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Supporting New Managers

by Sue Dorward

In June, I had the privilege of coaching and presenting at an executive education program sponsored by the Society for Women Engineers (SWE) and Smith College Executive Education for Women. **From Specialist to Strategist: Business Excellence for Women in Science, Technology and Engineering** is a management development program for women four to ten years into their careers who are poised to assume first-line management positions or higher levels of leadership. This annual program is just three years old, fills up early, and has grown each year. This year there were 75 participants from around the world, hailing from such blue chip companies as IBM, Kimberly-Clark, and Rockwell Automation.

This year the program included a new, highly integrated coaching component. A team of five coaches ensured that all participants could have a coaching session if desired. About a third of the participants indicated that their companies offer them coaching and mentoring, which I found very encouraging. Companies are starting to understand the value of coaching their junior leaders, not just the executives, especially as baby-boomer managers look forward to retirement and need to groom qualified successors.

CHALLENGES

I coached 15 of the program's participants for 30 minutes each. These women impressed me with their competence, desire to succeed, and company loyalty. Not surprisingly, however, I noticed that they shared common challenges. Some of the women felt isolated, with no support in addressing their most difficult management challenges. They had no mentors or coaches and did not feel comfortable turning to their managers for help (due to not having a solid relationship with their managers, not wanting to reveal the challenges to their managers, or the managers' time constraints).

Another common theme was dealing with a difficult person in the workplace. A former peer may have sour grapes about the participant's promotion to management, sometimes due to the peer valuing technical skills over soft skills and not understanding that soft skills are necessary for successful management and leadership. A subordinate may be generally difficult to manage, a challenge for any new manager. Or a coworker may constantly challenge new ideas, making a new manager feel threatened, defensive, or insecure. The participants

found these situations quite stressful and expended a lot of mental energy trying to figure out how to deal with these people.

SUPPORT

What can we do to support these new managers? Make sure that any new manager has one or two people to whom they can turn for effective, timely support. Also, help them anticipate whom among their co-workers may be difficult to deal with in their new role, and provide suggestions and resources for dealing with these people successfully. Laying some groundwork with such people as well as the new managers up front can make a positive difference in the new managers' confidence, attitude, and overall success.

ADVICE

You may recall that in the last EMS newsletter I introduced a new "the best advice we ever took" initiative, an effort to help support junior engineers and managers by passing down words of wisdom from those with more experience. At the **Specialist to Strategist** program, I gave a presentation on courageous leadership. At the end, I explained my best advice initiative, distributed note cards, and asked the participants to write down the best advice that they ever took. I wanted to see what advice they had to pass on, but also to get a better understanding of what advice they themselves found to be the most valuable. In some cases, their advice helps us understand what they have found useful in addressing the challenges that they have had to face so far, and in other cases it highlights how limited the advice is that they have to draw on at this important time in their careers.

I am working on a separate article that will include some of their responses, but I would like to share here the advice provided anonymously by some of the participants:

1. You need someone to take over your job before you can move up. Don't feel good when you are needed.
2. When giving presentations, remember, you are the expert.
3. You need to learn how to change light bulbs, hammer, etc. You can do anything a guy can do.
4. Learn to play golf. Decisions are made on the golf course.
5. Remember, it can always get worse!

Did the advice make you smile but, at the same time, give you a sinking feeling that we need to do more to help junior managers? Don't you just want to reach out and give them a helping hand? What advice do you have for new managers? Please email me with your advice for them!

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