

# Key lessons

“If you aren’t in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?” –T.S. Eliot

## Introduction

Some of your first 90 days as a manager will be exhilarating. Others will be excruciating. And they will all be worth it, because they’ll lead up to something much bigger: a work experience that offers the opportunity for continued learning, insights and accomplishments.

Focusing on this long-term view from the get-go will help you stay grounded. Consider the findings from researcher John Gabarro, who studied new managers at various types of companies. Gabarro’s work shows that a manager’s first few months are typically about acclimating and trying out some early changes. After the six-month mark, things slow a bit so that teams can catch their breath. And then the manager, whose expertise has increased significantly, often implements deeper and more effective improvements in the 12- to 18-month time frame, which leads to a final stage of fine-tuning in the second and third years.

*In other words, you need to acknowledge the importance of this crucial transitional phase, but also pace yourself. In your first 90 days, focus on what is doable, as well as what is most likely to set you up for long-term success.*

## Six essential lessons

### 1. You’re completely starting over.

Management requires a completely different skill set from what you may have done as an individual contributor. That’s why it’s so important to [make the mental leap to manager](#).

### 2. Everyone will be watching.

Have you ever stepped out onto a stage in front of an auditorium full of people? It’s pretty intimidating. And while your office doesn’t look like a stage, you’re facing something similar as a new manager.

Everything you say — and don’t say — will send a message. Your new team members will be listening nervously and closely, because what you say and do will shape the trajectory of their careers. Your new boss will be wondering if you’ll live up to your potential. Other managers will be gauging their progress relative to yours. You need to be ready when the curtain goes up.

### 3. Don’t rock the boat — at least not yet.

It will be tempting to start making big changes and decisions as soon as you step into your new management role. Not so fast. Even if you were promoted from within and understand the culture and politics of your company, *you don’t know what you don’t know yet*. Visit with your new team members, your boss, your peers from other teams, your customers and partners. Ask good questions. Listen more than you talk.

Second-guessing management is a favorite exercise of the troops, but now that you are part of the management team, you must take time to assess the lay of the land, rather than following your previously held assumptions.” *Most experts agree that you should take at least a week, and up to four, to gather feedback and information before making*

*any significant decisions or changes.*

#### **4. Learn the law.**

New managers aren't always trained about the legalities of their positions. Are you familiar with discrimination laws? Do you know what you can do and say — and what you can't? You'd better. Managers can be held personally liable for their actions, as well as their inactions. It's not enough to be a good person or have common sense (although that never hurts). You need to know both federal and state laws, especially when it comes to hiring and firing people.

Ask your HR department or manager for training, and don't let it slide if you're unable to get answers that way. There are several online courses and books on the topic. If ever there was a time for CYA, it's now! Whether or not your company provides adequate instruction, you can still be sued, and your company will not be obligated to help defend you.

#### **5. Manage up, down and laterally.**

New managers understandably tend to focus on managing their direct reports. But it's just as important to manage up (i.e., [manage your boss](#)) and manage laterally (i.e., manage other teams and peer managers). You and your team are not an island.

Many times, managers tend to see things only from their own micro-perspective. Understand your team's mission on a grander scale and how what you're doing fits into the company's growth. What teams should your team have strong relationships with? Who's your group's advocate, and which group thinks your team is unnecessary? Widen your perspective. A successful manager has good field vision.

#### **6. Balance confidence with humility.**

Management is tough — tougher than many people realize. While you have every right to feel confident (after all, your company and its leaders have shown they are confident in you!), don't fool yourself: This isn't supposed to be easy.

So how should you carry yourself? Don't hesitate to ask questions or admit when you've made a mistake. You may discover, as many of the best managers have, that this approach [builds credibility](#) and trust more securely than acting as if you know everything.

Next: [What does a manager do?](#)