

Becoming a first-time manager is one of the most challenging experiences in a person's career. It is both a time of great excitement as well as uncertainty and insecurity. The good news is that you have been promoted. The bad news is that you will probably be left to sink or swim.

Many new managers are unclear about the expectations of their new position and often replicate the competencies that made them successful in the past. A common behaviour is to try to control everything and not let go. Soon, morale in the team plummets and tension and conflict arise.

First-time managers who succeed are able to make profound adjustments and adapt themselves quickly. By developing new competencies, they start to become value creators to their teams and companies. They also position themselves better for greater responsibilities in the years ahead. But those who aren't able to make the critical shifts will struggle.

This book will help you maximize your chances of success as a first-time manager.

"BH Tan has written a book full of insights and practical advice into the subject of management that is invaluable for both first-timers and those who have been in the field for many years. As someone who has been in the field for many years, he has expanded my knowledge on the subject greatly. For this reason I must say a very heartfelt 'Thank you!' to BH Tan."

— Marshall Goldsmith  
Bestselling author of *Triggers* and  
*What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

"All first-time managers and their bosses should read this. Spare 20 minutes, one chapter per night, and practise what you have learnt the next day. Soon, you will experience the profound change that emerges from the inner you."

— Spencer Liao  
Dean, TSMC College


visit our website at:  
[www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

 **Marshall Cavendish**  
Business



BH TAN

**The First-Time MANAGER in Asia**

Marshall Cavendish  
Business 

Only

Preface by Marshall Goldsmith,  
bestselling author of *Triggers* and  
*What Got You Here Won't Get You There*.

# The First-Time MANAGER

Maximizing your success  
by blending East and  
West best practices | **in Asia**



"An invaluable resource for all managers, especially those transitioning from their roles as individual contributors to first-time managers... From a coach who has worked with plenty of others to help them succeed comes this timely gift."

— Brian O. Underhill, Ph.D.  
Founder and CEO, CoachSource

BH TAN

For Review Only

# The First-Time **MANAGER**

Maximizing your success  
by blending East and  
West best practices | **in Asia**



BH TAN

**mc** Marshall Cavendish  
Business

# For Review Only

Cover image: Turgaygundogdu/Shutterstock  
Cover design: Bernard Go Kwang Meng

First published 2010, reprinted 2011  
© Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited

This revised edition published in 2016 by Marshall Cavendish Business  
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International  
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Request for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300. E-mail: [genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com](mailto:genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com). Website: [www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Marshall Cavendish is a trademark of Times Publishing Limited

## **National Library Board Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Name(s): Tan, B. H. (Boon Hock), 1953-

Title: The first-time manager in Asia : maximizing your success by blending East and West best practices / BH Tan.

Description: Second edition. | Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Business, [2016]

Identifier(s): OCN 947026645 | ISBN 978-981-47-5199-5 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Management—Asia. | Personnel management—Asia.

Classification: DDC 658.40095—dc23

Printed by NPE Print Communications Pte Ltd

## PREFACE

As a first time manager, you have a lot to learn. This wonderful and insightful book by executive coach and leadership consultant BH Tan will teach you what you need to know to manage well.

Learning to manage and becoming a leader isn't something that comes naturally to everyone. Just because you get that promotion you've wanted or think you deserve it doesn't mean you will automatically know what to do. It takes work, diligence, and wisdom to be successful at running a project, a team, a department, or an organization. And, that is what BH will help you with when you read *The First-Time Manager in Asia*.

In this book, the author will help you answer many of the questions that you will inevitably have, like: What challenges will you face? What skills and knowledge do you need? How do you get the most out of your team? What will be expected of you? What pitfalls should you avoid? And many more.

In grappling with the lessons that are inevitable for first-time managers, I have found that one thing is critical — the team you lead is more critical to the success of a project or organization than what you contribute as a facilitator. You are only as good as your team.

I coached a manager years ago, who eagerly accepted the challenge of a new project. He quickly involved his team in the project, and established a rigorous project management process. Each person took responsibility for creating positive synergy with cross-organizational colleagues. They regularly reported on their efforts in reaching out to their partners across the company. They kept learning from all of their colleagues — and sharing what they learned with each other. They thanked people for ideas and suggestions and followed up to ensure effective implementation.

Of all of the clients that I have ever coached, I spent the least amount of time with this manager. There seemed to be an inverse

# For Review Only

relationship between his team spending time with me and his team getting better! As a coach, this was very humbling. At the end of our project, I discussed my observations with him. I noted, “I think that I spent less time with you and your team than any team I have ever coached, yet you and your team produced the most dramatic, positive results. What should I learn from my experience?”

