

L&D  
Best Practice Guide

# New Managers

How to support new  
managers so they become  
capable more  
quickly

“How do managers in your  
organisation get started?

Sink or swim?

There’s a better way.”

Paul  
Matthews



**PEOPLE ALCHEMY**



PEOPLE ALCHEMY

# New Managers

## How to support new managers so they become capable more quickly

New managers are often left to sink or swim, and the water is deep. How can we support them as they start their role so that they don't drown?

Losing new managers as a result of drowning is really quite careless because it is easy to give them the support they need to stay afloat long enough to start swimming capably on their own, or decide that swimming is something they really are not suited for.

Think for a moment what happens to someone when they get their first promotion to supervise a small team.

- Excitement?
- A touch of panic?
- Elation at the recognition?
- Energised with new plans and ideas to make things better?
- Uncertainty over what to do next?
- Awareness of the need to learn, but not sure what?
- Trepidation about the consequences of failure?

Probably all of the above and more besides.

Do you remember how you felt on stepping into a new role which involved being responsible for managing other people?

First the promotion, then comes the growing awareness that this is a much bigger change than anticipated. Any new manager who wants to do well will soon realise how much they don't know and, even worse, somehow become aware of how much they don't know they don't know. This is when they will start looking around for support.

The need a new manager has for support reminds me of the small wheels attached to a bicycle to help someone learn to ride. In New Zealand I grew up calling them training wheels, but in the UK they are called stabilisers.

An advert I saw for stabilisers had the following claim . . .

“Get your children safely in the saddle and boost their confidence as they learn to ride with a set of stabilisers.

Stabilisers will keep them sturdy and help to prevent wobbling while they improve their balance. They're easily fitted to your kids' bikes, and just as easily removed when the aspiring Chris Hoys are well-balanced and ready to go it alone on two wheels only.”

How can you add stabilisers to your new manager's role to help prevent wobbling and improve balance?

The two most common ways that new managers get started are:

1. No help other than 'Here's your team. Get on with it'.
2. They are sent on a new manager training course for a few days and receive a dump of information that has little context for them, and which therefore is poorly retained or understood. And then 'Here's your team. Get on with it'.

Those who are lucky have a line manager who nurtures the fledgling supervisor, and provides the support they need. We all know that probably the biggest factor determining how well and how quickly new managers 'get up to speed' is how much support they receive while doing so. Of course, if they don't get enough support, they may never get up to speed at all.

If you have managed others, reflect on where your knowledge and management skills came from. How much of what you needed to know did you learn from a formal training course; how much did you learn from peers or from your line manager; how much did you learn through experience; how much did you learn through observing managers before and after you were promoted?

I would wager that most of your management skills came from conversations, observation and experience, and not from training courses. Most of what we know in

order to do our jobs we learn outside the formal training channels, yet little attempt is made to leverage this insight when supporting new managers.

One of the problems with many formal management training courses is over-training. We have fought for budget and we have fought to get these people removed from their workplace and into a training room. We have them in front of us, and while we have them, we're going to give them everything we've got. It is not that the information is not trainable. It is just that it is too much information at once, and it is information delivered out of context because in many cases they have – as yet – little or no management experience. The information needs to be drip-fed naturally, in context, rather than force-fed as if you were fattening a goose for foie gras.

Just like learning to ride a bike, even with stabilisers, learning to be a manager takes time. It is a process rather than an event. I would argue that it is the role of L&D to facilitate this process in a way that supports and stabilises the new manager while they find their balance.

New managers have a lot to learn, some of which will be unique to their role. If they are new to the organisation, they will have even more to learn than someone who has been promoted internally. They will also need to start establishing relationships with the people who can help them, and with the people who have an interest in their performance. They will need to find out where and how to access all the

resources they will need to do their job. They need to understand how they will be measured. They need to develop a plan of what they will achieve. They need to establish themselves as a valuable player in the game of work, and much more. And while they are doing all this, they will be expected to be actually doing their management job.

This is an overwhelming, elephant-sized list. The obvious way to tackle it is in bite-sized chunks, with a plan showing where to start and which bite to take next, and support and encouragement to keep going.

