

Leadership Transitions

Research: Becoming a Manager Doesn't Always Feel Like a Step Up

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March 09, 2021



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Summary. Being promoted from the frontlines to a managerial position may seem like a step up. But for some, this new role can be disenchanting, resulting in good employees leaving their positions. To better understand who might experience

“managerial blues,” researchers... [more](#)

Becoming a manager is typically considered a positive step in someone’s career. Moving into such a prestigious and potentially fulfilling position is seen as an accomplishment, a clear sign that an organization trusts the employee to handle more responsibility. There is, however, evidence that some people experience “managerial blues,” or disenchantment with their managerial job, viewing it as less meaningful than their previous one. Such disenchantment can easily push people to exit the managerial ranks not long after joining them, creating potentially a huge loss for the employee’s career and the organization.

So, how can organizations predict who might experience managerial blues? Our research, based on interviews with newly promoted supervisors working for the Paris subway system, offers some answers.

In total, we interviewed 58 people made up of two groups: half had been subway drivers and the other half had been station agents (mostly selling tickets to travelers). In our inductive coding of the interview transcripts, we found that only the subway drivers reported managerial blues, suggesting that expectations that people carry from their past jobs into their new ones might offer a key to understanding these distinctions.

In the case of the former subway drivers, we learned that they dealt with life-and-death situations in their (old) jobs for years, consistently feeling a great responsibility for the lives of others. One told us, “On one subway train there are approximately 600 to 800 passengers so we are responsible for all the passengers, for the safety, for everything that happens.” Drivers said, they needed to be “very

attentive” and “careful” not to make mistakes for fear of “constantly putting lives at risks.” Their sense of personal responsibility was particularly heightened during critical incidents, such as suicides or when passengers jumped in front of trains. (Almost all drivers could recall at least one suicide in their careers.) These events remained ingrained in drivers for years. As one explained, “These are moments that leave a mark on you...We will never forget them.”

But it was not only dealing with life and death that shaped their expectations of responsibility. Driving was also a job they had to do alone, which meant rarely being able to rely on colleagues for help or to share the blame with anybody if something went wrong. As an interviewee noted about his time as a driver, “If there are criticisms to be made there is only one person [to blame]... I’m responsible for what I do.”

When they were offered a managerial position, much like their former station agent counterparts, these drivers recalled they were excited to “evolve professionally,” “make more money,” and “learn something new.” As one person explained, he saw it as “challenge” and accepted thinking “it could be enriching.” He, like the other managers, began overseeing 25 to 50 employees on a given subway line and was responsible for any issues that arose on it. All managers underwent a one-year training to develop their managerial skills and had a pretty good idea of what the new job entailed. By the time we spoke with them, they had been on the job for around four years — ample time to adjust to their new roles. But the former drivers and former agents experienced similar managerial jobs very differently.

More than two-thirds of former subway drivers indicated that they had either already applied to or were hoping to change positions in the near future. Although they saw some positive aspects in their promotion, such as enjoying the contact and communication with

their direct reports — and even felt they were good at managing — they also experienced disenchantment. Their managerial jobs were not as meaningful as their past ones. As one former driver expressed, “Really, we do nothing that matters.” Although they did not want to go back to driving subways, they wanted to move to positions in the company where they had “the impression that we are actually doing something important” and could “feel like they were making a difference.” This was quite the contrast to the former station agents we spoke with — the vast majority were content and fulfilled in their managerial jobs.

Our analysis found that the former drivers’ managerial blues was largely explained by how they experienced and understood personal responsibility. They had spent on average 12 years in a job where their actions directly impacted passengers’ lives, with no one else to blame or count on when something went wrong. When these former drivers were promoted, they no longer dealt with life-and-death situations on a daily basis and rarely worked alone. They acknowledged that they had more autonomy in decision-making and were in charge of a wider scope of activities as managers — certainly adding to their sense of managerial responsibility. But overall, this paled in comparison to their expectations. To them, becoming a manager was both a step up and a step down in their career ladder.

Contrast that with the former station agents, who did not deal with life and death situations, rarely worked alone in their past jobs, and did not bring with them similar expectations of what responsibility felt like. Thus, they did not experience a sense of loss. In fact, being in charge of their direct reports made former agents feel like they “climbed up a step” in terms of personal responsibility, as they now were in charge of the careers and well-being of others. This was quite

the opposite of former drivers, who viewed this same managerial duty as less significant, comparing it to supervising children during recess.

Managerial blues is not only an issue for the subway workers we interviewed. Past studies have noted that some doctors in Norway and in the United Kingdom see their managerial roles as “marginal” and lacking “gratification” compared to their past ones on the frontlines. In addition, police officers have been shown to value “real work” (i.e., enforcing the law while on patrol) over any other tasks and are therefore prime candidates for experiencing the blues.

We also suspect the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic may exacerbate feelings of responsibility and autonomy. Thousands of nurses, doctors, home care attendants, and correctional officers have had to deal with the deadly consequences of the pandemic, often alone. Years from now, or perhaps even more rapidly, a select few of them will get promoted to managerial ranks. Given their past experiences, we suspect that many will likely develop the managerial blues.

If stepping up translates for some managers as a feeling of stepping down, better understanding and preparing for this transition may help avoid the potentially costly consequences of disenchantment. This could mean rethinking the design of managerial jobs for those coming from lines of work impacting others’ lives, particularly if the work is done independently. For instance, a nurse promoted to a managerial role could retain a few patients; this later set-up might prove more effective at buffering a feeling of loss.

Overall, when becoming a manager can lead to unfulfilled expectations of responsibility, employers need to think of new ways to manage this transition and ensure that those selected fully thrive in their managerial roles. While it is important to know the tangible

elements such as the skills, knowledge, and social networks that people carry with them from their past jobs, the more subjective elements, such as expectations, can also have a meaningful impact on their managerial careers.

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