The transition from individual contributor to new manager represents a pivotal, complex juncture for both the new manager and an organization. This new manager group is extremely important to the quality of the organization’s succession plan as this group is the ‘feeder’ group for all other management positions. The patterns of behavior learned during this transition will affect how the new manager will lead in the future. In many cases, companies fail to provide appropriate support to new managers.

There are high human and financial costs associated with not making the transition. When new managers do not make the shift and spend their time doing individual contributor work, the cost of every transaction is increased and other employees’ development is being compromised (Charan et al., 2001). A more costly scenario is when the organization not only fails to gain a new, effective manager, but also loses an exceptional individual contributor or technologist (R. Hill & McCullough, 1998). Even still, there is limited academic research that focuses on first-time managers.

The research questions

In this paper, I took a closer look at the transition from the perspective of new managers. I focused on what new managers needed to learn in order to be successful as managers of people, how they learned these skills and competencies and what support the organization initiated.

The research was designed to study the following questions from the perspective of the new manager:

1) What do new managers consider the most important skills and competencies to develop as a manager?
2) How do they learn these skills and competencies?
   a. What resources have been most influential? Why?
   b. Who has been most influential? Why?
3) What support did the organization initiate to provide these resources and to help develop these relationships?
4) Is there a difference in the perceptions of new managers who are meeting expectations and new managers who are exceeding expectations?

The research design

The participants in this study were employed by one Fortune 500, global consumer products company. The eight participants had recently transitioned from an individual contributor role to an operations manager role. These new managers were interviewed using a semi-structured process.

The findings

The following themes emerged in the data:

Informal learning as primary learning process

The primary learning processes cited by new managers in this study were informal. Informal learning can be described as the unstructured learning that occurs outside of the classroom. This type of learning is typically unintentional, spontaneous, highly contextual and situated. Conversely, formal learning is intentional, structured learning that occurs inside of a classroom setting and is typically directed by an instructor. I have plotted the extremes along a learning continuum in Figure A. In this study, the managers’ learning falls close to the right end of the learning continuum. Likewise, the U.S. workforce has also moved toward an informal, experience-based approach to development. According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), learning in the workplace has shifted from predominantly formal, short-term instruction delivered by an expert to more informal, strategically-focused learning guided by internal employees (Bierema & Gilley, 2001).

Experiential learning as primary learning process

When asked how they learned, the new managers were able to

Figure A: The learning continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Learning</th>
<th>Informal Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occurs inside the classroom</td>
<td>Occurs outside the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>Unstructured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intentional content</td>
<td>Unintentional content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher driven</td>
<td>Learner driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberate</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
characterize their foremost learning process as ‘trial and error,’ ‘on the job’ or ‘learning by doing.’ This experiential learning was highly influenced by their context (immediate social and environmental systems, including culture) and the variety of new and different experiences. Many theorists, especially those grounded in the constructivist learning theories, believe that experiential learning is one of the best ways for people to learn. If people construct knowledge based on their interpretation of an experience in an attempt to make sense of and draw meaning from their environment (Driscoll, 1994), then content should not be separated from the use of the content (as in formal learning strategies). Constructivists contend that people learn most effectively when they try to understand concepts in the real-world context in which they are found (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992).

Inherent influencing factors: Context, relationships and experiences

A new manager’s work environment or context is where they think, learn and act. The context embodies the espoused beliefs and desired behaviors of a successful manager. Unsurprisingly, context is the most influencing factors found in my research.

New managers are influenced by the interactions with their immediate social systems. They draw on these relationships for perspective, feedback, advice and emotional support. It is important for the new manager to demonstrate intrapersonal (understanding of oneself) and interpersonal skills (understanding of other people) to develop relationships and to be accepted as a competent, trustworthy, credible member of the social system.

New managers need practice being a manager. New managers who are exposed to new and different experiences, especially experiences leading change, have a distinct advantage in achieving success.

Similar and additional influencing factors were identified by other research. These include task variation, opportunities to consult experts inside and outside of the workplace, changes in duties and work that stimulates learning (Eraut, Alderton, Cole, & Senker, 2000), roles that allow for participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and facilitation of informal communication, problem solving and innovation within such communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Others also believe that structures and incentives for knowledge sharing and opportunity for job mobility also promote informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

An underestimation of the importance of informal learning

Informal learning is difficult to recognize and measure, but it is assumed to represent up to 90% of all learning in the workplace (Sorohan, 1993). Said another way, informal learning represents an overwhelming majority of learning in the workplace. Yet, informal training in the workplace is under-researched and under-represented as a part of management learning programs. Most of the energy invested in management development has been directed at improving formal learning. Generally, studies on learning in the workplace, like this study, have been limited to specific organizations and struggle to measure and compare the quality of learning experiences (Skule, 2004).

