

An aerial photograph of the Tokyo skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of soft orange, pink, and light blue. The city is densely packed with buildings of various heights. In the center, the Tokyo Tower stands out prominently with its distinctive red and white lattice structure. The overall scene is a panoramic view of a major metropolitan area.

Downfalls of First Time Managers

Tony Curl

Downfalls of First Time Managers

There is not a manager or leader out there, that doesn't have a story to tell about the lessons they learned in their first roles of managing people and teams.

I know the leader I am today, is far removed from the leader I was five years ago, let alone 30 years ago when my journey began. The mistakes I made, the ladder rungs that broke under my weight, the human collateral, are just some of the areas that taught me to find a better way. While a better way may have been a long time coming or a long time being found, the better way usually came about due to a personal growth journey. In other words, if I didn't go looking for a better way, the better way may not have been found.

In other words, listen to what your mum used to say:

“Learn from your mistakes”

Based on many conversations, my journey would sit around the middle of the pack. Some leaders learnt early, and climbed the ladder to success and achieved amazing heights, while others never recovered from the mistakes and returned to the cocooned comfort of a lesser role and subsequently settling for a less challenging life. I learnt, being stubborn, the hard way and as a new better way dawned, was when I achieved traction with people and teams. When I achieved traction with people and teams, I built better results.

Why did it take so long?

Downfalls of First Time Managers

My first company had mentors and role models and promotions were based on technical skills and the ability to invest a lot of time into the job. You worked hard, long hours to get noticed and get ahead. I was never taught “leadership” as such and was expected to lead people naturally. I was taught how to counsel and discipline, but not to inspire and motivate. When you are expected to be a natural leader, you will inspire some of your team with your skillset and competence, but with all the positive natural skills, came some really ugly ones and that is the challenge first time managers face.

Many first time leaders are promoted into their first roles, based on competence or on a technical skill base. They are good at what they do, but don't know how to lead and manage people. On reflection, and based on personal experiences as well as ongoing conversations with many clients, I have created this list of downfalls for first time managers.

List of Downfalls for First Time Managers

1. Rely on Title

Please don't think that people will do what you ask, simply because you have a title. You may be the boss, but leadership is earned. Positional leadership is the toughest leadership there is, yet many stay here rooted in the belief that the people you manage are poor when in reality, the answer lies in the mirror. Positional leaders rely on checklists, systems and processes and almost continually follow-up. It's hard work. One thing is clear, is that leaders that rely only on title, work hard, burn out and never maximise the potential of their team. In fact their results are usually average or below, and seriously, what's the point of that.

Downfalls of First Time Managers

2. Needing to be liked

The need to be liked is part of our basic physiology and need for social connection. It's important that you build genuine rapport with your team. It's nice to be liked. It's more important to be respected. Don't confuse the need for connection with the need for friendship. Dealing with tough situations are all part of being a manager, and when dealing with that with the emotional pull of friendship, will always cause pain.

3. Don't assume the skill set of your team.

While you may have been promoted because of your technical brilliance, don't assume that your team are similar. Assuming your team are effective as you were, is a recipe for disaster. Get to know them, their strengths and weaknesses and work alongside them to achieve best results.

4. Do the job myself.

The polar opposite of what I just spoke about. Our first attempts to influence may fail, or the team are not skilled enough to achieve the standards of the job as expected by the new manager, so we give up and just do the job ourselves. The resulting mess, and overworked manager stressed to the max, and a team that may as well be playing cards in the lunchroom

Downfalls of First Time Managers

5. Treat everyone the same

I often see managers talk about their ability to treat everyone the same. They wear it as a badge of honour. I treat everyone the same. In fairness, what they are probably meaning to say is they have a consistent and fair approach. Treating everyone the same is just another example of what not to do. Everyone is an individual, and everyone is different when it comes to being motivated and engaged. Using the same approach, or treating everyone equally, ensures that you will be missing the magic that happens when you truly connect and motivate.

6. Play favourites

Again, another polar opposite. Playing favourites is a dangerous pastime. Playing favourites is all about turning a blind eye to your most effective or skilled team members, when they do something bad. Or it can be about creating a clique in which some are in, and most are out. Playing favourites because you like someone, or they share common bonds on favourite sports or sporting teams is just dumb. Team division is just not team building

7. Assume that all is well when no-one is providing feedback.

Never assume that just because your boss isn't providing you feedback that everything is ok. No feedback keeps you where you are. What got you in the position, will not get you to the next stage. The facts behind feedback is that the people getting the most feedback are usually poor performers. The next lot are the better performing team members. Average doesn't cut it, and if you aren't chasing your constructive feedback expect to stay a long time in the role you are in.

So how do you, as a first time manager, wade your way through the downfalls of the appointment. What are my tips to succeed.

Downfalls of First Time Managers

- Aim for outstanding. Don't aim to fly under the radar. Follow the belief you are outstanding and match that with your actions to deliver.
- Listen, Listen, and Listen. Nothing shows people they are respected and valued by the capacity for someone to listen to them. First stage of you building your team, is to listen to what they say.
- Communicate, Communicate, And Communicate. Don't assume, don't just talk, don't create noise. Communicate expectations, standards, vision and results. Coach your team ask questions and then listen. Be clear, be concise.
- Set your boundaries. It is important for you to understand your team and to build genuine rapport, but as the manager you set the boundaries. While some company functions will be necessary, a weekly nightclub or pub session is probably out of order.
- Prioritise Development. Both of yourself and your team. Statistics show us that most leaders don't receive any leadership training for their first ten years. The most important aspect of getting your job done is leadership, and the averages indicate you will not get it. I still remember picking up my first John Maxwell Leadership book from a bargain bin. My journey started that day. When you keep developing yourself, you will see the way forward with your team. When you don't accept the status quo, neither will they.

Leading as a positional leader is the toughest there is. Yet many stay in that world, thinking there is no alternatives. There are plenty of alternatives in which you can grow. Become aware of them, look for them and always remember.

When you want a career you need to show capability, not in the current role you have, but in the one you are aiming for. Identify the skillset you need to do it, then actively work to develop it. It's only the ones that perform at their current role, develop their team for success and have the potential in the role above that move ahead sustainably throughout a career. Most others, don't"

Downfalls of First Time Managers

Tony Curl grows leaders and grows businesses. He raises the leadership capacity of business owners, corporate executives and start-up entrepreneurs and gives them the awareness to work on their own growth as a major function of their business growth. Many first time leaders feel neglected in terms of being developed as leaders and Tony has developed a foundational leadership program that helps first time leaders learn and grow. He can be contacted via the Think and Grow Website at www.tagb.com.au or by email tony@tagb.com.au