

# HBR Blog Network



## 5 Tips for New Team Leaders

by Jeanne DeWitt | 10:00 AM September 22, 2014

I've been a new manager five times in my career: once as a first-time manager at Google going from being a teammate to leading peers, three times as I was promoted within Google, and most recently as the new Chief Revenue Officer for UberConference (<https://www.uberconference.com/>), a teleconferencing startup in San Francisco. What I've found is that success out of the gate is normally tied to being truly open to learning, communicating openly and honestly, and ultimately being prepared to take action when you know where the team needs to head.

To that end, here are the key things I've learned along the way:

**Over-communicate.** When someone new joins a team, it generally creates some nervousness. Everyone wants to know what you're going to change and where you're going to take the direction of the team. Be as open and transparent about what you're thinking as quickly as possible. You can start by outlining your 30-day plan. While you may not have any opinions specific to the business yet, you can tell people what you want to learn about and evaluate. Additionally, the more transparent you can be, the more comfortable people will feel being similarly candid with you. You may not know your strategy, but you can certainly talk about your values, priorities, and observations.

**Ask questions.** I make a rule that about 50 percent of the words coming out of my mouth should end with a question mark in the first 30 days. I'm also explicit with people that all I plan to do is ask questions in the first month (which helps me hold myself accountable to that!). When I first became a manager, I was introduced to the concept of being a "knower" versus a "learner." A knower assumes she has the answers, whereas a learner will admit that she doesn't — even if she has significant experience. Being genuinely excited about the opportunity to learn and understand what's going on within the company builds credibility, and generally makes you more approachable.

**Figure out what people *really* want to do.** In one of my new roles at Google, I managed a woman who was in the sales organization as a Demand Management representative. After chatting with her about her career aspirations and what got her most excited to get out of bed in the morning, I realized that she had real untapped talent on both the creative and analytical fronts. I didn't really have a role for her yet, but knew she was being underutilized. I shifted her to being my "analyst," which basically meant someone who would work with me on whatever big project I was tackling. She ended up being one of the top performers in our organization, and now is part of a global SWAT team that helps fundamentally rethink key go-to-market tactics. You probably have a lot of people just like her in your organization. Meet with all of your direct reports for at least an hour within your first week. Ask them about what they really enjoy doing and what they aspire to be doing in the next 2–3 years. It's often the case that the role the individual is in today isn't necessarily fully utilizing their skills or motivating them to be their absolute best. Quick changes in role definition can turn a solid player into a rockstar.

**Get your hands dirty.** Spend time doing the work that your team actually does. Not only does this help establish you as someone who leads by example, but you also learn first-hand about all of the different challenges that people experience every day. At UberConference, we have every new member of the team spend a week as a guest member of our customer support team. As a result of those experiences, everyone is far more connected to our customers, and changes to the product, tools, and messaging are implemented immediately because that first-hand experience creates passion. If you can understand what it's fundamentally like to be on the front lines, you have unique perspective when making larger strategic decisions and communicating them to your team.

**Be decisive.** Once you have a good lay of the land, explicitly lay out your vision and then plan to start moving toward it. People feel less unrest when they understand the bigger picture and can see where things are heading. In my experience, this is often the hardest thing to do when you're new, and also the hardest to recover from if you don't do it. At Google, I relocated to Australia to run our Asia Pacific sales organization. I got this opportunity despite knowing nothing about the region and never having been a sales representative — or having managed a sales team, for that matter. I immediately saw what I perceived to be workflow and sales skill issues. Rather than calling them out and putting a plan in place to address them, I kept trying to slowly mold things into a different state. I kept second-guessing myself and worrying that the sales team wouldn't get behind the changes that I knew needed to happen. About six months into the job, a couple of the top reps came to me, pointed out that they knew what I really wanted, and told me they wished that I had just laid out the changes I wanted and asked people to up their game.

Being new is rarely easy, but if you've taken the time to be a learner and to get to know your team, chances are they will follow you when you step up and lead.