

Building for the future: Strategies for nurturing and developing new line managers

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning from programming to line management presents a unique journey for each programmer embarking on this path and comes with its own set of challenges and insights. This paper leverages the knowledge and guidance of experienced leaders and mentors to propose strategies to ensure new line managers feel supported effectively across the different focus areas. Beyond making use of conventional training methods, mentoring/coaching programs and knowledge-sharing forums, the paper also explores the utilization of tools and data that would empower new managers to develop, while balancing programming and line management. Through the implementation of these strategic approaches, both new line managers and their development teams can effectively tackle daily challenges while laying the groundwork for fostering the next generation of leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from a technical role to a management role is a fascinating yet challenging journey. It is crucial to first recognize the skills already possessed that will support the new role. These might include technical expertise, problem-solving abilities, and any leadership experiences from the past. Leveraging these skills can provide a strong foundation when stepping into management.

People management is a core aspect of the new role. This involves engaging, coaching, and motivating team members, each of whom may have different personalities and working styles. Effective and open communication is key to managing these dynamics successfully. Additionally, being confident in the new role and actively participating in decision-making processes that impact the wider group are essential components of effective management.

New managers require training and support to develop the necessary competencies. This includes learning how to give effective feedback, conduct performance reviews, and continuously develop their skills. Providing tools and platforms for ongoing growth is important to help new managers thrive.

Managing a global team adds another layer of complexity, as it involves understanding and adhering to various local laws and HR policies. Maintaining ongoing communication with HR and being familiar with these policies ensures that specific rules can be applied correctly and effectively.

Overall, the journey from a technical role to a management role is rewarding but requires a thoughtful approach to developing new skills and leveraging existing ones. With the right support and mindset, this transition can be navigated successfully.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Talented and highly skilled programmers often find that their most appreciated skills are not as useful when stepping into a line manager role. The abilities that made them successful in their previous roles do not necessarily translate to success in management. Sharing feedback, especially constructive feedback, can be uncomfortable for new managers, particularly when they are responsible for their peers. These challenges are common and understandable.

Being a new manager is difficult, and it is crucial to be clear about the challenges they should expect. As upper-level managers, we have the responsibility to provide clarity on these expected challenges. To face these challenges, new managers need support in the form of training and mentoring, as well as tools that can help them in their new roles. The support offered should be tailored to the specific challenges they face, and upper-level managers should work with new managers to develop the appropriate mindset for the role.

However, developing new managers goes beyond one-off training sessions. New managers need continuous learning opportunities, such as mentoring, participating in programs dedicated to managers, and receiving regular feedback. This ongoing support is essential for their growth and success in their new roles.

EXPECTATIONS OF CHALLENGES

Sometimes, highly successful statistical programmers are promoted to line manager roles due to their exceptional performance. However, these skilled programmers often struggle to adjust to their new responsibilities. Surprisingly, the ability to develop perfect datasets or tables does not necessarily help when it comes to people management. As they transition into their new roles, they encounter a variety of challenges and new experiences, such as:

- Motivating, engaging, coaching others
- Communicate with line reports and upper manager effectively.
- Provide effective feedback.
- Maintain a good technical knowledge while also managing the team.
- Being involved in decision making affecting the wider team.
- Employee performance reviews
- Recruitment
- Managing peers
- Being knowledgeable about local laws and HR policies

The list of challenges for new managers is extensive. Due to the diverse nature of these challenges and the need for new managers to adapt and develop new skills, upper-level managers must clearly outline potential difficulties and anticipate them.

Identify all the skills that are transferable to the new role. While an expert programmer may not have led people, they have led studies. Therefore, leveraging study-leading abilities and related competencies can ease the transition. As a programming lead, one must possess excellent communication, organizational, and time management skills, the ability to prioritize, manage unexpected situations, and technical expertise. Adapt these developed skills to people management:

- **Technical expertise:** Enables new managers to offer technical support to their team and accurately evaluate their technical performance during periodic reviews.
- **Communication skills:** Developed as a study lead, these skills help in adapting to different personalities, maintaining effective communication with both team members and upper-level managers.
- **Organizational skills:** Previously used in studies, these skills can be redirected towards managing the various tasks a line manager faces (e.g., setting and following up on objectives, maintaining regular one-on-one meetings, staying on top of daily/weekly/monthly tasks).
- **Prioritization and problem-solving:** The ability to prioritize and handle unforeseen situations is crucial for supporting and developing team members.

Engaging, motivating, and coaching people are new aspects of the line manager role. New managers need to take the time to get to know their direct reports. This won't happen overnight, but by listening to their reports, understanding their goals, motivations, and struggles, new managers will gather the information needed to support their professional development and create tailored solutions.

An important aspect of the role is respecting local laws and HR processes. While it can be challenging to stay on top of everything, the organizational skills developed in previous roles can be a great asset. New managers should rely on HR for guidance and be encouraged to seek support when needed.

SUPPORT

Upper-level managers need to anticipate the challenges new managers will face and provide tailored support. New managers must understand the mindset required for their role and receive relevant training and tools to progress successfully. Employees stepping into a management position for the first time should recognize that there is a learning curve. They need to take the time to learn about each of their reports to provide effective management.

