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Become an Effective Software Engineering Manager

How to Be the Leader Your Development Team Needs

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If it scares you, it might be a good thing to try.

➤ *Seth Godin*

A New Adventure

You hold the ID card out in front of you so you can read it. Fortunately they've spelled your name correctly. Shame about the photograph, though. You return it to your pocket. You've arrived. It's day one.

"I'm so glad you're here!" says an approaching figure with her arm extended to shake your hand. She does so vigorously. It's Lisa, your new boss.

Following your manager across the open-plan office, you look around and take in the sights and sounds of your new workplace. As you pass the kitchen, you hear the frothing of the milk wand on the espresso machine and the chatter of your new colleagues. A ping-pong ball ricochets off of the glass dividing wall. A man whizzes past on a scooter. This is quite different from your old workplace.

A whiteboard in the middle of the office is surrounded by a red velvet rope. Lisa turns around to face it. You look puzzled. It's crammed full of impenetrable mathematics. The bottom right contains a collection of signatures. Lisa points at it.

"This is the algorithm that gave birth to this company. The signatures are from our founders. Who'd have thought that such a beautiful series of calculations could create a unicorn?"

You nod and smile in acknowledgment, pretending to understand what it means.

Lisa continues walking toward the side of the office that has floor-to-ceiling windows. You can see her making a beeline toward an empty desk. She gestures toward your chair.

"Have a seat," she says. "I've got to run to a meeting, but send me a DM if you need anything. I'll pop over again later."

"Sure, thanks!" you reply. Lisa dashes off behind one of the whiteboards. Unlike the one in the center of the office, it's not covered in complex mathematical symbols. Instead, it has an incredibly bad drawing of a horse with some text underneath. You squint to read it.

"Hello new *neigh*-bor!"

Oh dear. You sit down. Your chair emits an almighty squeak. You move your arm. Another giant squeak. Well, that's going to get old fast.

Hitting the spacebar, your computer comes to life. You type your username and temporary password into the login prompt and hit return. You have two unread emails. Number one:

Hey,

I forgot to tell you my DM handle. It's @lisag. Shout if you need anything. And I'm sorry about that horse drawing. Glad to have you on board!

Lisa

The next message appears to be automated.

Welcome!

We are proud to have you as part of our company. Please click the link below in order to check your personal details are correct.

Click here *to check your details.*

An automated message from PeopleWare HR Solutions. Do not reply.

You click the link and are taken to a page to review your profile. Your eyes are drawn to the box denoting your role.

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Job title: Engineering Manager
Team: Infrastructure
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Hello, and welcome to your new job as a manager. It's great to have you here. We're going to get straight to business. It's your first week on your new job. How should you get started? What should you be doing? Help is at hand. We're going to give you some structure to make your first week a breeze.

Being a manager is a difficult job and those that become managers often have little practical guidance. Where's the API documentation for humans? Many

engineers enter their first job having studied or practiced their skills for many years, either via education or self-directed learning. However, most new managers have never managed anyone before and often find themselves overwhelmed and unsure of how to do their job. This can be immensely stressful. I wonder how many potentially fantastic managers never continued down that path because they were unable to get the support that they needed. No more, I say. No more.

That's why this book is here. Throughout your journey, you're going to learn all of the essential skills you'll need to be the manager that you wish *you* had. This book is designed to incrementally teach you the practical, hands-on skills that you will need day-to-day, through to bigger-picture topics such as pressure, diversity, and career development.

We'll begin by getting you oriented during your first week as a manager, showing you how to get to know your team and your workplace, and give you the tools you need to manage yourself. Then we'll show you how to communicate effectively, how to do one-to-one meetings, consider how different people are motivated, then learn how to run performance reviews, hiring processes, letting people go, and consider how you can build visibility and influence.

Later, we'll consider stress, workplace politics, your own mental health, departmental best practice, career development, diversity, and inclusion. We'll conclude by looking at startups and planning out the future that you wish to have in your career.

However, let's get back to your first week. You're going to:

- Meet your team and your manager.
- Book in the meetings that you need.
- Create your snapshot of the team.
- Create an action list of items to focus on next.

Are you ready? Here we go!

Beginning Your First Week

Congratulations on your new role! You may have not made the transition into management in real life yet, but in this book you have, so well done. You are the star of this story.

