

# What are the Common Mistakes of New Managers?

*Adapted from "The Wall Street Journal Guide to Management" by Alan Murray, published by Harper Business.*

What are the common mistakes of new managers? Good management has been thoroughly studied and is widely understood, but it is still more honored in its breach than in its practice. Most new managers, in particular, get it wrong.

Harvard Business School Professor Linda Hill studies those who become managers for the first time, and writes perceptively about some of the common myths and misperceptions that lead to mistakes in their early days. Among them:

**Myth 1:** Managers wield significant authority.

New managers were often standouts in their previous jobs, and as such, enjoyed a fair degree of independence and autonomy of action. With a new job and title, they expect to feel more authority.

Well, surprise! Most new managers report they are shocked by how constrained they feel.

"They are enmeshed in a web of relationships," writes Ms. Hill in a 2007 Harvard Business article called "Becoming the Boss." "Not only with subordinates, but also with bosses, peers, and others inside and outside the organization, all of whom make relentless and often conflicting demands on them. The resulting daily routine is pressured, hectic and fragmented."

She quotes one new leader saying: "Becoming a manager is not about becoming a boss. It's about becoming a hostage."

Until new managers give up on the myth of authority, and recognize the need to negotiate their way through a web of interdependencies, they are likely to face frustration and failure.

**Myth 2:** Authority flows from the manager's position.

New managers frequently think that what authority they have is conferred by their title. But in fact, writes Ms. Hill, “new managers soon learn that when direct reports are told to do something, they don’t necessarily respond. In fact, the more talented the subordinate, the less likely she is to simply follow orders.”

Over time, good managers find they must earn their subordinates’ respect and trust in order to exercise significant authority. They need to demonstrate to subordinates their own character, their competence, and their ability to get things done before those subordinates are likely to follow their lead.

**Myth 3:** Managers must control their direct reports.

New managers, insecure in their roles, often seek absolute compliance to orders from their subordinates, particularly in their early days.

But what they learn over time is that “compliance” is not the same as “commitment.”

“If people aren’t committed, they don’t take the initiative,” writes Ms. Hill. “And if subordinates aren’t taking the initiative, the manager can’t delegate effectively.

The challenge for managers is to nurture a strong sense of common commitment to shared goals – rather than one of blind allegiance to the managers’ dictates.

**Myth 4:** Managers must focus on forging good individual relationships.

Ms. Hill says managers need to focus not on friendship, but on building a team.

“When new managers focus solely on one-on-one relationships, they neglect a fundamental aspect of effective leadership: harness the collective power of the group to improve individual performance and commitment,” she writes. “By shaping team culture – the group’s norms and values – a leader can unleash the problem-solving prowess of the diverse talents that make up the team.”

**Myth 5:** The manager’s job is to ensure things run smoothly.

Keeping an operation running smoothly is a difficult task, and can absorb all of a new manager’s time and energy. But if that’s all the manager does, writes Ms. Hill, he or she is making a big mistake.

“New managers also need to realize they are responsible for recommending and initiating changes that will enhance their groups’ performance,” she writes. “Often – and it comes as a surprise to most – this means challenging organizational processes or structures that exist above and beyond their area of formal authority.

Only when they understand this part of the job will they begin to address seriously their leadership responsibilities.”

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