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Alumni Unscripted: Three Qualities to Succeed as a First-Time Manager

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Managing employees for the first time is both an exciting and nerve-wracking experience. However, if done well, it can be the most rewarding and impactful work you ever do—for you, your employees and the business as a whole. So what qualities do you need to succeed as a new people manager? I believe the best managers are caring, clear and coaches.

### Caring

It was the visionary of the hospitality industry, J.W. Marriott, that said, “If you take care of your people, they will take care of your customers and your business will take care of itself.” I believe no truer words have ever been spoken when it comes to leading people.
Your job as a manager is to take care of people and deliver results. If your focus is people, you will get both an engaged team and the results you are responsible for. If you focus purely on results, you will likely get neither. Why? People want to work for people they like, respect and trust. I’m not saying you should be everyone’s best friend, but when was the last time you worked really hard for someone you couldn’t stand to be around? Your direct reports will give discretionary effort and accomplish amazing results when you take the time to build an individual relationship with each member of your team.

Here are a few ways to show your care for your team members:

- **Learn their story:** I have a template I use with everyone I hire called “Me in 5 Minutes.” It asks a few simple questions but helps me get to know what they like, what they don’t like, and how I can most effectively work with them.
- **Do an off-site:** Nothing builds team camaraderie like getting away from the office. Consider holding a planning meeting at the start of the year that involves something non-work related like bowling, a movie, a dinner or a service project.
- **Recognize your team members in a meaningful way:** One of the best questions you can ask your employees is “How do you like to be recognized?” I’ll never forget when a leader pulled me up on stage in front of 300 people and recognized my efforts on a project. I wanted to crawl in a hole! I’d much rather have a handwritten note. Bad recognition is no recognition at all. Be sure you’re praising your team on their terms, not yours!
- **Do 1-on-1’s:** I meet with every person on my teams at least one time every two weeks. These 1-on-1 meetings are so valuable for relationship building and setting clear direction. Guard this time. You are not too busy for it!
- **Listen for little things:** I’ll never forget when one of my employees asked me, “Do you think I could have some post-it notes?” I thought, “That’s it???” And it was! Sometimes meeting the simplest needs makes all the difference in employee engagement.

**Clear**

The best managers are crystal clear in the goals and expectations they set for each employee. Don’t miss this. *The single most important thing you will ever do as a manager is set clear performance goals for every member of your team.* Most companies have a format or process in which this is done, but I urge you to do it well. Clear direction up front, accompanied by regular check-ins, alleviates all sorts of pain, frustration and misunderstanding when it comes time for performance reviews.

Here are a few ways to be clear with your team members:

- **Agree on goals:** I like to have my team members take the first stab at writing their own performance goals for the year. I edit and re-direct them, and then we meet and finalize the goals together. This creates mutual buy-in and everyone feels in control of their destiny for the year.
• **Use S.M.A.R.T. formatting:** This seems obvious, but I’ve seen a lot of poorly worded goals that lead to confusion and frustration. A great goal is **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Attainable**, **Relevant**, and **Time-bound**. Leave nothing open to interpretation.

• **Adjust as needed:** I have yet to have a year where I didn’t adjust an employee’s performance goals mid-year. Simply put, business changes fast! If a goal is no longer relevant (the “R” in S.M.A.R.T.), don’t be too inflexible to adjust. Work with that team member to reset a meaningful goal.

**Coaches**

After my very short-lived NFL career came to a close, I was a head high school football coach for about four years. I was responsible for a staff of 12 coaches and a program of more than 100 players. I can’t tell you what a great proving ground coaching football was for me as a leader of others!

Think about what great coaches do. They challenge and inspire. They plan and set direction. They give feedback and develop talent. And ultimately, they are judged on one result—winning. Sounds like being a manager in the workplace to me. If you want to succeed in leading others, I’d suggest taking on the mindset of a coach.

Here are a few ways to be a coaching manager:

• **Ask, don’t tell:** In his book “Drive,” author Daniel Pink says one of the biggest things people want at work is autonomy. Autonomy is simply freedom from control. In short, no one likes a micromanager! Get in the habit of asking questions, not telling people what to do. I have learned that asking my teams “What do you think?” is far more powerful than sharing my own opinions.

• **Let them figure out how:** I once had a manager tell me “You’ll figure it out.” In the moment that made me mad, but looking back, I did figure it out, and it was one of the best developmental experiences I ever had. Legendary General George S. Patton said, “Don’t tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and let them surprise you with the results.” A coaching manager defines **WHY** the work matters and **WHAT** needs to be accomplished. It is not your job to tell people **HOW** to do their work. Support them as needed and watch their creativity blossom!

• **Give feedback early and often:** So many managers miss teachable moments because they are afraid they will hurt an employee’s feelings. But what if someone came to you and said, “I have a piece of information that might help you do your job better. Do you want it?” I think we would all say “YES!” Giving feedback, even if hard, is so valuable in developing your employees’ talents. I’ve heard it said that great feedback must be timely, truthful and transparent. Don’t shy away from telling your team what they are doing well and what they could do better. And ask for the same from them on how you can improve as their manager!

Being a manager is a great challenge, but the impact you can have on others and the rewards of watching your employees grow makes it an adventure that is well worth it. If you’ll strive to be
caring, clear and in the mindset of a coach, you’ll have an engaged team that delivers great results!

Tim Hiller is a two-time graduate of the Haworth College of Business, earning his bachelors degree in sales and business marketing in 2008 and his MBA in management in 2012. Hiller played quarterback at WMU from 2005-09, leading the Broncos to two bowl games and spending time with four different NFL teams. Today, he leads the Talent Management function of the Instruments Division of Stryker, where he directs the strategy and execution of all personal, professional, sales and leadership development for more than 1,500 employees. In addition, Hiller is an in-demand speaker and the co-founder and owner of Next Level Performance, which builds leadership and character in student-athletes through the platform of athletics.