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# Transform Your Technical Expertise into Leadership

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**Summary.** People often get promoted into leadership roles because of technical or functional skills and expertise that enable them to perform well in their technical domain, but that don't translate into effective leadership. They then struggle to inspire, coach, co-create, and... [more](#)

In most organizations, technical experts who perform well will eventually be asked to lead a team and to deliver results through that team. This is because advancing in one's career typically

means moving into management, even if your area of expertise is unrelated to managing people. But being in management requires an entirely new set of skills. If you don't learn these skills, you'll likely end up underperforming and feeling frustrated.

Take my coaching client Amir\*, the head of supply-chain management for an international humanitarian organization. He was at his wits' end. Six months into his new role as manager, he had identified opportunities to increase efficiency and transparency and developed a strategy and plan for implementing changes. But he couldn't seem to get on the same page with Tatiana\*, a key team leader. While Amir believes he clearly explained the changes he wanted her to make, Tatiana ignored his directives and continued to run things the same way. This struggle consumed his time and energy and held back the rollout of his strategy.

With two decades of relevant experience and a sharp analytical mind, Amir is well qualified for his job. But his mastery at solving technical challenges contrasts sharply with the consternation he sometimes experiences in the face of people management challenges. In this, Amir is like hundreds of other leaders with whom I've worked. Here's the underlying problem, which I've observed over 20 years of coaching and training leaders:

1. People get promoted into leadership roles because of technical or functional skills and expertise that enable them to perform well in their technical domain, but that don't translate into effective leadership. They struggle to inspire, coach, co-create, and build commitment to a shared vision and to strengthen ownership and accountability in their teams.
2. Many organizations fall short in filling this gap with the training and coaching needed to develop technical or functional experts into skilled leaders. They also fail to prioritize effective leadership in their reward systems and culture. Without clearly communicating what effective leadership looks like in practice, valuing it, and providing

- structured opportunities to get better at it, they contribute to the gap between leaders' actual and potential effectiveness.
3. Managers often operate under misguided assumptions about leadership and don't appreciate their own contribution to the difficulties they experience. As a result, they often misdiagnose the situation, go astray in their search for solutions, and default to ineffective behaviors. They fail to learn and grow as leaders.
  4. Ineffective leadership behaviors erode performance and well-being for organizations and their members.

Amir's initial analysis of the problem with his team leader was this: Tatiana resists implementing changes he has introduced, fails to hold her team members accountable for implementing changes, doesn't take initiative, is overly reliant on Amir for direction to move forward, and thwarts his progress on strategic work by interrupting him frequently throughout the workday for guidance. To solve these problems, he took the following actions: he started checking up on Tatiana's and her team members' performance, approached her team members directly for information he knows they have rather than going through her, specified certain times of the day when she can contact him, and noted his criticisms in her annual performance review. Although these steps made sense to Amir at the time, this was the wrong approach.

Instead of producing the outcomes he hoped for, his actions only aggravated the situation. Tatiana understandably felt undermined, disrespected, and micromanaged. She began circling the wagons more tightly around her team to protect them from what she perceived as Amir's interference. Instead of exhibiting more initiative and independence, she avoided taking on responsibility out of fear that she would do something that displeased Amir. Deeply shaken by the negative performance review after a consistent record of positive reviews under previous leaders, and concerned that it might signal hostile intent and possibly damage her career, she filed a complaint against

him. As a result, Amir felt frustrated and stuck, Tatiana was profoundly stressed, and each party concluded that the other person was impossible to work with.

Where does a leader like Amir go from here to recover from their missteps and improve their leadership? How can you solve leadership challenges and increase your own effectiveness as a leader, even if your organization isn't helping you to do so? By committing to ongoing self-directed leadership development. This involves identifying what you want to be able to do differently as a leader and why this development matters to you, broadening the perspective you're applying to your leadership challenges, seeking input, and experimenting with new behaviors.

One of the factors that separates people who lead from those who simply occupy leadership positions is the wholehearted embrace of continuous learning and growth. The best leaders I know make it a practice to interrogate themselves, assume that they always have more to learn, seek feedback, and structure their own learning experiences. Here's how to do so.