He thought about my question. “As a coach,” he said, “you should realize that success with your clients isn’t all about you. It’s about the people who choose to work with you.” He modestly chuckled, then continued: “In a way, I am the same. The success of my project isn’t about me. It’s all about the great people who are working with me.” And, as a first-time manager, this will be true for you too!

In *The First-Time Manager in Asia*, BH Tan has written a book full of insights and practical advice into the subject of management that is invaluable for both first-timers and those who have been managing for a long time. As someone who has been in the field for many years, he has expanded my knowledge on the subject of management greatly with this book. For this reason I must say a very heartfelt “Thank you!” BH Tan.

**Marshall Goldsmith, *New York Times* and  
million copy best-selling author of *MOJO* and  
*What Got You Here Won't Get You There*.**

# For Review Only

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	10
Foreword	12
Introduction	15
<b>Part One: Your Biggest Changes When You Become A Manager</b>	<b>21</b>
1. Are you ready to play a bigger game?	22
2. Charting your course	32
<b>Part Two: Managing Yourself</b>	<b>37</b>
3. Do you really know yourself?	38
4. What kind of leader do you wish to be?	45
5. Why EQ matters a great deal	53
6. Developing yourself	61
7. Time management	69
<b>Part Three: Managing Team Members</b>	<b>79</b>
8. Leadership is a relationship	80
9. How to delegate	88
10. The manager as coach	96
11. Coaching proficiencies	104
12. Giving feedback	111
13. Asking for feedback	120
<b>Part Four: Managing Teams</b>	<b>125</b>
14. Becoming a team leader	126
15. Forming and developing your team	132
16. Managing team dynamics	143

<b>Part Five: Managing Key Relationships</b>	<b>148</b>
17. The power of engagement	149
18. Leveraging cultural diversity	158
19. Managing conflict	164
20. Leading change	172
21. How to influence	179
22. Managing your boss	186
23. Managing other stakeholders	193
24. Managing organizational politics	199
<b>Part Six: Becoming a More Complete Leader</b>	<b>207</b>
25. The importance of self-renewal	208
26. Your Leadership Journey	216
<b>Appendix One:</b> A coaching conversation	222
<b>Appendix Two:</b> How bosses can facilitate successful transition for first-time managers	228
<b>Appendix Three:</b> Leveraging human capital for sustainable competitive advantage	230
<b>Appendix Four:</b> Leadership Turns Framework	233
Endnotes	235
Index	239
About the author	243

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has emerged from my years as a business executive and subsequently as a leadership development consultant. Many coaches, teachers and business leaders with whom I have had the privilege of working have taught me much over the years. Some of their ideas and experiences are reflected in the pages of this book. To these wise and generous people, I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

There are also many supportive clients around the world who have provided me the opportunities to test and refine the concepts and frameworks I have shared. The practical nature of this book owes much to the interesting and challenging assignments from these clients and I thank them truly.

My deepest appreciation goes to Dr. Marshall Goldsmith for writing the preface to this book. Special thanks to Dr. Brian O. Underhill who, despite his very hectic schedule, kindly agreed to write the Foreword. I would also like to extend my profound and heartfelt gratitude to my friends, colleagues and clients around the world who have read the draft of this book and offered suggestions for improvements. Despite their busy agendas, they took precious time off to give me a hand. My deepest thanks to: Lin Heng, Josephine Teo, Spencer Liao, Andrew Stanleick, Dr. N. Varaprasad, Paul Lim, Leslie Chong, Younes Alaoui, Susan Ho, Nancy Verhoeven, Foo See Luan, Chen Sue Cheng, Jane Dmitrova, Ong Su-Chzeng, Mark D'Souza, Dr. Mimi Choong, James Wong, Sandra Henson, Audrey Lee, Shereen Kaur, Geraldine Lee, Sandra Drought, Dr. Zareen Karani Araoz and Olwyn Merritt. They have all helped me improve my writing. Any shortcomings that remain are entirely my responsibility.

I am greatly indebted to my esteemed publishing team at Marshall Cavendish: Chris Newson, Violet Phoon and Lee Mei Lin who saw the potential in this book when it was just a figment



# For Review Only

of my imagination; Editor Mabelle Yeo, whose creative passion, editorial professionalism and insights I greatly value; Stephanie Pee, who is always open to new ideas, yet so disciplined in coordinating and keeping to the timelines agreed; Marketing Manager Patricia Ong and her team; illustrator Edwin Ng and designer Bernard Go. I do thank you all indeed.

Finally, my deepest love and thanks to my remarkable wife, Boon Hwa, home manager extraordinaire, and my daughters Andrea and Amelia, first-time managers at their workplace. They bring me joy every day.

