about what is really on their mind, so between you a resolution can be sought.

FAIRNESS/IMPARTIALITY

Fairness means treating employees justly and individually, depending on the specific situation and the employee's participation. This means using good judgment when making decisions regarding your employees. Impartiality is defined as being fair, equitable, unprejudiced, unbiased and objective. Programmers who believe that their line manager will show good judgement and treat them justly are more likely to respect them and look up to them and as a result be more productive and comfortable with their role in the business.

Within a statistical programming environment, as well as the people skills detailed above, line managers also need to be able to identify gaps in processes and improvements to increase efficiency, demonstrate good negotiation and time management skills. They also have to be well organized, be able to prioritize and also multi-task as the workload comes from a wider variety of different sources and there is often no clear prioritization.

WHY PROGRAMMERS MAKE GOOD LINE MANAGERS

One of the main advantages that line managers with a programming background have, is that they understand the role of a programmer and can talk from a position of authority as they understand the challenges programmers face. They can provide mentoring and support and can help negotiate timelines and push back where necessary given they are confident and knowledgeable about the tasks. Even if they can't directly help, they should know who programmers can go to for specific support and advice. Programmers who are (or have been) project leads have experience of managing the work of other programmers and understanding their strengths and weaknesses which are important skills for line managing staff. They will also have developed good communication, organizational and negotiation skills whilst overseeing projects, key skills needed by a line manager. Having a programming background also means that they can help out, if needed, providing technical or project leadership support, deputizing for their direct reports if required.

They are also well placed to demonstrate active listening and open communication (2 of the top qualities of a good line manager). By actively listening and having open communications with their direct reports they can act as a facilitator, guiding them to solve their own problems and ensuring the programmers learn for themselves the best solutions which will help them in the future. They have the technical skills to be able to help without necessarily being an expert.

Programmers are often seen as introverts and therefore they may feel that they are not extrovert enough to do line management. However, some of the greatest leaders of the world have been introverts (Mahatma Gandhi, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg). Susan Cain in 'TED talks – The Power of Introverts' ⁶ states that:

"There's zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas"

So why do introverts may good leaders? Well, firstly, they listen when others speak whereas extroverts tend to speak a lot when placed in a group. Introverts tend to quietly observe the group, listens to every person's contribution and will only speak when they have something meaningful to say. Also, people listen to them when they speak, their

contributions are always thoroughly thought out and well developed hence valuable to the group. They also work well in solitude and as a result they focus better. Bill Gates, one of the world's richest introverted men, explained how isolation, deep focus and internalization has helped him succeed in this extrovert-dominated world. You don't have to be the loudest and a highly social person to make a good leader.

Three of the other top ten qualities of good manager, are understanding, knowledge and helpfulness. Line managers who have previous programming experience are well placed to be able to demonstrate understanding and knowledge when programmers need their support. They are also likely to have the experience to be able to help with any technical or process issues and if they can't help directly will know who the programmer can go to for help.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LINE MANAGEMENT ROLES

Within a statistical programming group, line management can be either a full-time or part-time role, alongside other programming responsibilities. If it's a full-time role it frees up more time for providing line management support and supporting process improvements, but many programmers don't want to do this as they worry about losing their programming skills. It does have the advantage though of being able to dedicate more time to supporting and developing staff, which often gets de-prioritized if doing this role alongside a project role. Part-time roles usually combine line management with some programming responsibilities and/or project management. For example, it may be a case of managing more junior programmers working on a project that you are also project managing. The advantage of a part-time manager role is that you still have time to do some of the technical work and hence have first-hand experience of new tools and processes so you can directly help support and train your staff who are also using them.

The line management structure may be flat, with several line managers who each manage a large number of programmers of different levels of experience. Alternatively, it may be more of a hierarchical structure with junior programmers being managed by more senior programmers who are then managed by more senior line managers.

A line manager may manage a group of programmers working across a number of different projects or alternatively they may manage programmers working on specific projects. In CRO's this is often account aligned, so they manage a group of programmers working for a particular client, whereas in Pharma they may be therapeutic area (TA) aligned or assigned to manage all the programmers working on a large submission project. Being Client or TA aligned helps with standardization and specific training so all the staff, line managers included, become very familiar with the requirements of the Client/TA. The disadvantage is that it can lead to a disconnect between managers and programmers from different Client/TA's which can hinder general process improvements and training across the group.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING A LINE MANAGER

The role of a line manager can be very rewarding and fulfilling and offers the opportunity to really make a difference. As was mentioned earlier in the paper, managers have the most immediate control over staff job satisfaction and their sense of purpose and belonging and hence play a key role in staff retention. Companies spend a lot of money attracting skilled staff and line managers play a key role in ensuring they get up to speed quickly, feel appreciated and become key assets for the company. Loyalty, dedication and enthusiasm are key attributes that managers play a key part in developing. If you are passionate about getting new drugs to patients to help save lives, then as a line manager you can have a bigger stake in that than if you are a programmer on a specific project.