In any organisation, it makes sense to map out a new manager learning pathway that takes them week by week through what they need to know, starting with those things that have the highest priority. You then need to make sure they are supported while they travel along that pathway. If you do this in a way that engages people with how they learn most naturally, you will have far greater success than you would with the sink or swim approach.

So how do people learn most naturally?

You have probably heard of the Chinese proverb:

“Tell me, I’ll forget  
Show me, I’ll remember  
Involve me, I’ll understand”

We learn best by doing, and management, like riding a bike, is best learnt in the

saddle. In fact, it could be argued that – like learning to ride a bike – the really important and lasting things any manager needs to learn can ONLY be learned in the saddle.

This is a bigger mindshift than you might think as you contemplate moving away from traditional training as the primary tool for getting people ready for their jobs. As you consider reducing training in favour of this more organic ongoing performance support, how do you feel?

Many people in the training profession see the new focus on informal learning and performance support as a threat. This is unfamiliar for them, and the formal training ground they are currently standing on is being whittled away.

One trainer who was in the middle of a swingeing set of budget cuts recently told me, ‘Every time a training course is cancelled, somewhere, a cute little training fairy dies’. It took some coaxing to help him see that the training fairies were not dying; they were off doing new and better things.

The training fairies these days are focusing on what needs to be done to ensure that people are capable of fulfilling their role in the organisation. They are far less concerned with what people are learning and far more concerned with what people are capable of doing. They have realised that learning and capability are two very different things. They have realised that for people to keep believing in fairies the focus needs to be on what matters, and that is capability.

“It took some coaxing to help him see that the training fairies were not dying; they were off doing new and better things.”

Stop, and imagine for a moment that you have your own business. You need a new manager and I can offer you a choice of two candidates. One has been on many training courses, has learned a lot and has several certificates and qualifications. The other is capable of doing what needs to be done in your business. Which one would you prefer to have working for you?

Capability will trump learning, and the fairies know this.

Let’s get practical about what it takes to enable a new manager to go from a standing start to a sufficient level of capability so that they can contribute effectively to the organisation in their new management role. Let’s call this threshold capability. At this point the new manager still has much to learn, but is an effective manager and doesn’t need the stabilisers anymore.

The first thing to think about is time. How much time does it take in your organisation for a new manager to reach threshold capability? Six months? Nine months? A year? Or even longer?

What affects this timescale? If someone is left to their own devices, the timescales will be longer. If they are supported and given a structured approach to develop

their capability, the timescales will be shorter.

Of course any organisation would wish to reduce this amount of time because there are strong commercial reasons to do so. What is it worth to reduce the time to threshold capability by a few months? Is it worth enough to pay for some kind of structured and supported approach? Is it enough to pay for stabilisers?

And how much can you compress the time to this capability threshold without overwhelming the new manager and actually reducing their ability to reach threshold capability? What is a realistic minimum time?

This will depend on three things: the ability of the new manager to learn and to transfer their learning into new behaviours, the complexity of the management role, and the quality and design of the 'stabilisers'.

Management, like riding a bike, is best learned in the saddle.

Given that we have selected a new manager and started them in a defined role, the variable we have control over is what we can provide as stabilisers.

The stabilisers need to take advantage of the fact that most learning is experiential and social. Although important, the learning that is done through formal channels such as training courses is a small proportion of what the new manager will learn over time in order to reach their threshold capability, and be able to operate without the stabilisers.

This learning ratio is often called the 70:20:10 model. This is not a recipe for good practice; it is more of a philosophy whereby the idea that most learning is experiential and social is used to guide learning interventions.

If we want to focus on experiential and social aspects of learning for our new manager, how would we construct their stabilisers? We would want to create a sequence of experiences and social interactions that are spread over time to ensure the new manager is exposed to situations that encourage them to learn what they need to know to operate capably in their job. Notice that this needs to be about what is important for them in their own job, not what might be important to any manager anywhere.

Here is a practical way to achieve this. Bolt stabilisers onto the new management role in two ways . . .

1. A structured learning pathway that focuses the new manager on the key things that need their attention and need to be learned
2. Support from a mentor, preferably their direct line manager, who helps them take responsibility for their own development.