## FOREWORD

My first experience in “management” was a complete disaster.

I was a private school elementary teacher, in charge of music for the kindergarten through sixth grade. I had approximately six classes of different grades that I would visit during the day. What I thought would be my dream job went terribly sour.

For several years leading up to the position, I was a very successful personal piano teacher. I would teach pupils one on one. All the days that I had allocated to teaching were packed with students. I was greatly enjoying my work and earning good money.

So good at it was I that several of the parents recommended me as a teacher for their private school. I was honoured by the opportunity and intrigued with the possibilities: greater responsibility and more chances to make an impact. Plus, the money was much better. All I would have to do was more of what I did as a personal teacher, and I'd be a success in the classroom.

I couldn't have been more wrong. What got me “here”, was not going to get me “there”.

I began the school year as the “cool, friendly teacher”, just like I did when I taught individually. I was the nice guy that all the kids liked— amiable, fun, easy-going. I would differentiate myself from the typical “old-lady stern educator-type” teacher. It would be easy. Or so I thought.

Within two weeks, I had lost total control of all my classrooms. The children were running amuck doing anything they wanted right in front of me. They would talk whenever they pleased, got up and did whatever they wished, laughed in each other's faces and even laughed at me. The kids would yell, scream, throw things and even hit each other, completely ignoring my useless threats to enforce order. I wasn't even close to completing the lessons plans I had drafted up.

I was totally miserable. I'd made a terrible mistake thinking I could make it as a school teacher. My low point came when the headmistress stormed into one of my out-of-control classrooms and yelled at the students for five minutes straight. She had heard the noise from her office and had had enough. Obviously I couldn't control the situation, so she would take charge. I'm still amazed that I made it through the rest of that year.

Today I serve as an executive coach, working with leaders of some of the world's largest companies. And I remain fascinated by what makes a good manager and leader. Having coached literally hundreds of leaders, I have decided that the transition from individual contributor to first-time manager is the hardest one to make in one's career.

I learned—the hard way—that one of the many challenges a new manager faces is how to hold others accountable. Many new leaders will try the tactic I did—that of being everyone's friend (especially if they were once peers)—only to find that to be difficult, if not impossible.

I see this in the new leaders I work with. They allow less-than-acceptable performance to go on and on. They try to say something to the offending employee, but it is usually done in a soft manner, and with no consequences, therefore allowing the employee to continue the undesirable behaviour unabated until a more experienced manager takes control of the situation.

I also meet other new managers who face a different challenge—and that is over-control. We will see this in Chapter 1 in the story of Janet, a rookie manager who tries to control all the activities of her direct reports, only to the severe frustration of all involved. She eventually leaves the company in exasperation (and, ironically, goes on to become a school teacher).

Many years ago, I coached a manager from a mobile phone handset maker who was just like Janet. She was brilliant technically and educated in an Ivy League institution. As an analyst, she did all her assignments flawlessly. She was then promoted to

run a small customer service division but she quickly became a relentless micromanager. It took some time (and a few people leaving) before we figured out why she couldn't let go. One day, as I questioned her, she had a magical epiphany: "I feel like if I'm not doing the work, I'm then not adding any value."

Aha! With that realization, we worked to change the way she could add value—from doing the actual work alone to getting the work done through people. I'm quite sure just that simple realization alone saved her future career at the company.

This book is an invaluable resource for all managers, especially for those transitioning from their roles as individual contributors to first-time managers. Those of us who did it on our own have learnt how tough it can be. From a coach who has done the same thing himself and worked with plenty of others to help them succeed, comes this timely gift.

By the way, as I mentioned, I did survive that year teaching, and went on to teach a second (and final) year. I quickly found a few "mentors/coaches"—seasoned teachers who showed me the ropes. They taught me that I had to immediately institute a new, consistent set of rules with the children and promptly enforce them. Once the students saw that I was serious, things started to turn around. After I had earned their respect as the authority figure, I could gradually start to play the "cool, friendly" teacher role. As BH said in Chapter 8, leaders need to exercise a blend of soft and hard power in order to be effective.

Hopefully you can learn to navigate this transition better than many of us have before you. With a resource like this book, I am confident that you are already on your way. I wish you the best of luck!

**Brian O. Underhill, Ph.D.**  
**Founder and CEO, CoachSource**  
**Co-author of *Executive Coaching for Results:***  
***The Definitive Guide to Developing Organizational Leaders***

## INTRODUCTION

### WHEN YOU BECOME A MANAGER

Why a book on the first-time manager? Isn't learning how to manage people something that comes naturally as you progress up the ladder in your career? And, frankly, looking at the managers around you, haven't these people picked things up on their own through trial and error?