- **Training materials:** Collaborate with the HR Department to provide new managers with a variety of training materials accessible at any time. These should include resources on managing remote employees, handling difficult employees, conducting performance reviews, using HR tools, and setting relevant objectives. At Aixial Group, the HR Department has developed a range of recorded trainings that give new managers a strong start. Additionally, a company-wide management forum allows managers to share experiences.
- **Management checklist:** Creating a simple checklist can be highly beneficial, ensuring that no steps are missed. One effective example is the new starter checklist, which continues to provide support when welcoming new team members.
- **Mentoring:** Assign a mentor to new managers or provide mentoring yourself as an upper-level manager. Having a mentor helps new managers feel supported, motivated, and confident. Schedule regular mentoring sessions and gather feedback from both the mentor and mentee. Guide new managers to develop the right behavior and mindset, helping them overcome potential anxiety or insecurity about managing peers.

- **Shared management drive:** At Aixial Group, we benefit from a shared space where relevant information for managers is stored. Having all necessary information in one place reduces time and frustration when searching for resources. Ensure that stored information is kept up-to-date and changes are communicated within the management group.
- **Recruitment:** Recruitment can be challenging for new managers, often due to a lack of confidence. At Aixial Group Biostatistics, we have created an interview script for recruiting Biostatisticians and Statistical Programmers. This script ensures that all relevant information is discussed and provides support for managers, ensuring each candidate is evaluated consistently. Determine what is important for your interview process and build a script around those criteria.
- **Experience sheet:** An experience sheet offers an overview of the team's experience. Update it periodically (e.g., once a year) so that both new and experienced managers can see its utility.
- **Sharing effective feedback:** New managers may know how to share feedback, but the effectiveness of their feedback is crucial. One preferred method is the STAR¹/AR² method (DDI, n.d.). Present this method to new managers and encourage them to practice and use it. The STAR method (DDI, n.d.) is not only useful for sharing effective feedback but also for formulating answers to questions. Encourage new managers to leverage their technical skills to add credibility when providing feedback.
- **Development tracker:** At Aixial Group Biostatistics, we have created a tracker to show the progress of newly hired employees in identified development areas. This simple tool helps managers make decisions on work allocation and use it for performance reviews. As a visual tracker, it provides a summary of an employee's development at a glance.

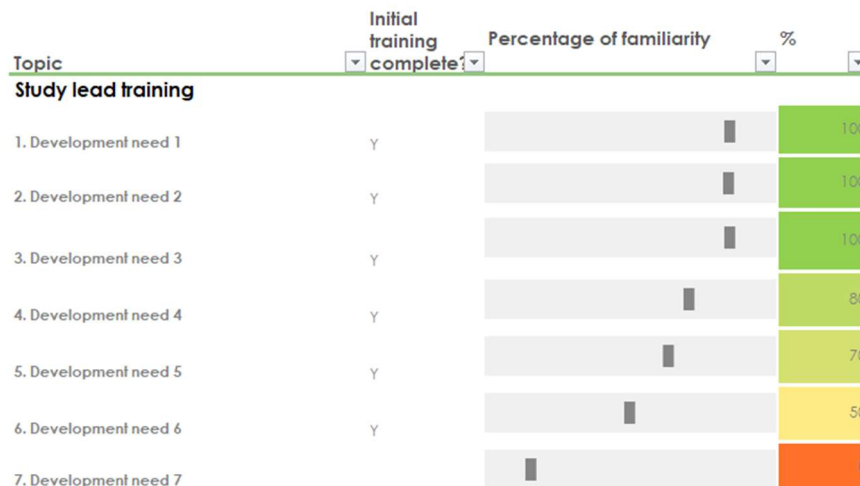


Figure 1 - Development Tracker

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Once the initial training plan is completed, the progression of the new manager continues. It's important to remember that developing a new manager goes beyond a one-off training session. To cultivate reliable managers and future leaders for your company, continuous support and ongoing learning are essential.

Supported and continuous learning enables new managers to foster a positive work environment, focus on effective and periodic feedback cycles, prioritize employee well-being, and play a pivotal role in your company's success.

Continuous and sustained learning can be achieved through:

- Initiating a forum for managers within your company.
- Providing accessible training materials.
- Offering continuous mentoring and coaching.
- Conducting regular follow-ups.
- Sharing regular feedback.
- Debriefing situations with new managers to learn from experiences.
- Allowing new managers to learn from mistakes.

¹ STAR=Situation, Task, Action, Result

² AR=Alternative Result

With continuous learning and support, new managers will not only develop into leaders but also find their own management style and manage employees authentically.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have examined various strategies for nurturing and developing new line managers, emphasizing their crucial role in shaping the future of organizations.

Key takeaways include:

- Providing individual attention and support empowers new managers to step into their roles with confidence, resulting in:
- Enhanced managerial efficiency
- Improved employee support and well-being
- Increased engagement
- A positive learning environment

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