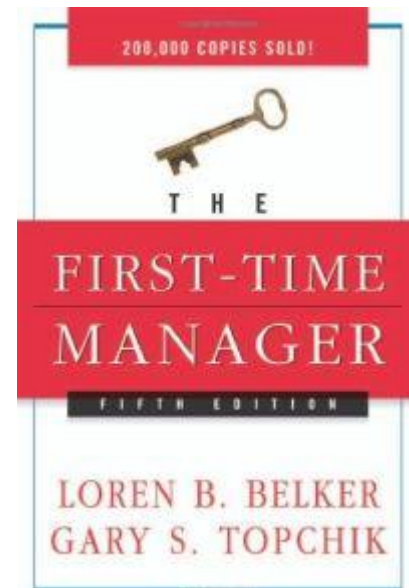


## The First-Time Manager

Loren B. Belker

### Recommendation

Many rookie managers feel like imposters until they grow into their jobs, but if you are scaling that learning curve, help has arrived. Authors Loren B. Belker and Gary S. Topchik provide managerial coaching for new occupants of corner offices (or, at least, of cubes with windows). The text provides novice managers with concrete examples, solid discussions, helpful suggestions and insights on a wide menu of corporate challenges. Although the book is redundant in spots, and needs more extensive chapter summaries, it is a terrific tutorial for managers. “Good Book Summary” recommends this book to everyone in managerial slots, especially those who just arrived.



### Take-Aways

- Most corporations rely on sudden-immersion management training. Instead of sinking or swimming, find your own mentors and development resources.
- Excellent managers are superior students of human behaviour.
- Manage fairly; do not let office friendships influence your decisions. Strike a balance. Don't micromanage, but don't neglect key details.
- Earning trust, loyalty and confidence is time-consuming.
- Give staffers constructive praise to convey appreciation, value and respect.
- Use strategic verbal and nonverbal hints to end long or useless conversations.
- Maintain open communication with all rungs of the corporate ladder.
- From training to conflict resolution to dealing with difficult employees, use your human resources department as an ally.
- Carefully document employee reviews and discipline procedures with concrete facts and specific examples. Use termination when all else fails.
- Guard your tongue. Inappropriate comments, ill-tempered outbursts or breaches of confidentiality could derail your career and spark lawsuits.

## Summary

### The Rookie

The good news: You've been promoted to management. The bad news: Not everyone wishes you well. What's more, your company may not provide the training or the tools that you need as a first-time manager. The challenge is daunting, but you will handle the office maze much more capably if you keep the following concepts in mind:

- Managing a team significantly differs from being the team superstar.
- As the team captain or manager you should keep your eyes on the entire field. Don't get lost in minor league details.
- Successful managers learn to delegate.
- Leaders motivate; office dictators often fail.

### The Welcome Mat

In addition to a new office and a new title, you may also encounter jealousy, hidden agendas, pointless flattery and resistance. Fortunately, most staff members regard new managers with a "wait-and-see" attitude, which is a healthy, balanced approach to change. Patience and restraint will serve you well as you proceed. From the beginning, don't bark out commands from your new dugout, be aware of not talking more than you listen, try not to become falsely friendly with new reports and never turn into a know-it-all. Do seek out each staff member for a one-on-one conversation, maintain an atmosphere of fairness, and express sincere interest in the goals and concerns of your new staff members.

### Cultivating Confidence and Trust

Face it: You're not going to win trust, confidence and loyalty overnight. It's a deliberate process. Think about the baseball diamond. Let your players score the runs; your role is to create a strategy that will get your team on base and on the scoreboard.

*"Unfortunately, many companies don't go through a very thorough process in choosing those who are to be moved into managerial positions."*

Don't belittle your employees or impose inhumanely high standards. Perfectionism is a trap that will catch even your best staffers in an atmosphere of resentment and defeat. Set reasonable targets that will develop team spirit and motivate improvement.

### Demonstrating Appreciation

Constructive feedback is an important tool for fostering a positive, productive workplace. Take these steps to make sure that the praise you offer acts as pragmatic feedback:

- **Give specific details** - Use concrete facts to praise or change staff behaviour.

- **Connect the dots** - Demonstrate how smaller details operate within the context of the overall departmental or corporate game plan.
- **Don't go overboard** - Stick to the facts. Avoid extreme dramatisations.
- **Don't hoard secrets** - Chop down the office grapevine by creating an open, secret-free environment.

*"Don't believe that everyone is happy about the choice of the new kid on the block"*

Active listening is also a powerful management tool. As an engaged listener, ask questions, summarize the speaker's main points, and provide appropriate verbal and non-verbal feedback. Active listeners avoid unnecessary interruptions, self-centred asides and "know-it-all" comments. Smart managers do not get enchanted with their own rhetoric.

### **Tasks and Pitfalls**

Managers wear many hats. In different scenarios you will serve as a teacher, motivator, coach, standard-bearer and enforcer. Your different roles fall into six basic tasks:

1. Staff recruitment.
2. Communication about department and corporate goals.
3. Resource management and planning.
4. Project development.
5. Staff training.
6. Personnel assessment.

*"Never make it personal."*

Novice managers often become overly engaged in their old tasks or place greater emphasis on their previous functions within their departments.

Although it is difficult, let go of your former roles. Don't let your old job become your new hobby. Look ahead. Don't micromanage. Focus on the complete picture. A balanced perspective will help you climb each rung of the corporate ladder.

### **Hiring 101**

The hiring process involves a menu of tests, ranging from aptitude exams to drug tests. But very few screens measure or report employee attitude - the most important element in the office.