In this introduction, I would like to address all these thoughts, as well as a few others, that may come to your mind as you make that first leap into the ranks of management.

First, let me start with a few words on my corporate journey, and how I became the author of this book. I began my life in corporations more than 30 years ago, embarking on what has turned out to be a two-part career: first as a corporate executive and then as a leadership consultant.

For the first 20-odd years, I worked for various U.S. and European multinationals. I assumed my first role as a manager at the ripe age of 26. In the years ahead, I worked in various disciplines such as engineering, marketing, sales and general management. My last position held was that of Asia-Pacific vice-president of an American high-tech corporation. Then, I decided that it was time for me to venture out on my own and do something that has always been my passion: developing people. That was the start of my second career, and I've been doing it for the last 12 years. In this capacity, I worked with high-potential managers ranging from young 20-somethings to experienced and battle-hardened 50-somethings to do only one thing: enhance their success and effectiveness as leaders in corporations.

Truth be told, I'm having much more fun and satisfaction working with people than running businesses. And this is something that I will talk a little more about later in this book.

# For Review Only

So why should you spend your time reading a book on the first-time manager? To answer this question, please sit back and imagine that you are about to embark on a new project of great importance to your company. You are the leader of a team of specialists, many of whom you are meeting for the first time. What's the feeling like?

You'd probably feel a tinge of excitement running down your spine. At the same time, you are gripped with some uncertainty and insecurity too. These are some typical questions that you may have:

- What am I expected to do?
- How will my success be defined?
- What are some challenges that I will face? How can I tackle them successfully?
- Are there some new skills and knowledge that I will need? How do I acquire these?
- What's unique about my new role that I must quickly come to grips with?
- I don't know enough about my co-workers. How should I behave towards them?
- How can I get the most out of my team?
- I'm the boss now. If any of my guys get out of line, how should I crack the whip?
- I'm not that comfortable with my boss. What should I do?
- Will I be successful by focusing on doing my job in the best possible way? Or do I need to network and play politics like some managers I know?
- Are there some pitfalls that I must avoid?
- What will help me become more successful?

What are your chances of success then? Most first-time managers, flushed with the idea of becoming a boss for the first time in their career, will think the odds are in their favour.

Having worked with thousands of such managers in various organizations around the world, my observation is that making this transition from an individual contributor to a manager is fraught with

difficulties. Nearly all struggle with the new challenges ahead. They soon face a stark reality. They are pretty much on their own and there is no honeymoon period, so to speak. Their superiors expect them to prove their worth from the word “Go”. And, by the way, please don’t expect much help from bosses. They are under pressure as well and simply too busy to provide guidance to their rookie managers.

However, first-time managers are a hardy and resilient lot. With some help, the majority will make it. Unfortunately, for some people, the experience will be an unpleasant one. Sadly, some will soon decide that being a manager is not their thing. Perhaps, they really don’t have what it takes to become managers, they and their bosses will quickly conclude. It is better for them to revert to their previous level and be a specialist or individual contributor. Or does it really have to be this way?

## WHAT YOU WILL GET FROM THIS BOOK

Many years ago, I came across a charmingly facetious book about organizational life written by a Canadian educational psychologist, Laurence Peter. It is called *The Peter Principle*.

*“In any organization, people tend to rise  
to their level of incompetence.”*

— The Peter Principle

This maxim has intrigued me for many decades since then. I have seen many bright, young and promising people getting themselves trapped by *The Peter Principle* and never achieving their potential as managers and leaders. Yet, I have also worked with countless managers who are better prepared mentally and emotionally for the journey. The speed bumps are still there. There will be tough challenges. But they are much better equipped to handle them. Many of these people not only excel as first-time managers but proceed to move up the next few levels, adding immense value to their organizations and the people with whom they work.

You don't have to fear *The Peter Principle*. It can be circumvented and I'll show you how.

I would like to graphically illustrate the value of this book to first-time managers by using the imagery of a novice explorer venturing into the wilderness. These are what you will get:

1. A map and compass for your journey.
2. A set of useful tools that will help you overcome obstacles along the way. These tools will enable you to make improvisations according to the situations at your workplace.
3. An experienced tour guide who shares lessons learnt from other travellers before you so that you can avoid pitfalls and hidden traps. These will be shared through **managerial anecdotes** sprinkled through the various chapters. Though most of these situations are real, some background details have been modified and pseudonyms are used.
4. A telescope. Why? With the above you're all set for the here and now. A telescope helps you to peek a little beyond your immediate destination, and prepare you for the next steps in your career.