Line managers also have a very varied workload, being faced with new situations almost daily which challenge them and from which they can learn. Becoming a line manager gives you the chance to diversify and develop new skills outside of the traditional programming role such as getting involved with the recruitment of new programmers, learning to manage project budgets and dealing with poor performance issues. It can also help keep you up to date with the trends and challenges of being a programmer without actually having to do the hands-on work. It has the potential to give you a broader exposure than you would have if you were only undertaking project work. You can oversee a wide range of projects and process improvements without having to be involved at the "brass tacks" level. There is also the potential to work with lots of different clients, stakeholders and sponsors, building relationships for the future. As a leader within the group it also provides the opportunity for you to start new initiatives and develop tools and processes to make a positive difference to the group.

For those who are able to take on a part-time line management role, alongside project work there is the advantage of being able to still continue to develop and use your technical skills, as well as develop the new skills required of a good line manager. This gives the opportunity to have a varied and rewarding role that could ultimately result in promotion to a more senior role either on the technical or managerial side, allowing you to keep your career options open.

Becoming a line manager also offers up new opportunities for career growth. For those who for personal reasons do

not want a full-time job, line management may offer an opportunity for part-time work whilst still having a senior role. This is unlike an experienced programmer role which often involves meeting tight deadlines that means it needs to be a full-time role. Whilst for those who have career aspirations to ultimately take on a senior leadership role going into line management can act as a good stepping-stone, exposing you more to the strategic side of the business. The skills you learn and develop as a line manager are also transferrable (unlike programming skills) which gives the potential to move either into another department or even into another industry.

As a manager there is also a lot of satisfaction to be gained by building a high performing team and seeing your direct reports grow and develop within their role and then progress through their chosen career path. Within a Pharma company this could be building a team of programmers to support a submission project that may ultimately result in a faster and successful filing or in a CRO it may be building a team of programmers who can support a particular client and lead to further organic growth for the client.

Managers who have previously been programmers themselves know what it's like to start at the bottom as a junior programmer and some of the challenges they faced with their own career development. It can be very satisfying to be able to utilize the benefit of your own previous experience and any mistakes you may have made along the way to be able to help nurture and develop more junior staff. It can be very rewarding, seeing someone who was struggling come through it and ultimately be successful in their job or even be promoted into a more senior role.

CHALLENGES OF THE ROLE

Managers need to role model the organizations values and behaviours, there is nothing more demotivating for staff than to see leaders say one thing and do another. They have to actively engage in finding out what the organization is trying to achieve and their role in achieving it. They also need to manage their own energy and help manage the energy of those around you (Leadership Plain and Simple) ⁷. Noel Tichy, an American management consultant stated that:

"Simply put, a leader's job is to energise others. There is no time off when a leader isn't responsible for energizing others Every interaction a leader has is either going to positively energise those around them or negatively energise them"

In a line management role, you are not directly involved in the production of deliverables, unlike a programmer, which can make it hard to feel the same sense of achievement. Programmers are custodians of the clinical trial data and play a key role in testing the efficacy and safety of potential new medicine for patients and hence tend to be very delivery focused. But line managers play a key role in managing the workload and supporting the programmers, including defining new processes etc. and hence enabling the programmers to produce quality deliverables on time. Line management also seems to be one of the first things to give under pressure for time. It's easy to cancel line management meetings to allow more time to do project work, but its really important that they are prioritized.

Everyone is different and you need to adapt your management style according to the individual. The amount of time spent with direct reports can vary widely. Those competent, efficient programmers who are often a company's key asset tend to just get on with it and deliver with little management support needed. As a Line Manager you tend to spend more time with people who are struggling and have issues, whether personal or work related, which can be very taxing and time consuming. It's important though to make time for those talented individuals who don't necessary ask for help, to give them the opportunity to excel further, be more productive and potentially help you as a line manager. It can also be a challenge managing Programmers who are technically very strong but whose communication skills need improvement.

