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Managing others

# Management: what to do when your team grows

Leading a larger number of people requires a different approach



Abby Fenton: 'Everyone, including me, did a little bit of grunt work' © Lexey Swall

Janina Conboye AUGUST 7, 2018



Managing a few people is challenging, so what happens when promotion means your team grows from three people to 15 overnight?

A manager in this situation must scale their [management style](#), and fast. The first thing to realise, says [Mary Abbajay](#), president of Careerstone, a training and consulting firm, is that what works for managing one or two people will not necessarily work for more.

## Less is more

Think carefully about your workload and learn to adapt. Long catch-ups are fine when managing small teams, but shorter, more focused conversations with team members can be just as effective.

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**You have to allow people to make mistakes and help them**

Mary Abbajay, president, Careerstone

Recently, Ms Abbajay advised a young leader whose team is about to grow from three people to 15. Currently, the manager is friends with everyone on her team. But Ms Abberjay points out that these friendships may have to change, and “you have to be OK with that”.

The example highlights another pitfall: managers sometimes feel “a need to prove themselves to all

Feedback

these people. Some get a little nervous”.

Lee Martin, senior vice-president of strategic development at Getty Images, has been in the same situation. He joined the photography agency Allsport in 1983, which at the time had six staff. Mr Martin became one of the company’s four owners, who then managed rapid growth of the business to 180 people — half of which Mr Martin was directly responsible for.

Allsport was bought out in 1998 by Getty, and at one point Mr Martin had up to 600 direct or indirect reports.

He says setting clear goals at a team and individual level is key. “Less is more. Don’t try and boil the ocean and try to do everything,” he says. “I have always tried to lead by example. I have never asked my team to do things I wouldn’t do.”

When he managed a small team, he was involved in day-to-day work. But with larger teams, he learnt how to trust and delegate.

Ms Abbajay says the bigger a team gets, the more managers must let go. “Micromanagement is one thing that drives everybody crazy,” she says. Be clear about expectations, but remember “you have to allow people to make mistakes”.

## Learn to motivate

Derek Lidow, a former global CEO, entrepreneur and author of *Building on Bedrock: What Sam Walton, Walt Disney, and Other Great Self-Made Entrepreneurs Can Teach Us About Building Valuable Companies*, says managing a handful of people means building bonds between individuals. But when managing 10 or more, the task is more about motivating them.

“You need to appeal more broadly to some core basic needs. There is a need to establish that a team has an overarching purpose,” he adds. “That transition trips up a lot of people. Some are great one-on-one, but are less comfortable with larger groups.”

Yaping Gong, head of management at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Business School, suggests a “structural response” to a growing team. For example, if a manager finds themselves leading 10 or more staff, they could create multiple small teams and appoint leaders to each of them.

## ‘Keep it fair and equal’

Abby Fenton is the chief external affairs officer at Whitmand-Walker Health, a health services provider, in Washington DC. She moved to the role three years ago after working in the television industry. She says:

*‘When I took the role at WWH, I went from one person doing everything to having a staff of five. I had managed teams in the past, but I had to get back into the rhythm.*

*The big thing I figured out early, (and where working in television helped) was how to be strategic around personality, how to manage lots of different ones. So a big thing for me is spending time getting know staff and how they like to be led.*

*My style is to make sure everyone, including me, does a little bit of the grunt work. It took me a little while to get used to delegating as I didn’t want everyone to think I was giving them the bad tasks and I was doing the good ones.*

*Managers can struggle with bigger teams because they want everyone to like them. But you have to realise over time that you are going to have different relationships with different members of the team. Keep it fair and equal and then everyone in their own way will feel good about their jobs.’*

## Performance and culture

Both of these are also important. Many managers want to make their mark quickly, but it is not always the right strategy.

“If taking over an existing high-performing team,” says Ms Abberjay, “don’t upset the apple cart until you know what works well and what doesn’t. Learn the existing culture before you change it.”

Technology and [flexible working](#) mean managers may also have to grapple with an increasing number of remote workers. Here, says Mikko Summala, a manager at start-up Parking Energy, communication should be thought through carefully.

The vice-president of sales and marketing for the company, which develops an electric car charging system, draws on previous experience in a job where he built a virtual team of 100 people.

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“For remote workers communication doesn’t happen by the coffee machine or in the corridor,” Mr Summala says. “Google Hangouts, Skype and email is

where people in different locations communicate. So [a manager] has to be organised and have a communication strategy. Revisit [this strategy] every three months for a healthcheck on how communication is going.”

## Training matters

Prof Gong believes that when stepping up to manage more people, guidance on how to provide feedback and effectively monitor progress is required. And when a manager is taking on ever larger teams, then “leadership training is critical”, he says. Such training may consist of goal-setting and communicating a vision for example

Mr Lidow points out that another effective form of training is to shadow a person who is at a similar level to that which they are rising. “Spend a week with them and have a debrief every morning or evening.”

It’s like having a mentor with lots of additional insight, he adds, and “it’s a good way to see what works and what doesn’t and you get a visual connection with the skill set”.

But Mr Summala admits training can be more difficult in organisations where resources are scarce. Start-ups, for example, are chronically underfunded as everything goes into developing a product.

While there are many things to consider when taking on the management of a larger team, Getty’s Mr Martin is keen to stress that managing is not a top down process. “You have to take people with you — if you don’t you are going to fail.”

A promotional banner for the 'FT Women at the Top' event. The banner has a dark background on the left and a teal background on the right. The teal background features a repeating pattern of the text 'WOMEN AT THE TOP' and 'FINANCIAL TIMES'. On the dark background, the text 'FT Women at the Top' is written in large white letters. Below this, it says 'London' and '20 September - 21 September 2018'. There is a white button with the text 'Register now'. To the right of the button, it says 'Presented by' followed by the 'FT Live' logo, which is a red circle with 'FT' in white and 'Live' in red.

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