## MANAGING THE ASIAN WAY

I would further add that this book is written for managing in an Asian environment. It is meant for Asian managers and their Western counterparts who will work alongside each other in Asia. With China and India fast becoming economic powerhouses, more and more investments are heading towards Asia. Increasingly there will be more Asian managers reaching the upper rungs of management. At the same time, Western managers, especially the younger ones, will want to be stationed in Asia, not just for short-term assignments, but for the long haul.

These self-confident, rising Asian managers and the curious, young Western managers know that it is no longer tenable to apply Western management practices without adaptation. There is visible



pride in things Chinese and Indian. This book will therefore blend the best of Western thinking and Eastern wisdom.

## WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK

This book will be most helpful for the thousands of young people promoted into managerial responsibilities for the first time each year.

Experienced and more senior managers who are facing challenges in leading and managing may find the topics a useful refresher, as they will offer new insights on managing and leading. There is a truism about managing that is worth reminding ourselves about. As we move upwards and acquire even more responsibilities, the basics do not change or become less relevant. True, we'll need to adapt our management styles to more complex situations. Also true is the fact that we'll also need to constantly reinvent ourselves and broaden our repertoire. But we must never lose sight of the basics.

Well-meaning bosses of first-time managers, who are increasingly aware of their pivotal role in helping their new managers succeed, will find this a useful resource. I have also included in the appendices practical information and insights for learning and development practitioners, consultants, academics and executive coaches, who are involved in setting up and delivering leadership development programmes for high-potential employees.

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

The first-time manager is a very busy person with many things on her mind, conflicting priorities and insufficient time to get all these accomplished. In writing this book, I have adopted a straightforward, pragmatic and conversational approach. The reading experience is very much like you, the reader, and I are engaged in a friendly and candid chat one topic at a time.

Please note that throughout this book, I will use the pronouns "he" and "she" interchangeably. In my experience, men and women can be equally effective as managers. In fact, I think organizational effectiveness will be further enhanced if more women move up the

hierarchy. Various studies in the United States and Europe such as those by McKinsey and Catalyst have shown that companies with the highest proportion of female directors are more profitable and efficient, on the average, than those with the lowest.<sup>1</sup>

You will find 26 brief and easy-to-read chapters that will contain practical ideas that you will need to know and act on. Browse through the book very quickly the first time round to get a feel of what is in store for you. Then come back again and again one chapter at a time. Highlight the pages. Dog-ear them. Write margin notes. Keep a notebook handy so that you can jot down ideas that you find useful.

At the end of each chapter, are the **Anchors** and **Deep Dive** segments, identified by corresponding icons. Anchors are a summary of key takeaways. Deep Dive poses provocative questions for you to reflect on. More importantly, act on them at the workplace.

To conclude this introduction, I'd like to share a Chinese saying.

*“Learning without thinking is labour lost;  
thought without learning is perilous.”*

— Confucius

Let's go one step further by reminding ourselves,

*“Action without knowledge is irresponsible;  
Knowledge without action is a waste of time.”*

I welcome feedback from readers. Please email me at [bh@leadassociates.com.sg](mailto:bh@leadassociates.com.sg). You can also visit our website at [www.leadassociates.com.sg](http://www.leadassociates.com.sg).

My hope is that this book will in some small way facilitate the development of new managers who will spearhead Asia's growth in the 21st century.

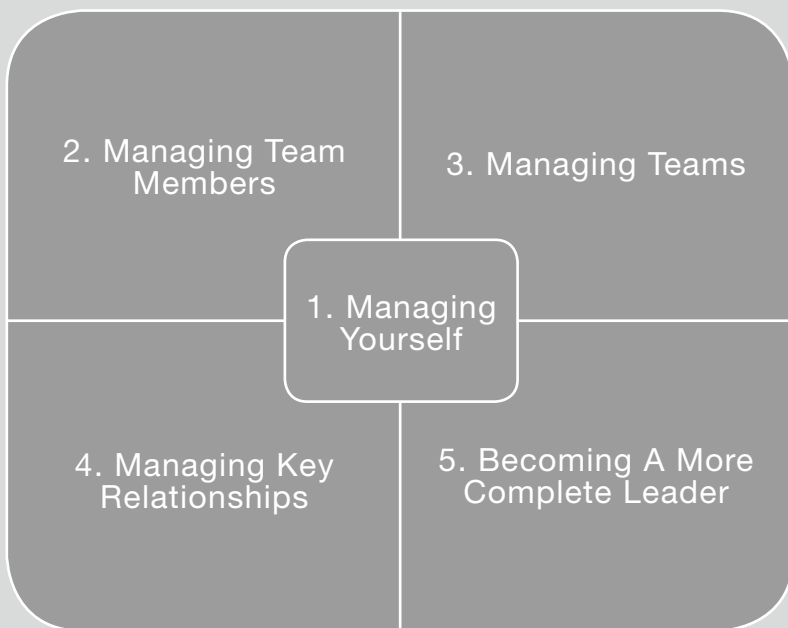
Thank you.

