

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

# Why the Most Productive People Don't Always Make the Best Managers

by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman

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When a company needs a supervisor for a team, senior leaders often anoint the team's most productive performer. Some of these stars succeed in their new role as manager; many others do not. And when they fail, they tend to leave the organization, costing the company double: Not only

has the team lost its new manager, but it's also lost the best individual contributor. And the failure can be personally costly for the new manager, causing them to doubt their skills, smarts, and future career path. Everyone loses.

Why, then, do some fail while others succeed?

In another article, we explained the seven behaviors of the most productive people, based on an analysis of 7,000 workers. The behaviors were: setting stretch goals, showing consistency, having knowledge and technical expertise, driving for results, anticipating and solving problems, taking initiative, and being collaborative.

These competencies all leverage *individual* skills and *individual* effectiveness. They are valued skills and make people more productive, but all except for the last one (collaboration) focus on the individual rather than the team. When we went back to our data, the skills that our analysis identified as making a great manager are much more *other*-focused:

- **Being open to feedback and personal change.** A key skill for new managers is the willingness to ask for and act on feedback from others. They seek to be more self-aware. They are on a continuing quest to get better.
- **Supporting others' development.** All leaders, whether they are supervisors or managers, need to be concerned about developing others. While individual contributors can focus on their own development, great managers take pride in helping others learn. They know how to give actionable feedback.
- **Being open to innovation.** The person who focuses on productivity often has found a workable process, and they strive to make that process work as efficiently as possible. Leaders, on the other hand, recognize that innovation often isn't linear or particularly efficient. An inspiring leader is open to creativity and understands that it can take time.
- **Communicating well.** One of the most critical skills for managers is their ability to present their ideas to others in an interesting and engaging manner. A certain amount of communication is required for the highly productive individual contributor, but communication is not the central core of their effectiveness.
- **Having good interpersonal skills.** This is a *requirement* for effective managers. Emotional intelligence has become seen as perhaps *the* essential leadership skill. Although highly productive individuals are not loners, hermits, or curmudgeons, being highly productive often does not require a person to have excellent interpersonal skills.

- **Supporting organizational changes.** While highly productive individuals can be relatively self-centered, leaders and managers must place the organization above themselves.

When we further analyzed our data, we found that many of the most productive individuals were significantly *less* effective on these skills. Let's be clear, these were not *negatively* correlated with productivity; they just didn't go hand in hand with being highly productive. Some highly productive individuals possessed these traits and behaviors, and having these traits didn't diminish their productivity.

But this helps explain why some highly productive people go on to be very successful managers and why others don't. While the best leaders are highly productive people, the most highly productive people don't always gravitate toward leading others.

Nearly one-quarter (23%) of the leaders who are in the top quartile on productivity are below the top quartile on these six leadership-oriented skills. So, the odds are that one out of four times a person is promoted to a leadership position because of their outstanding productivity, they will end up being a less effective leader than expected. If the highly productive person possesses technical expertise that is specific and acquired over a long period of time, it is tempting to hope the individual will quickly acquire the needed leadership skills shortly after being put into a new role. Sadly, it only happens part of the time.

Managers need to be aware that the skills that make individual contributors effective and highly productive are not the only skills they will need to be effective managers. We are convinced that the best time for individual contributors to be learning these managerial skills is when they are still an individual contributor.

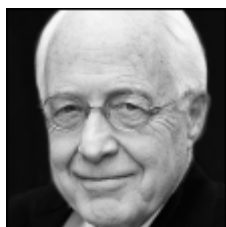
Some organizations are much more adept at identifying those individuals who will be successful managers. These organizations tend to get a jump on developing managerial skill in these high-potential individuals, training them before they're promoted.

Why start early? After all, most people who end up being ineffective supervisors are not *terrible* at the skills listed above, and those who recommend them for promotion believe that those skills can be further developed once they're in a managerial role. The problem is that developing these skills

takes time and effort, and organizations typically want to see immediate positive results. New managers tend to be overwhelmed with their new responsibilities and often rely on the skills that made them successful individual contributors, rather than the skills needed to manage others. The time to help high-potential individuals develop these skills is before you promote them, not after.

This should come as a wake-up call to the many organizations that put off any leadership development efforts until someone is promoted to a supervisory position. There's no reason to wait; after all, when individual contributors improve these leadership skills, they will become more effective individual contributors. The time and money spent investing in individual contributors' leadership development will help both those who are promoted and those who are not.

The bottom line: Start your leadership development efforts sooner. Then when you promote your best individual contributors, you can be more certain that they'll become your best managers.



**Jack Zenger** is the CEO of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article “Making Yourself Indispensable” and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Jack at [twitter.com/jhzenger](https://twitter.com/jhzenger).



**Joseph Folkman** is the president of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article “Making Yourself Indispensable” and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Joe at [twitter.com/joefolkman](https://twitter.com/joefolkman).

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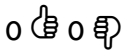
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