The working environment today has changed dramatically from how it was 10-15 years ago when most programmers were office based, with a line manager who was located in the same building as them. In that environment there were clear steps you could take to communicate regularly with your team including walking the floor, eating in the canteen and keeping your door open (if you were in a separate office) and asking people how they are doing. Nowadays, many people work in global teams and are home rather than office based, a situation that has been heightened by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, with workers unable to go to their usual office location and having to work at home. In this situation, it is too easy for a line manager to have only minimal contact with their direct reports and it is a real challenge for them to ensure they are staying in regular contact with them. But it is critical that they do so. Active listening is particularly difficult to do remotely as it involves interpreting a person's body language as well as what they actually say, but by using video calls, via Microsoft TEAMS, Skype or other means, it can help improve communications.

DECIDING IF YOU WOULD BE SUITED FOR A LINE MANAGEMENT ROLE

Great managers are made not born, but there is one caveat to that which is that you have to enjoy the day to day management role and want to do it. In her book 'The Making of a Manager' ¹ Julie Zhuo proposes 3 questions that

those considering a line management role should ask themselves to see if they would be suited to the role:

1. Do I find it more motivating to achieve a particular outcome or to play a specific role?

As a manager you are judged on your team's outcomes, so your job is to do whatever most helps them succeed. If your team is lacking key skills' then you need to spend your time training or hiring. If someone is creating problems for others you need to get them to stop. So, the role involves being comfortable in delegating responsibility to others and trusting them to deliver (having ensured that they have adequate training).

2. Do I like talking with people?

A major line management responsibility is ensuring that the individuals you support are able to thrive. This means that listening to and talking with them are a core part of the job. If you relish working in solitude and don't particularly enjoy being disturbed by other people, then this is probably not the role for you.

3. Can I provide stability for an emotionally challenging situation?

Because management is all about people, and each person brings his or her own unique experiences, motivations, hopes, fears and quirks to the table, managers face their fair share of hard conversations. If you're the friend whom others lean on in difficult times, who might be described as empathetic and undramatic, who can be counted on to defuse rather than escalate tensions, then you'll be better equipped to deal with the range of emotionally charged scenarios that meet any manager's path

KEY LEARNING FOR NEW LINE MANAGERS

PROVIDING SUPPORT

It's critical that as a line manager you support your staff. Employees need to be given the freedom to try new things and possibly to fail. This is the only way they will grow into excellent performers. When employees feel protected by their leaders their normal reaction is to trust and cooperate which ultimately improves performance, as discussed by Simon Sinek in his Ted Talk 'Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe' ⁸. They also need to be treated as individuals and you will need to adapt your style accordingly. Some programmers need constant reassurance and support with lots of regular meetings whilst others are happy to work independently and require minimal support.

GIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback needs to be given on an ongoing basis, so that the manager deals fairly and clearly with one behavior at a time, so the person receiving it can hear it. Don't wait until its annual appraisal time to give feedback, there should be no major surprises at the appraisal meeting. Giving positive feedback as soon as it is received helps motivate people to deliver and timely constructive or negative feedback enables staff to act swiftly upon it.

We all have a universal tendency for negative events and emotions to affect us more strongly than positive ones. It's often the case that we are devastated by a word of criticism but unmoved by a shower of praise. In their book, 'The Power of Bad and How to Overcome It' ⁹, the authors John Tierney and Roy Baumeister recommend using this knowledge to help deliver negative feedback. It's best to start the conversation with some positive reinforcement, letting the employee know they have done some good things and then ease into the criticism with the sorts of questions used by doctors to deliver bad news, such as 'How do you think things are going?'. Most people will probably recognize some area for improvement. You can then confirm the employee's judgement and then expand the discussion to offer your analysis of the problem. You can then use the power of bad to your advantage. As soon as the brain receives criticism it kicks into high gear, alert for information to deal with the threat. Now you can start accentuating the positives, focusing on future achievements (how to help them succeed in the coming year) rather than past mistakes.

MAKE TIME FOR YOUR DIRECT REPORTS

The most important resources for any business, is its people. Hence, it's really important for line managers to spend time with their direct reports. In many organizations the managers spend most of their time catching people doing things wrong, but in order to help people reach their full potential it's much better to catch them doing something right. This is best achieved by having regular and frequent contact with their direct reports, observing what they are doing and seeing how they are progressing, providing support and guidance when required. Also keep detailed notes from your meetings with your direct reports. These not only act as a useful refresher before subsequent meetings but they will serve as a useful reference for the future, particularly when it comes to doing yearly appraisals or if you need to deal with any performance issues.