—BH Tan

For Review Only

# PART ONE

## Your Biggest Changes When You Become A Manager



*"The journey of a thousand miles  
Begins with a single step."*

—Tao Te Ching

## 1 ARE YOU READY TO PLAY A BIGGER GAME?

### SUDDENLY, IT IS A MUCH BIGGER WORLD OUT THERE

At workshops for first-time managers, I usually start by saying, “What has got you here will not get you there.” This is a line borrowed from Marshall Goldsmith, one of America’s pre-eminent executive coaches.

Participants’ interest is piqued. And an air of anticipation is created. They wait for me to explain a little more. The most effective way for me to drive home my point is to use a soccer analogy.

Imagine yourself as a skilful and well-regarded member of a soccer team. You have excelled in playing in one of the positions in the team, say, that of a striker or a goalkeeper. You have also been a great teammate, working well with the other players to help your team succeed in various matches. Recently, the coach tapped you to be the new captain of the team. Next week, you will be leading your team into an important match for the first time as the skipper.

Overnight, your view of soccer is transformed!

As an individual player, you are expected to be very competent in playing in a particular position in the team. That means apart from possessing a natural flair, you need a keen interest and a good attitude. You also need to be in the pink of physical condition, and attend a series of training and practice sessions with your team mates. All these enhance the domain expertise that makes you a very good specialist.

During the game, your biggest contribution is to leverage your domain expertise and collaborate with other specialists to score against the opposing team. What you do and how you behave will be in accordance with a pre-set game plan. On the pitch, you will look to one particular player for guidance and inspiration. He is the team captain.

# For Review Only

When you become the captain, you play multiple roles. First and foremost, you are the leader of the team, on and off the field. You must command the respect of your players and the trust of the coaches and managers. You will pick your prospective players for their individual skills. Then you must bring them all together and turn them into a high-performing team. You play a key role in defining the game strategy and team formation for every match.

At practice and workout sessions, you need to be a role model. You are the first one on the field and the last one out. You make sure that every player sticks to the workout plan and prescribed diet. What if players don't turn up on time, become disinterested or get out of shape? It's your job to talk to them and to bring them back in line. This is not easy, especially if these people are your buddies.

During the game, you need to be in constant communication with your players so that they are always moving in the direction that was agreed on during practice sessions. Yet you cannot be shouting and yelling all the time.

The situation is very fluid, changing by the moment, as the players on both sides pit themselves against each other. As the skipper, your team triumphs if you have engendered a sense of purpose, esprit de corps, nimbleness in thinking and bold execution. Players read the situation intelligently, seize the opportunities swiftly and perform their own magic while working in synergy with one another. Such a team shines because they work in an environment that nurtures entrepreneurship. The result is improvisation on the spur of the moment, creativity and innovation.

Essentially, you wear two hats. Not only are you the captain, you are a player as well. A good captain might not be the best player in the team. Being the captain, you may, however, be tempted to prove to your fellow players that you are the best by competing with them for the ball. A key question for you will be: What defines my success as a captain? Personally delivering the goals, or orchestrating the team's success by bringing out the genius in all my players?



## GOING UP THE VALUE CHAIN

By this, I'm not just referring to the bigger pay packet that you can expect. That will come of course. In return for the bigger bucks that you're getting, the most important difference when you start managing a team is that you are expected to add greater value to your organization compared to what you did previously as an individual contributor.

This is an extremely important point that you must understand and acknowledge. Otherwise, when you get promoted, you will continue doing what you were doing in your previous role because that has become your comfort zone and you were so good at it. Let's now look at a real-life case of a person who failed to go up the value-chain when she became a manager.

