

FROM FRIEND TO BOSS: MAKING THE TRANSITION TO LEADERSHIP

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I recently ran into Sam, a supervisor who attended one of my year-long leadership programs. Sam was going into his second year of his first supervisory position. His promotion moved him from the department where he had worked for over 15 years to a different department where he supervises a crew of 8. His crew are guys that he's known for a long time and while they didn't work side-by-side, they knew each other through plant functions, hanging out during lunch or fishing or hunting outside of work.

Moving from friend to boss was an awkward transition for him. He had a number of concerns going in to this new role. For example, he wondered if his friends would accept him in his new leadership role. "They only know me as Sam," he explained. "How am I going to get the credibility I need to be the boss?" "And," he continued, "what am I going to do when things go wrong and I have to correct or even discipline an employee? I worry that they won't take me seriously."

This is a fairly common situation for supervisors who are promoted up the ranks in their organizations. There's a little bit of the "kid brother/kid sister" syndrome that exists. You know, once the kid brother, always the kid brother? Supervisors who have longevity within their organizations have to employ some specific strategies to become viewed as a competent and effective supervisor. When you think about it, though, these are actually strategies that are "best practices" for anyone stepping into a leadership role.

Understanding the Role of the Supervisor

One of the first things that Sam and I discussed was his concept of what it means to be "the boss." So often, new supervisors have the idea that "being the boss" means "being in charge" and getting to be "in control." In fact, the primary role of the supervisor is the opposite:



Two of the most important tools for supervisors are delegation and communication

the role of a supervisor is to be a resource for your staff. Your employees are the ones doing the work and your role is to facilitate their success. If you are busy wondering if your staff revere you, respect you or fear you, your priorities are misplaced. Spend your energy focusing on *helping your staff* be successful. That will earn you credibility.

A word of caution here: *helping your staff* is not the same as doing the work for them. For many new supervisors, it's hard to go from technical expert to supervisor. In fact, you probably like to do your work very much! But let's face it: it will be down-right impossible for you to do the work of your crew AND your work as a supervisor. Your best strategy is to learn how to delegate and assign work to others.

To effectively delegate, think of the concept of "triage." To "triage" is to determine the priority of an issue or condition. The term is originally French in origin and refers to the process of separating, sifting or selecting. When your staff come to you with issues, questions or projects they can't handle, it's your role to assess the severity of the situation and separate these issues into different categories. It's not your role to simply solve the problems of your employees or do the work they say they can't do. Instead, assess the issues that are brought to you.

For example, is the issue something that your employee could handle but chooses not to? If so, ask questions. *What have they tried already? What else could they try?* Resist the urge to do the task yourself and instead give the task right back to them to complete. Encourage that employee to try different avenues and report back.

What if the issue or situation is something your employee could handle, but lacks the skill or knowledge to do so? Again, resist the urge to do the task yourself. New supervisors are likely to “do the task” because it feels easier, quicker or less risky. Avoid this trap. Your role is to help develop those skills in your employee so they *can* accomplish the task in the future with minimal help or supervision. In this case your role is to teach, coach, guide or assist your employee. You may want the employee to check back with you more frequently, or you may have to show them more than once. But it’s their job to do, not yours.

Finally, what if the issue or situation is something that carries a level of risk if not completed correctly or in a timely manner? If this is the case, then you may need to coach or guide more closely or work *in concert with the employee*. But remember to try not to take on the task yourself. Set up regular meetings, require follow-up on tasks, but avoid doing the task yourself if at all possible. Your employees will begin to see that you are building *their* capabilities rather than building yourself up. It’s a subtle but very important difference which separates the most effective bosses from the least effective bosses.

Have a Business Reason

The second priority for new supervisors is to learn to frame issues in business terms. You should never have expectations for your employees “just because you say so.” If you want things done “your way,” you will quickly lose the respect of your staff. Consider this: as a supervisor, you are an agent of the organization, and the work that gets done through your employees is for the good of the organization. When you assign work to your crew, or when you have to change processes or systems or outcomes, you should always have a valid business reason to do so. Before you hold a conversation with your crew or an individual employee, take time to clearly outline the business reasons behind your decisions or concerns. Your crew may not like or agree with your decision, but at least they can clearly understand the rationale behind your decisions. By doing this, you will better situate yourself as a decision maker who is fair and focused.

This particular strategy is one of the best ways to demonstrate yourself as a business leader to your staff (who once viewed you as a peer). *Business outcomes* should be your focus – not personalities. You don’t want to be viewed as someone who makes decisions on a whim or who is flexing his or her power and authority. Instead, be ready to explain the good business reasons why deadlines are in place, or why changes must be made. Do some work behind the scenes evaluating why certain procedures matter to your business practices and communicate those to your staff. Try to get away from “because I said so,” or “I don’t know; top management said to do this.” Do your research and always make decisions based on *business reasons*. When you start to do this, your new employees will start to view you as a fair and impartial leader who takes the business side of the workplace seriously.

It’s a tough position being a new supervisor. Over the past year and a half, Sam has had many trials and challenges in his new role. But because his decisions and communications have always focused on *good business reasons*, he’s begun to earn the admiration of his employees. He’s had to learn to “let go” and delegate tasks and authority to his staff. “There’s nothing worse than having staff who are bored stiff while I’m buried under piles of work,” Sam came to realize. “I figured out the hard way that my role is to let my crew be a high-performing team who can get our work done.”

Conclusion

Using these two strategies – delegating, and communicating in business terms – will help to situate you as a supervisor who has his crew’s best interests at heart. It’s a tricky balance, but with practice you’ll be able to move successfully from friend to boss.

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