In the book 'The New One Minute Manager' ¹⁰ Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson propose that managers do three things with their direct reports, all of which can be done with minimal time.

The best minute I spend is the one I invest in people

1. **Once minute Goal setting**
Make sure staff know what is expected of them. Keep goals and objectives very clear, and quickly review them on a frequent basis
2. **One Minute Praising**
Help your staff to reach their full potential by praising people as soon as possible, being clear about what they did right and telling them you have confidence in them and support their success
3. **One Minute Reprimands**
Reprimand and reassure. Be open about the fact that you will let them know if they do the wrong thing. Be specific about what they did wrong then remind them that it is about their performance in this instance not about them as a person or the valuable contribution they make to the business.

The overall message of the book is to be clear with your staff whether you are setting goals, praising or reprimanding. Keep the communication simple so that your staff members can easily digest the information you are giving them. When we can clearly understand and process information it is so much easier to put it into practice.

BEING AN EFFECTIVE LEADER

You don't need a certain IQ or job title to be a leader, but you do need to have an ambition, dream or goal for your team, and it's got to matter to you.

In his book 'Leadership Plain and Simple' ⁷, Steve Radcliffe details 3 basic aspects to leading that you need to grasp that he gives the acronym FED:

1. **Future**
Leading always starts with the future. Powerful and effective leaders are guided by the future they want, and the leader is strongest when that future is powerfully connected to what he or she cares about. So, as a line manager within a statistical programming group, it's important that you fully understand and buy-into what the future goals of the group are and are committed to making them happen
2. **Engage**
If you want the help of others to create that future, then you need to engage them. You need to interact with others in a way that has them wanting to build the future with you. So, this is not a case of just telling programmers what to do or presenting information to them but rather it involves a 2-way interaction and calls for qualities like integrity, openness and consistency.
3. **Deliver**
This is about making it happen. You need to get the best out of yourself and others in order to deliver results. To excel in deliver, you first must have done a great job in future and engage.

As a leader you need to be clear on what goals you want to be achieved and then be able to support your direct reports to ensure they can deliver against these goals. As Nelson Mandela said:

"Vision without Action is merely a dream. Action without Vision is merely passing time. Vision with Action can change the world"

DEVELOPING THE REQUIRED SKILLS

The best way to learn is on the job, by interacting with your reports and learning through experience.

Remember that great managers are made not born, so no one is going to expect you to have all the skills you need before you start the role. It's useful to have another line manager who you admire that can mentor you or at least that you can observe how they operate. As a line manager you will also have a manager yourself who you can ask advice from as well as feedback on how you are performing in your new role. So, seek out those who can help you become an effective line manager. As Mark Twain stated:

"Keep away from people who belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great"

Most large companies will have useful training material available in topics such as people management, leadership and managing virtual teams and may even have specific courses aimed at new managers that it would be well worth attending. Alternatively, there is plenty of material available on-line, examples being the Manager Tools 'Basics' podcasts available at <https://www.manager-tools.com/manager-tools-basics> and the Ted talks on management and leadership which has influential videos from expert speakers at www.ted.com/talks.

The recommended reading section below gives details of three books that I would recommend for new line managers and information from each of them has been presented in this paper.

CONCLUSION

The role of a line manager is critical to any business, including statistical programming groups and it can be a very rewarding and fulfilling role to do. As this paper had detailed, there are lots of challenges to the role but also lots of

benefits too and although it is a very different role to that of a statistical programmer, it also required many of the same skills. If, having read this paper you are still not sure that line management is the right path for you, then there are things you can do to get a better feel for it, such as mentoring other programmers, getting involved in the recruitment of new programmers and talking to recently appointed line managers. You may also have the opportunity to taken on line management of a small number of direct reports alongside your programming role, if this is available to you then this will be an ideal chance to really get to know whether the role is for you or not. If you are considering a future career move and are undecided whether to continue in a technical programming role or move into line management then take advantage of the fact that you have a choice and decide which path is better suited to your strengths and interests.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Yvonne Moores, Frans Massyn and Rob Horton for their input to this paper and the associated presentation slides and also for diligently reviewing them. Also, thanks to, Steve McNally, Yehor Shakh, Dries Becker, Allison Arnold and Anupama Shashidhara who shared their experiences of line management and Matthew Lord who helped develop the presentation slides. This paper would also not have been possible without the inspiration and support of my late husband Dr Ian Peers, who never stopped believing in me.

RECOMMENDED READING

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