### Managerial Anecdote

*Janet worked for three years as a product specialist in a major healthcare company in Singapore. She learned quickly, and very soon was able to handle very independently the promotional and*

*marketing responsibilities for two hair care products assigned to her. When the marketing manager who was her boss was promoted to lead a larger brand, Janet was the natural successor.*

*Janet was very pleased to be recognized for her achievements. This promotion would give her a pay raise which would come in handy as she was planning to get married. It was also a first step into management which meant more authority and influence.*

*As a marketing manager with three product specialists, Janet found her responsibilities expanding significantly. Apart from hair care products she now had skin care in her portfolio. This was very new to her. Of the three product specialists she had to oversee, two were formerly her peers working in skin care. The third one was a new recruit she had taken in for hair care.*

*Janet found her workday now packed with meetings and presentations. There were many parties she had to meet. Apart from her general manager as well as senior executives from the head office in London, she had to interact with key accounts and vendors. Major product launches were in the works. As she was unfamiliar with the skin care range, she left it entirely to the two product specialists responsible. Her efforts were all devoted to marketing hair care products. Besides, she reasoned, the recruit was too new and inexperienced.*

*The first six months thus whisked by like a blur. The new product specialist quit after four months in frustration as he felt Janet did not trust him and was micromanaging him every inch of the way. The two other product specialists became very demotivated as Janet had shown very little interest in the skin care products.*

*A number of product launches were botched. The pressure on Janet mounted, and she left the company a short while later, convinced that she was not cut out to be a manager. She subsequently became a school teacher.*

What brought about this rather sad turn of events for Janet? These were some key contributing factors:

- Janet did not have a clue about what was expected of her as a manager compared to her previous role. Neither was she equipped to make the necessary shifts mentally and emotionally.
- She stepped into her new role during a very busy period when new products were being launched. There was literally no time to catch her breath and ask, “What am I supposed to do now?”
- As she was under considerable pressure to deliver results, she quickly defaulted into doing what she was good at in her previous role, i.e. managing hair care, while conveniently leaving what she was unfamiliar with—skin care products—to her two subordinates.
- She did not communicate with her team members, resulting in a lack of common purpose, direction and motivation.
- Her boss, the general manager, did not coach her or help her to settle in and find her footing. In fact, she was thrown into the deep end of the pool by her company.

In a nutshell, Janet did not make a successful transition into her first managerial role.

## CRITICAL SHIFTS FOR SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

When people become managers for the first time, they are in effect undergoing a rite of passage. Like adventurers, they are about to enter a dark and deep mysterious cave. In both Eastern and Western mythologies, we all know that there are fearsome creatures guarding the various thresholds. Those who are unworthy get eliminated quickly. Only the fittest gain safe passage as they slay one dragon after another. At the end of the journey, our heroes emerge stronger, wiser and more resilient.

Professor Linda Hill<sup>1</sup> of Harvard Business School puts it this way, “The first managerial assignment is a pivotal developmental experience for future executives. It is when an executive’s basic



philosophy and leadership style is shaped...” She then goes on to stress that a “profound adjustment” is required—a transformation of professional identity, no less.

Lessons learnt and experiences gained have shown that the transitional journey to managerial responsibilities involves critical shifts in four areas:

## **1. Key responsibilities**

As a manager your role will become broader and more complex. You are now responsible for your team and not just yourself. A major paradigm shift here for you is the realization that your success now depends on your subordinates. You will succeed only if they succeed. In the same vein, if they are weak and ineffective, you will fail.

“I don’t believe this,” I hear you protesting. “You mean to say that when I become boss, I become vulnerable because my success is no longer determined by me?” And you had thought that as a manager, you would have full power and authority over your people.

When the truth finally sinks in, some first-time managers default into micromanaging and doing their subordinates’ jobs as they do not want to be held ransom by weak subordinates. This is not sustainable and will poison the working atmosphere as Janet had found out. Besides, by doing their subordinates’ work they aren’t doing what they ought to be doing as a manager.

To ensure success in your new role, you have to create conditions that will help enable your people to succeed. This means understanding what your bosses expect and translating them into results by working through your team members, and coordinating with peers and other functions. And very importantly, to help your people succeed so that you may succeed, you need to coach and develop them.

## **2. Key skills**

Your skills in your previous role as a specialist are useful but no longer sufficient. They were technical or “hard skills” such as data

analysis, project evaluation, trouble-shooting, preparation of a financial report, etc.

At this stage in your career as a first-time manager, you will need to continue acquiring other hard skills such as budgeting, report writing, etc. More importantly, you will need to quickly pick up “soft skills” such as delegating, influencing, communicating, motivating.

Why? Because as a manager you will have to get things done through others. To be able to do this effectively, you will need relational skills, or soft skills. With such skills you will be better able to connect with others and influence them. This is in fact a key determinant of your success. More on this will be discussed in Chapter 5 on EQ.

### **3. Key stakeholders**

When you move up the corporate ladder, you will have a more complex web of relationships with a broader range of stakeholders. While you may have your own team, it isn't sufficient to help you accomplish your goals. You will need to “borrow” other teams' resources. In turn, they will want to leverage on yours as well. So independence needs to co-exist with interdependence. Also noteworthy is the fact that you and these stakeholders may frequently not see eye-to-eye. Your priorities will be different, and your goals may be in conflict.