**First, identify a leadership competency you'd like to build.** If, like Amir, you're starting with a problem you want to solve, ask yourself what you need to be able to do better as a leader in order to solve it. Shifting your focus from the external problem that's bothering you to the internal development you need to solve it is a crucial step. In applying the same types of thinking to leadership challenges that they've successfully applied to technical problems, technical experts often look to "fix" others and fail to recognize their own role in the problem. Unless you develop insight into how your patterns of thinking and reacting interact with those of your employees, you will find yourself in the same situation again and again. Your analysis of the leadership challenges you face will be incomplete and your strategies to resolve them won't work.

Although Amir began by wanting to change Tatiana's attitudes and behavior, I asked him to consider what success would look like and what he needed to be able to do more effectively in order to create the outcomes he desired. He articulated his desire to develop a better working relationship with her — one based on trust, mutual understanding, and shared vision — that would enable them to move forward together on the change initiatives. He also wanted to be less emotionally reactive and to avoid acting out of anger and frustration.

To strengthen your motivation to learn and develop, think about what's meaningful to you about accomplishing your goal and why you want to do it now. For Amir, having respectful relationships with people at work is fundamental to his values. He recognizes that his performance and well-being — and even how happy he is at home — are tied to the quality of his work relationships. He is committed to having a positive impact on his department and improving the quality of service it provides. He hopes to move to a more senior position in the next two years and understands that his career advancement depends on being able to lead change with the support of his people.

**Second, reflect and seek some input to better understand the challenge you're facing — just as you do when trying to solve a technical problem.** To help sharpen your analysis of the problem, you almost invariably will benefit from considering others' perspectives and soliciting feedback. Amir recognizes his own tendency to be impatient and easily aggravated. Through conversation with Tatiana, however, he developed a more complete view of their interpersonal dynamic. For instance, while his intention in lowering her performance ratings and identifying areas for improvement in her annual review was to motivate her to change her behavior, he had not realized that conveying his displeasure via her performance review rather than in conversation felt like a surprise attack from a dangerous adversary, rather than a challenge from a trusted superior. Instead of motivating her, this approach demoralized her.

Leadership challenges are fundamentally interpersonal in nature; thus, their solutions are as well. By inviting Tatiana to share how she experienced their working relationship and listening with empathy and an open mind, Amir created an opening that allowed him to share his own experience in a way that she was able to hear without becoming defensive. Through their conversations, Amir and Tatiana not only increased their mutual understanding, but also achieved consensus on their shared desire and intention to develop a better working relationship.

**Third, use your increased understanding of the situation and your own role in it to identify specific behaviors to change or implement.** It's also helpful to seek suggestions from people who know you for actions you can take, a practice that executive coach Marshall Goldsmith calls feedforward (so named because it consists of suggestions you can try in the future rather than information on past behavior). Amir asked Tatiana what she thought would help improve their working relationship; she replied that she wanted more support. To translate the concept of support into behaviors he could practice, Amir asked her for examples of what support would look like on a day-to-day basis. She requested a daily check-in to align on progress, priorities, concerns, and challenges. Putting this into practice helped to build Tatiana's trust in Amir and give her the clarity and confidence to move forward in her work independently, just as Amir had hoped. In turn, the improved trust, communication, and shared understanding reduced Amir's frustration and helped him feel more capable of managing this key relationship.

By engaging in this kind of self-directed learning, leaders not only improve their skills; they also serve as role models for learning, openness, and taking accountability for interpersonal impact. Communicating what you're trying to do differently and seeking feedback or feedforward helps generate support for your improvement efforts, which can enhance their impact. With this approach, you are much more likely to succeed than if you attempt to solve leadership problems by imposing a solution on

someone else.

If you'd like to become an expert in leading others as you are in finding technical solutions, the best place to start is by understanding that the pathway to progress lies in shifting things inside yourself first. By learning to see yourself as part of a system of relationships and experimenting with ways to shift the dynamics of the whole system in a more productive and collaborative direction, you can transcend the limitations of trying to fix other people that can confound technical experts.

This paves the way for leadership and career success.

*\* Names have been changed.*

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