And just as stabilisers are fitted to each side of a child's bike, you really need both, because they work together. One on its own is much less than half as effective as two working in synergy together.

The structured learning pathway is a set of weekly briefings that cover the issues

managers typically come across in the normal course of their jobs. Remember that the pathway happens parallel to their work as a manager, so it is not about huge amounts of content or management theory. It is about real things that matter and contribute to the new manager's growing capability.

Here are some examples . . .

- Building relationships
- Setting objectives
- Team meetings
- Managing conflict
- Statistics and reporting
- Keeping legal, healthy and safe
- Holidays, sickness and other absence

Consider the benefits if each week a new manager is presented with a short briefing, perhaps a page or two of content, on subjects such as those listed above.

In addition to the content there are also questions or tasks which encourage the manager to build on the briefing by discovering for themselves things such as where information is on the intranet, who they need to talk to in other departments (such as HR or Accounts), who their stakeholders are, how the politics work and so on. It encourages them to embrace specific experiences and relationships which will help them learn what they need to know for their own job.

This learn-and-apply methodology will give a far better retention rate than if the

same information were to be delivered in a training room. It also teaches the new manager that they can, and indeed should be using a self-directed approach to their learning and career development.

Now add the other stabiliser wheel: a mentor. Each week the mentor will help the new manager by holding an informal discussion about the week's briefing, questions, and tasks. The mentor will share their own experience and offer encouragement and support where needed as the new manager goes through the inevitable ups and downs of gaining a new skill.

Of course, anybody who knows what good management is would say that the line manager should be doing this anyway, but the sad fact is that they often don't. The structure of the weekly briefings makes it much easier for the line manager to commit this time to their direct report. The structure also gives both the new manager and the line manager a programme that will aid them in covering the essentials that will enable the new manager to reach threshold capability.

There are several desirable side-effects of having a line manager as the mentor. One is that the line manager is almost certain to learn from the programme as well. It will remind them of good management habits that they may have let slide, or even introduce them to new ideas that round out their management capabilities. Another is the establishment of a strong working relationship between the line manager and their new direct report (and

the importance of this relationship should not be underestimated). Yet another is that, each week, the new manager and their line manager are discussing things which are critical to the success of the team – such as process improvement, team dynamics, conflict or KPIs – in a way and to a depth that would otherwise almost certainly not happen. The output from those weekly conversations leads to a culture of continuous improvement sponsored by the mentor, and focussed on results.

Helping any new manager recognise how they are adding value, and helping them add even more value, will set them up

with a management philosophy that will serve them and their organisation well over the long term.

We started this Best Practice Guide by asking ‘How to support new managers so they become capable more quickly?’

And we have given you a simple and effective way to do this.

I'd like to acknowledge Beryl Cuckney for her work and research into a practical way to develop new managers.



# PEOPLE ALCHEMY

People Alchemy is an automated, learning workflow platform which encourages real behaviour change through action, activities and tasks. It's innovative, easy-to-use and jam-packed with features designed to deliver benefits to your people and your business, straight out of the box.

It's your modern solution to driving learning impact.

Our Learning Workflow Platform focuses on delivering activities, not content. That leads to true learning transfer and application of knowledge. People Alchemy gets learners doing the practice they need to improve performance

This is not an LXP. Or an LMS.

This is a Learning Workflow Platform and it's instigating real change in learning.

 [peoplealchemy.com](https://peoplealchemy.com)

 [hello@peoplealchemy.com](mailto:hello@peoplealchemy.com)

 +44(0) 330 113 3005

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## **Paul Matthews**

is the founder of People Alchemy and an internationally recognised author and speaker on L&D.

Thanks for reading this Best Practice Guide. I hope you found it useful. You picked up this Guide, which means you are keen to find new ideas and new ways of doing things to get better results. I can help you. Together we can look at what you want to achieve and then develop your strategy to make it happen. What is your L&D goal? What do you want to achieve? Let's talk about it :-)

 [paul-matthews.com](https://paul-matthews.com)

 [paul@paul-matthews.com](mailto:paul@paul-matthews.com)