### **4. Adding values appropriate to your level<sup>2</sup>**

What values are you required to bring to the organization as a manager? How do you know you have added the values that are appropriate to the level that you are in?

In my experience working with managers at all levels, I frequently find this concept largely unrecognized and poorly understood. It is not uncommon even for senior managers to be operating far below their assigned levels. When managers aren't clear about what values are appropriate to their level, they usually default to doing their subordinates' jobs. You will find numerous

examples of this in the various anecdotes sprinkled throughout this book.

Let's refer now to the case of Janet in the managerial anecdote. Upon her promotion, her responsibilities were to lead her team of three product specialists to oversee two product categories: hair care as well as skin care.

The values appropriate to her level will be as follows: (a) Achieving results through her team, (b) Guiding and developing her people to be more effective and (c) Enabling her people to excel through appropriate processes, systems and communication.

Unfortunately, she fell short of all three values. She did not lead or develop her people and failed to communicate with them. Instead of providing guidance for work to be done, she left them in the lurch and behaved as though she was still a product specialist for hair care, ignoring the other important part of her portfolio—skin care. And eventually, her poor business results did her in.

## IMPLICATIONS ON YOUR CAREER PROGRESSION

As a first-time manager, you are also called a first-line manager. This is the first managerial level in an organization and it requires you to supervise people directly. There are many other levels beyond this. Typically, the next level will be a middle manager who supervises first-line managers. After that, it is a division manager. A step higher will be the general manager. Then a VP, and finally, all the way up to the CEO.

As you climb higher up the corporate ladder, your playing field will continue to expand. There will be bigger responsibilities and expectations, and the challenges that you will handle will become more complex and strategic.

The bottom line is this: throughout your career, in order to continue your upward trajectory, you will have to constantly reinvent yourself by learning, unlearning and relearning. The good news is that the fundamentals that you inculcate as a first-time manager will form a bedrock foundation for you as you scale

greater heights. You will be paid back in spades now and then in future if you master the principles explained here.

Many companies are becoming aware that they can't just promote people to managerial positions. They need to help them make the transition as well. This is especially important for first-line managers because they form the pool from which candidates for other management positions will be drawn in the years to come. When companies encounter chronic leadership difficulties at various levels, these can largely be traced back to that first transition into the roles of first-time managers. As these companies expand, they will find that there aren't sufficient capable internal candidates for higher positions.

In contrast, if rookie managers were properly guided in the first leadership transition, they will be better equipped to lead and positively impact their environment and the people who work with them. With the passage of time, they will also grow in experience and capabilities, and be ready for greater responsibilities. With every step up the ladder, they will add and create better value.

It is necessary to recognize that not everybody has the aptitude to become a manager. There are some who prefer to become subject matter experts. If your interests are in this direction, talk to your boss and HR people and explore the possibility of going up the technical ladder instead of the managerial ladder.



- When you become a manager, doing more of what has worked previously will not do. You will have to reinvent yourself in four critical ways.
- Not everybody has the aptitude to become a manager. There are some who prefer to remain as subject matter experts.

# For Review Only



Q1: If you were Janet in the managerial anecdote, what would you have done differently when you got promoted?

Q2: What are the values that you need to add as a manager? Who can help you validate that they are appropriate to your level? See the Leadership Turns Framework in Appendix Four.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BH Tan is one of Asia's leading executive coaches, leadership consultants and educators specializing in leadership development in a culturally-diverse environment. He is the president of Lead Associates ([www.leadassociates.com.sg](http://www.leadassociates.com.sg)).

In the last 12 years, BH has worked with hundreds of senior executives in a wide range of industries. He has coached CEOs, presidents, VPs and middle managers in Asia, the United States and Europe, and top executive teams, to enhance their growth and effectiveness and bring greater value to their organizations. Leaders who have worked with BH Tan value his unique ability to provoke insightful perspectives arising from his practical and real world experience.

Prior to becoming an executive coach, BH was a senior business executive with 25 years of international leadership experience, working extensively in many parts of Asia, including various ASEAN countries, China, India, Taiwan, Korea, Japan as well as in the United States and Western Europe. He served at VP level in a number of well-known MNCs.

He has consulted with many leading international firms and organizations including AMD, L'Oreal, Dell, Johnson & Johnson, International Flavors & Fragrances, Microsoft, TSMC, BASF, Sanofi-Aventis, Exane Derivatives and Lafarge.

He lives in Singapore with his wife Boon Hwa and two daughters, Andrea and Amelia. He enjoys travelling, reading, jogging and listening to music.