Do you remember your first day in your current job? Perhaps you turned up at the office to discover that everything that you needed to know was documented in easy-to-find places, that the organization chart was up to date, that there was an informative onboarding process, and that building your

development environment was an absolute breeze. Oh, wait. No, this is the real world. Instead, regardless of whether you joined the company to write Java, do QA, or to be a Scrum master, it's likely that you spent your first week muddling through, feeling like an impostor, and worrying whether you're making a good first impression with all of your new colleagues. Don't worry. It happens to us all.

Joining a new organization as a manager, or even being promoted from within your existing company, can be daunting. Joining as an engineer is equally scary, but at least you can ask for some bugs to fix while working out how the development environment is put together. You can find *something* productive to do straight away. When you join as a manager, what should you actually do? The initial feeling of pride that you experienced when accepting the job offer may quickly fade and be replaced with a bevy of questions:

- How should I get off on the right foot with my team?
- How is my relationship with others going to change now that I'm the boss?
- Why do I keep forgetting my pass when I visit the bathroom?
- What does the company expect me to do with my time?
- How am I meant to feel productive?
- What is my output?
- What am I actually responsible for?
- How is my performance measured?
- How on earth can I stop this chair squeaking?

Impostor Syndrome

Often, high-achieving individuals may experience an internal contradiction about their ability, resulting in a feeling like they are a fraud or a failure. This phenomenon is known as impostor syndrome. Individuals feel like they are faking it and that they will soon get found out.

If you feel this way as a new manager, then don't worry. It's normal. Know that your caution is because you want to do a good job for the benefit of others. You were given this role in the first place because you were qualified for it. Remember that. You will feel more confident with time. We'll look at impostor syndrome and its effects in *Humans Are Hard*.

Depending on the amount of preparation that you've had, you may have already come up with a plan for how you're going to spend your time. But for many new managers, it's common to feel like you're just making your job up

as you go along, and more importantly, that you're somehow not qualified to do it in the first place. You may have had a number of managers over the course of your career that each demonstrated different styles and approaches: maybe you had a quiet, sage manager who was better at structured written communication when compared to face-to-face exchanges; maybe you had a bouncing entrepreneurial manager who motivated valiantly but was scattershot in their support, or maybe you had a manager who was consistently never there at all (believe me, I've heard stories). What should you do?

Don't worry. This book is here to help you. We'll begin by bringing some structure to your first week. Everything that you do in this chapter will feed into the activities that you'll learn about and master as the book progresses, but for now, just follow along with an open mind.

Creating a Snapshot

If you're coming from a programming background, then you may be familiar with the concept of *snapshots*: they're the state of a system at a given time. They are often used to allow a program to quickly restore from backup.

Since you're a management application that has just been deployed into production, you're going to need to restore from backup. But—oh no!—there isn't a backup to restore from. So you're going to need to create one. You're going to create a snapshot for yourself. This snapshot will be the basis on which you will begin your work with the team.

With time, you'll be able to form your own independent view of your team. You'll know how they are performing, the direction of their work in the future, and the individuals themselves. However, since you've only just started, you're going to have to do some investigative work. At any given time, there are three views of the team that you can compare and contrast. They can be used to discover areas you can work on right away.

Consider the following three areas.
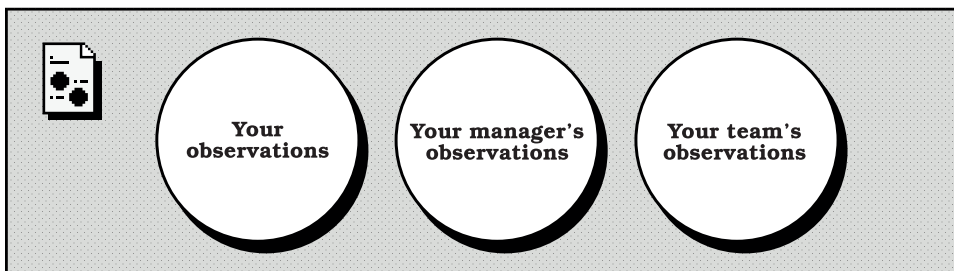
These are:

- *Your own observations.* What you see day in, day out when working with your team. However, you've only just started, so you'll need to rely on others while you form your own view.

- *Your manager's observations.* Your manager will be interested in your performance, which fundamentally is your team's performance. What do they think about them and why?

- *Your team's observations.* This actually consists of the individual views of each member of the team, but we'll group them into one for simplicity. How do they feel about themselves and their colleagues? How do they feel as part of the wider company?

Your initial task is to work out what those views are. Once you've done so, then you can compare them against each other to discover where your work can begin.

Ready? Excellent. Let's get going.