

Mastering the Transition from Technician to Technical Manager

By Bill Handschin, Ph. D., L.P.

If you talk to any information technology (IT) or research and development (R&D) professional, they'll smile when you say this: The complaint from business is, "The work is always late, and it's always over budget."

When you ask a technology company's executives, managers or human resources vice president, "Would you like to get more work done on time and on budget?" "Would you like to start seeing results instead of hearing excuses?" The answer is always a resounding, "Yes!"

So where is the disconnect? That's a loaded question, and it often comes down to this: A technician was hired or promoted into a supervisory or managerial position and the decision was based on performance in his or her current technical position. What follows is a painful struggle to figure out how to operate in the business world, which is *totally* different than the technological world.

At every level of management, new positions have different skill and ability requirements. To move from one level to the next is not just more of the same, it is a qualitative difference. In technical fields, this gap is even larger – the knowledge, skills, abilities and interest requirements differ greatly from the role of individual contributor to the role of manager. Along with the differences in skills is a very different culture.

The risk that technology companies face is very real: It is extremely expensive to make the wrong hiring decision. If you hire the wrong person into a management role, you will not only disrupt the work, it will take you several months to realize it was the wrong hire, and several more months to replace the manager. It can easily cost you an amount between a year-and-a-half to four years of the ineffective manager's salary to correct the mistake. Thoughtful assessment, selection and training can save your company a hefty sum in the long run.

This white paper will examine the challenges of hiring or promoting a technically trained person to supervise or manage a technical department, and discuss the assessment, coaching and developmental strategies to ensure their success.

Qualitative transition, not quantitative

I like to use this analogy: When sales people are promoted into sales management, they are still in the same culture – the sales culture. When technical people are promoted to management, they must move from the technical culture to the very different – and contrasting – business culture. They must now operate in two different worlds – the technical world and the business world – and successfully negotiate the

inevitable and ongoing conflicts between the two cultures. In *The Leadership Pipeline*¹, authors Charan, Drotter and Noel discuss the transition from one level of management to the next as a passage. “Each passage represents a major change in job requirements that translates to new skill requirements, new time horizons and applications, and new work values.”

The first passage, they say, is from managing self to managing others. “Though this might seem like an easy, natural leadership passage, it’s often one where people trip. The highest-performing people, especially, are reluctant to change; they want to keep doing the activities that made them successful. As a result, people make the job transition from individual contributor to manager without making a behavioral or value-based transition. In effect, they become managers without accepting the requirements.”

The nature of technicians

First, it’s important to gain an understanding of what makes technical people tick. Individuals who pursue technical degrees and careers tend to have a common set of natural likes, dislikes, interests and modes of operation. These are stated well in the book *Developing Managerial Skills in Engineers and Scientists*² by Michael Badawy. I’ve summarized the list as follows:

The nature of scientists and engineers as a group

- **Bias toward objective measurement**
Technically trained people tend to be objective rather than subjective. They are trained to always seek the correct, factual answer.
- **Paralysis by analysis**
The perspective of the technically trained person is that there is a right answer and his or her obligation is to find it, no matter how long it takes or how much it costs.
- **Fear of loss of intimate contact with the field**
People get into a technical field because they like it and have a strong personal interest. They commit to years of expensive training in order to become a professional in the field in which they’re practicing, and they strive to stay current in all the new and interesting topics; that’s where their identity is.
- **Technologists as introverts**
People tend to go into technology because they’re better at dealing with things or ideas rather than with people.
- **Poor delegators**
Technical people are used to working alone. They have their own little world and their own defined tasks that they enjoy doing, and in which they are proficient. They aren’t used to delegating work to others.
- **Inadequate interpersonal skills**
Technologists don’t like to engage in the day-to-day negotiating and compromising that organizations depend on to get things done. They talk about it as “politics” and generally want nothing to do with it.

Managers are the opposite

The challenge for technical people is that the skills and abilities needed to be successful as a manager are virtually the exact opposite. Let’s look at the flip side of each of the bullet points above.

¹ Charan, Ram, Strotter, Stephen, & Noel, James, 2001. *The Leadership Pipeline: How to build the leadership-powered company*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN 0-7879-5172-2

² Badawy, Michael K. 1995. *Developing Managerial Skills in Engineers and Scientists; Succeeding as a technical manager*, 2nd Ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 0-471-28634-6

- **Intuition**
Effective managers must often make decisions without all the facts at hand. They're capable of strong intuitive judgments.
- **Decision making**
In business, you need to keep things moving along and make decisions now. Even if it's based on partial information and it's not perfect, you need to go ahead; you can make it better later. You must make decisions in the best interest of the organization, where lost opportunities are often more expensive than an imperfect decision.
- **Desire to move away from a technical field**
The obligation of managers is to the business, not their technical field. Technical managers must shift their alliance to the organization rather than paying attention to technical details. This can be extremely difficult for technologists.
- **Managers as extroverts**
Managers need to be skilled interpersonally because they must accomplish tasks by working through others. That means being skilled at working with people individually as well as within groups.
- **Good delegators**
Managers do not do the work themselves. They must let go and delegate the work to others and be judged on the results accomplished by the team.
- **Strong interpersonal skills**
Managers need strong interpersonal skills to participate in the negotiating, compromising and "wheeling and dealing" that are the lifeblood of organizational life. At the interface between technical and business arenas, they must deal successfully with constant conflict. These are skills that most technical people are not trained or experienced in, and typically do not like.

Technical management requires a paradigm shift

So what does a technical expert need to learn to be successful as a manager? Basically, they must turn their whole world upside down.