*"The best performer doesn't always make the best manager."*

Detecting a job candidate's attitude is a difficult challenge that demands acute listening and interviewing skills. Three questions will help you assess an applicant's attitude:

1. What were your favourite tasks at your previous job?
2. Describe your last manager. How did you relate to him or her?
3. What was your least favourite chore at your last post?

*"The more you talk, the more you run the risk of boring others."*

If several candidates are competing closely for a single position, let the needs of your company be a decisive factor. Choose quickly and inform everyone of your choice. Brief your new hire on salary, work hours and any trial period. Make sure that everyone is on the same page about the job's requirements, benefits and compensation.

### **Training 101**

As a novice manager, you may feel insecure about your ability to perform every position in your department. Avoid that trap. You are responsible for the total results of your department, but you are not expected to carry out every job. Don't try to do it all.

*"Being loyal doesn't mean selling your soul."*

Your job is to make sure that everyone else is well-trained for his or her job. Ask seasoned employees to demonstrate specific chores to new employees. Choose trainers with excellent attitudes. Don't let a new hire be infected with the bug of discontentment. The training period also provides a good opportunity for reviewing corporate standards and department goals.

*"People don't act upon the facts; they act upon their perception of the facts."*

Write a complete job profile for each position. Heed input from employees and senior managers. A good job description has three elements: a list of the job's requirements, including technical ability and education; an explanation of the required attitude and behaviour; and an overview of the necessary people skills.

### **The Layers Above**

Middle managers are sandwiches in the corporate food chain. Like a cold cut on bread, you are pressed between layers of corporate dough. Therefore, as a rookie manager, you need to pay equal attention to junior staffers and to senior managers. When dealing with upper management, be sure that you brief your boss about the goals, strategies and successes of your department. Be mindful of your manager's time limits; provide logical, fact-filled reports. Finally, respect the opinions of senior executives.

*"Complainers are dangerous because the 'fever' easily spreads to others."*

Unfortunately, you will inevitably encounter a problem manager. Try to understand the dynamics. Ask yourself: Does this manager have a difficult relationship with most people or is this situation unique to me? Try to discuss and resolve the conflict with the person involved. Even a difficult boss may respond positively to feedback. What if your new boss detests feedback from underlings? In that case, try to find a seasoned in-house mentor with the political skills to tutor you through difficult situations. Your mentor may volunteer or suggest a third-party mediator to help resolve the impasse.

*“Status symbols are the icing on the cake; they are not the cake itself.”*

You could consider requesting assistance from your manager’s manager, but tread carefully and be wary. Taking this route could be the cure or it could permanently damage your relationship with your direct boss. Consider looking for a new assignment within the company or a new job altogether.

## **Difficult Employees**

As a manager, you may also have to deal with a wide range of problem employees. The list of personnel pitfalls includes employees who are combative, ditzy or attention grabbing. You might have to cope with a class clown or an obsessive workaholic. Don’t jump to conclusions, though. Circumstances can intervene to disrupt the performance of otherwise excellent employees, who can be thrown off track by sudden illnesses, personal problems or financial upheaval.

*“Don’t give up on people too soon; you may find you have the ability to reach them.”*

Don’t try to solve every problem that crosses your employees’ desks. Inappropriate or faulty assistance, no matter how well intentioned, can even create legal liability for you and your company. "Employee Assistance Programs" (EAPs), generally administered by the Human Resources department, offer employees various ways to deal with a wide range of personal, physical, psychological and financial problems. EAPs are also an option for staffers with substance abuse problems.

## **Discipline 101**

Avoid office surprises. Keep your employees updated on corporate standards and provide constant feedback about performance. To handle lackluster performance or wayward behaviour:

- Provide early clear warnings about problem areas.
- Avoid personal or combative comments.
- Maintain two-way communication. Don’t lecture. Listen and then speak up.
- Document warnings and reviews with memos.

- Consider reducing merit pay - or even firing the employee - if repeat warnings yield little improvement.

## **Terminations and Corporate Divorce**

Don't rush the firing process. Carefully examine the situation. Did the employee have proper training and adequate warnings? Was the employee fully informed about corporate procedures? Have you documented your efforts to help, train and redirect the employee? Was the employee fairly treated? Would another department offer a more appropriate placement? Was the employee a target of sexual, racial, religious or age-related discriminatory remarks? The wrong answers to any of those questions could lead to a lawsuit. Cover your bases. Watch out for signs of a hostile workplace. Those signs include sexual humour, inappropriate gestures, and the unfair distribution of perks and special treatment.

*"We fall or rise by our self-image."*

Corporate buyouts and mergers often spur layoffs and reassignments, major changes that typically begin within six months after a buyout is consummated. As a manager, you might be charged with slashing staff or cutting salaries. Minimise the drama of such dismissals with a professional but compassionate attitude. Listen carefully to terminated employees. Safeguard their dignity and provide financial coverage for unused vacation and sick days. Above all, maintain confidentiality.

## **Sparking Spirit**

Generating team spirit is a crucial skill. Your managerial success will depend on your ability to lead others toward a shared vision. To accomplish this task, provide:

- Precise goals for each unit and individual.
- Specific, reliable instructions.
- Constant feedback.
- Positive cooperation.
- A good example.

*"You have to keep an honest perspective on who you are."*

If you encounter difficulties, tap into the resources that are available to you through the HR office. Seek out employer-sponsored training to help you establish the right environment in your department. After all, you're in charge now.

# GoodBook Summary

## About the Author

**Loren B. Belker**, an official at a major insurance company for nearly three decades, also wrote the four earlier editions of *The First-Time Manager*. Gary S. Topchik, managing partner of a management development consulting firm, also wrote *The Accidental Manager* and *Managing Workplace Negativity*.