The recommendations

Based on key themes synthesized from my research and the research of others, I make the following recommendations:

1. Make direct managers aware of their important role in a new manager’s informal learning
2. Teach direct managers to be active management coaches and active models
3. Encourage new managers to connect with existing informal networks
4. Find ways to make informal learning more “structured” and deliberate

Making direct managers aware of their role in new manager’s informal learning

The new managers in this study put a spotlight on the importance of their relationships with their direct managers. These more experienced managers influenced what and how the new managers learned through their discussions and by demonstrating how to be a manager. Most direct managers, however, are unaware of their important influence. Organizations can help enhance these relationships by setting clear expectations for the direct manager’s role in new manager development and by teaching direct managers what this role should look like and how to do it. There are two obvious places to start: Direct managers need to learn what it means to be an active coach and an active model.
Teaching direct managers to be active management coaches

A direct manager can support a new manager's informal learning processes by providing ongoing coaching. New managers rely on direct managers for advice, a more experienced perspective, feedback and emotional support, all important elements of coaching. In many cases, they will solicit help from their direct manager as they reflect and conceptualize a past experience or prepare for a future experience. Instead of waiting for the new manager to seek them out, direct managers can initiate these types of reflective and preparatory conversations. This will be particularly helpful at the beginning of the new manager's transition so as to foster good learning habits.

With that said, direct managers need to know how to be good coaches. Typically, direct manager capability is not a focus of new manager development. However, organizations should consider their significant influence on a new manager.

Teaching direct managers to be active models

New managers learned how to be a manager by observing the behaviors of more experienced managers, primarily their direct managers. However, direct managers were passive models of management. There is opportunity for direct managers to take a more active role in this informal learning process.

One way is for direct managers to facilitate a cognitive apprenticeship, a concept borrowed from the cognitive sciences (Duncan, 1996). Cognitive apprenticeships closely follow the instructional strategies from traditional apprenticeships. In a traditional apprenticeship, 'experts' model real-world activities and explain what is being done and why it is being done that way as they go along. The apprentice then models the expert's behavior with the expert nearby to provide corrective feedback and coaching. As the apprentice becomes more experienced, the experts grant the apprentice more authority and freedom to act (Johnson, 1992). Translating this to manager development, the experienced manager models the desired behavior for the new manager and provides coaching to help him/her get to the desired performance (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1988). The expert's (direct manager's) deliberate sharing of his/her implicit knowledge is what makes a cognitive apprenticeship more valuable. This “thinking out loud modeling” (Duncan, 1996) is critical to the learning process as it gives the new manager insight into why the more experienced manager chose to do something a certain way.

Encouraging new managers to connect with existing informal networks

Good informal networks, forums and environments exist within organizations. These informal networks are important enablers of knowledge sharing and informal learning. It often takes time for new managers to recognize their potential influence on their learning. Often new to a context, it also takes time to discover and utilize these networks and environments. Experienced managers can coach new managers to be more deliberate about plugging into these networks and invite them into their own informal networks.

Finding ways to make informal learning more “structured” and deliberate

As I have mentioned in my findings, informal learning is often more accidental and unstructured than deliberate and planned. Organizations whose goal is to create a supportive informal learning culture find ways to create experiences and environments where informal learning can take place. A significant opportunity for future research is this area of informal learning design. One of the challenges with designing informal learning experiences will be how to preserve the easy, free-flowing exchange of ideas/knowledge of less structured informal learning. When organizations try to provide more structure to informal learning environments, what typically occurs is that people's overall posture stiffens, ideas flow less freely and people provide less candid feedback to each other. New approaches are needed to overcome these limitations of student learning.

Developing talented new managers is a critical, strategic challenge for organizations. The insights gained from this exploratory study can be used by organizations as they design management development programs that optimize this important transition and thus, beget a higher level of performance from their new managers.

References

Optimizing the Transition from Individual Contributor to New Manager

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About This Research

This article is an executive summary of Nicole’s Capstone (thesis) research, conducted from Spring 2006-Spring 2007. Her Capstone advisor was Kimberly Scott, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Director of Northwestern’s MSLOC Program.

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