When sales producers transition to sales management, they must learn:

- Now they're a trainer or coach instead of a producer.
- They're responsible for holding other people accountable – others do the work.
- Their loyalty must shift from their own individual sales goals to whatever the company wants them to do.

For the technical person, *that's just the beginning*. Technicians moving into management must possess, or be willing (and able) to learn, all of the skills described in the previous section, plus how to effectively bridge the gap between the business world and the technical world. They must learn how to help people on both sides of the fence understand what the issues are and how to go about resolving them.

There is another important caveat: They have to be good enough in the technical arena to be credible in the eyes of the people they're supervising. That doesn't mean they have to be the best expert. They must be an effective manager of technical people.

Many organizations struggle with this because they don't do a good job of explaining the difference between the technical role and the managerial role, explaining why the technical star didn't get promoted, or supporting the new manager through the learning that should precede, but often has to follow, the promotion.

When I assess technicians for managerial positions, I first emphasize their *potential* for management; they have to have it, or they won't get the job done. Second, I

emphasize that they are facing a major change in deeply-held beliefs about what behavior will help them succeed in a management job, and that change will not be easy. Finally, I help them to understand that once they make the shift into management, it may be difficult to go back into the technical arena. Making the shift into management really means committing to practicing management behavior for the next 10, 20 or 30 years of their work life.

When I consult with executives regarding hiring or promoting people to manage their technical departments, I advise them that it can take several years for the person to successfully make the transition, and it can be successful only if the person has the appropriate personality characteristics, skills, abilities, interest and willingness to work hard at it. That's why you don't often see good technical managers because the paradigm shift is so dramatic.

In the book, *From Technical Professional to Corporate Manager*³, David Dougherty advises: "If you don't like administration, motivational problems and discipline, don't try to fill a management role."

Real-life technical department challenges

In the actual work setting, what types of needs arise? How can a company utilize an experienced consultant to assess, train and coach technical department managers? To illustrate this, I'll describe three examples of former clients.

Example #1: More managers needed for an IT department

Some years ago I was part of a team that established a developmental assessment center for IT managers at a large national retailer. They had 1,100 people working in the IT department and they wanted to evaluate people's potential for management. We designed a two-day set of tests and exercises that were custom-made to reflect what a manager's life was like in their IT department. We installed the assessment center, trained their assessors, and they took it over. Their objective was to improve the quality of management in IT, and they were quite pleased with the results.

Example #2: New managers needed to cover pending retirements

In the early 2000s, a large regional power company began realizing it was facing a big turnover at the supervisory level in the next five years. It was going to lose a large number of its experienced supervisors to retirement and lacked a process to replace those people. I was part of a team that worked with the company to develop a process to identify technicians with supervisory potential. The company solicited people in the organization who were interested in moving up to a supervisory role, and gave them a realistic job preview so that they would understand the nature of the job. We developed an assessment center process to perform four main functions:

- Assess 165 candidates and identify those who had the best potential to become good supervisors or managers.
- Facilitate a discussion with HR managers as they decided who would be invited to supervisory training.
- Counsel those who appeared to be more high-risk candidates. Moving into a supervisory role meant they had to leave the protection of the Union and would not be able to return. We had to help people understand the nature of that risk, as revealed by the assessment process, and the likelihood of their success as a supervisor.
- Conduct follow-up meetings with the candidates and their managers, who would be training the potential supervisors, to help them identify specific skills

³ Dougherty, David E., 1984. *From technical professional to corporate manager: A guide to career transition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 0-471-80707-9

that needed development and the experiences that would help the candidates get on the path most quickly.

Example #3: Coaching technical managers

A large regional energy cooperative provided coaching for some of its upper level managers. I worked with two technical managers who were performing well on the technical side, but were facing difficulties on the management side. They were classic studies of what we've been discussing in this white paper. As the company looked ahead to changes that were coming, top decision makers knew they needed more out of these managers. They also wanted to know if the managers were suitable candidates to move up. I coached the two managers for about six months, starting with an assessment of their managerial skills. Our coaching engagement ended with an evaluation session with their bosses, with all three of us in the room. We talked about where the managers had started, the progress they had made and where they were headed. The responses were quite positive.

TMC is uniquely qualified to consult with technology companies

I have been involved in management consulting for more than 20 years, having earned my Ph. D. in psychology following a productive career as a research biochemist. I have worked with the IT and R&D departments of numerous clients in a variety of technological industries.

I am uniquely qualified to work with the technology industry because I have lived on "the other side" – the technical side. I understand what that culture is like, and what the people who live in that culture are like. That gives me a unique perspective that is rare in the Twin Cities market.

My credentials include:

- Management consultant
- Ph. D. in Psychology
- M.S. in Biology/Biochemistry/Microbiology
- Licensed psychologist
- Spent 18 years with MDA Leadership Consulting, Inc.
- Founded Talent Management Consulting, Inc. in 2005
- Practice is insured
- Published in two fields – biochemistry and psychology
- Practical work experience has been in the food, insurance, construction, education, transportation and health care industries, and the Peace Corps.
- Adjunct assistant professor at the University of Minnesota
- Adjunct assistant professor at St. Mary's University

Is your company struggling?

If your company's technical departments are not producing the results you need, you may need to hire new supervisors or managers, or your existing technical department heads may need training or coaching. Don't ignore it. It's costing you a lot of money if the people in those roles are technicians who are not equipped to handle the management responsibilities.

To discuss how Talent Management Consulting can help your company assess, train and/or coach technical managers, contact Dr. Bill Handschin at bhandschin@talentmci.com or 651-731-0211.