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6 Ways to Relieve the Pressure of a Promotion

The move from team member to project leader can be as stressful as it is satisfying. Here's how to make the leap smoothly.

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You've put in your time as a team member, and all that work has paid off: You've been promoted to project leader. Now comes the hard part. Not only do you face an increased workload, you'll be taking on new duties — perhaps even managing former teammates.

And with greater responsibility often comes greater stress. Some of that anxiety may be linked to a lack of understanding about the new role. One out of three leaders regretted being promoted due to poor preparation or not knowing how to succeed, according to a 2011 U.S. survey of 1,130 supervisors and first-level managers by talent management firm Development Dimensions International.

Here are six tips to help ensure stress doesn't sabotage your hard-earned promotion:

1. Identify weaknesses — and work to eliminate them.

By seeking training for deficiencies, you can build competence — and confidence.

Mike Graupner, PMP, recalls having trouble influencing his team when he first started out as a leader. So he took sales training courses. "That helped me understand how to show people that accomplishing the mission is in their best interest," says Mr. Graupner, now a senior project manager at GeBBS Healthcare Solutions, Westminster, California, USA.

2. Ask an expert.

Seek counsel from a leader you respect, whether it's a senior executive, fellow project manager or someone in your network, says Harley Lovegrove, chairman of The Bayard Partnership, a project management and consulting firm in Brussels, Belgium.

Discussing what they did wrong when they first started out, for example, can help you "avoid repeating the mistakes of your predecessors," says Mr. Lovegrove, author of "Inspirational Leadership: The Five Essential Elements."

3. Engage team members.

"The best way to build a team is to encourage the people around you to shape the culture of the project based on their own bad and good experiences," Mr. Lovegrove says.

For instance, when he kicks off a new project, Mr. Lovegrove hosts a mini-workshop where he asks team members to write down lessons learned from previous projects. Based on that information, the team crafts a set of team rules that forms the basis of the culture of the project, which builds greater buy-in in the process.

4. Avoid unnecessary disruptions.

"Introduce change only if there's a problem that needs to be fixed," advises Mr. Lovegrove. For example, if you'd like to alter a process or approach, do it gradually, he says. First, secure buy-in from team members individually and then execute at the team level.

5. Delegate tasks that don't require your expertise.

When you become a leader, people tend to make all of their problems your problems, says Mr. Graupner. It's up to you to figure out which ones you want to tackle.

"If a team member is having a computer problem, a novice leader will spend several hours trying to solve it," he says. "A senior leader, however, will say, 'We have an IT department, call them. I'll get involved if they fail.'"

6. Be upfront and honest with your team.

Team leaders often have to lead former teammates — some who may feel they deserved the job instead. Mr. Lovegrove recommends acknowledging it's your first time as a team leader, disclosing your weaknesses and asking for the team's help to make the project successful.

"Use people's perceived weaknesses as strengths," he suggests. "For example, if one team member identifies his weakness as being too detail-oriented, then give him the role of auditing the testing performance of the project deliverables."

Ultimately, the stress that often accompanies a promotion can't be avoided — just don't let it overwhelm the opportunity that lies ahead.

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