ONE
Starting out

1.1 I have just been appointed to my first managerial post – and it's scary. How do I get over this apprehension?
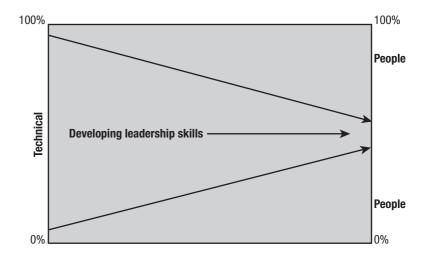
To be apprehensive about such an important career move is quite natural. For the first time, you have been formally appointed to look after the working lives of other people – and 'people' is the key word here.

Up to now, you will probably have undertaken a particular technical role comprising the execution of tasks for which you had sole responsibility, and for the success of which you were accountable to your manager. Your focus was therefore on learning the skills which enabled you to develop excellence in doing those tasks free, generally speaking, from concern about your colleagues and how they were performing.

This task focus must now give way to **people focus**. The issue becomes of paramount importance if dealing with other people does not come naturally to you. Unfortunately, promotions to managerial roles are often made on the back of technical excellence rather than potential people skills.

In future your prime concern will be the members of your team and ensuring that the team as a whole performs effectively – and that means starting to learn new skills which help you to understand, motivate, develop, lead and communicate with a group of individuals with very different thoughts, feelings and outlook. If you should find people relationships difficult at this stage, you will

need to put in serious effort to reinvent yourself as a manager and leader. The tips and techniques to help you do this form the substance of this book.
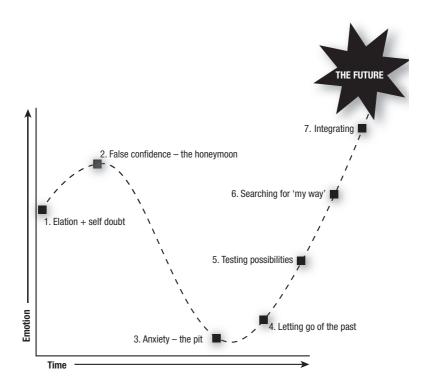
In summary, your former life will have probably focused 80% on the task and 20% on people; as a rule of thumb, your new role should begin to shift that ratio towards exactly the opposite position.

None of us likes the **process of change** very much and this is another cause for justified apprehension. However much you look forward rationally to your new role, adjustment to it and the new demands it makes upon you produces an emotional reaction.

The stages of transition follow a well recognized pattern. You start with a mixture of elation when told you've got the job and a 'what have I let myself in for' type of self-doubt. You then begin the role with an 'in fact, this is ok' type of false confidence approach (the honeymoon period), but quickly realize how much you need to learn and how demanding the role in fact is. At this point you may become quite anxious, realizing that the past has gone and that the future will require real effort to enable you to come to terms with the now

permanent differences in your working life. It then requires serious effort to move out of this 'pit', but things will start to get better as you experiment with new ways of doing things, discover the management methods which best suit you and your team, and finally become totally integrated into your new role.

The transition process just described looks like this:

All those embarking on change should be aware of this process and that we are all subject to it.
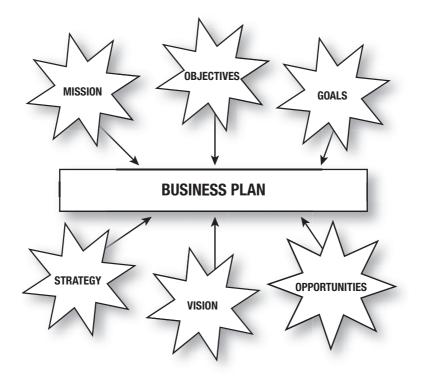
1.2   What can I do ahead of starting the role to ease the transition?

Don't wait until Day 1 of the new job before thinking about what it will involve. Freshly appointed managers should do some basic background research before embarking on what will be a very different role.

The starting point should be the **job description**. You will have discussed what the job entails at your interview. Now get hold of the formal document and think through and visualize what each area of your responsibilities will look like. At this stage, you will gain an initial feel for both what is likely to go well fairly quickly and what may cause you a few problems as you get underway.

Next, find a **mentor**. This should be someone who has had experience in the past of undertaking the same sort of role. Your mentor could be within your organization or working outside it. In the case of the former, it should not be your line manager who would have conflicting interests in undertaking this dual role. Your mentor should be someone independent from your direct working life, someone with the wisdom and 'grey hairs' to advise you as to how you might proceed in problematic situations.

You will also find it useful at this stage to research the up to date **business plan** of your organization. This will give you the big picture of what your employer is all about and where the corporate future is perceived to lie. Learn the (currently unfashionable) mission statement; discover what the organization's values are; consider its goals, and the strategy it is using to implement the business plan.

Armed with this knowledge, you should now seek out your new **line manager** and discuss with him/her how your department's or function's activities lock into the big picture, what the priorities are and what is expected of you in the early days of your job. It will also be an opportunity to discover any particular problems you are likely to inherit and have to deal with at an early stage. Make sure you do not leave this meeting without taking with you any useful documentation which is likely to provide a more detailed insight into the issues you have discussed.

It would also be a good idea, ahead of starting if possible, or at the latest on the first morning if not, to meet **your team** as a group in an informal setting, just to be introduced/introduce yourself so that your team members can get a feel for the person they will be working with in future. Like speed dating, it is surprising how much

one can sense and learn about a person within the first couple of minutes of meeting them. Don't underestimate the impact of that first team session.

It is less likely that you will meet individual **team members** ahead of starting, but you should certainly do this within the first week as part of your induction process. These meetings will enable you to find out about individual roles, and thoughts and feelings about how things are. They will also break the ice and significantly help with the 'people' issues and the development of your own thinking about your role and the future.

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Case study

Michael was appointed to his first managerial role and took the steps outlined above to help him come to terms with his new responsibilities and to learn something about his team. One factor that came to light informally was that an older team member resented Michael's appointment and let it be known socially that he was going to give Michael a difficult 'testing out' when he started for real. Michael went to see the mentor he had selected and asked for advice as to how to handle this potentially damaging situation. His mentor made two or three suggestions, including giving the awkward team member some additional status and responsibilities. This took the negative wind out of the team member's sails, and what could have proved to be a difficult relationship got off to a more solid start than might otherwise have been the case.

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1.3 I feel awkward about leading colleagues after being one of them for so long. How do I deal with this?

This question assumes that you have been promoted from within the team in which you currently work and now have responsibility for colleagues with whom previously you were 'one of the lads'.

This is indeed a tricky issue, and the solution involves a combination of developing respect and trust, and gradually creating some 'distance' between you and your team members.

It is highly probable that you will have been appointed in the first place partly because you already have the respect of your colleagues. If that respect was founded on your technical excellence, then you will need to be careful, since your new role is based on completely untried and untested managerial skills, hence the need to seek to develop these new skills as quickly as possible. Alternatively, you may have been viewed as a leader in waiting, in which case you may more naturally slip into the new role with the continuation and enhancement of pre-existing respect.

Trust will take time to develop. It will be based on your manifestation of competent managerial skills in an even-handed and fair manner within the team context, and, externally, of selling the team effectively to the outside world – internal and external customers. When team members come to see these skills consistently being displayed by you over time, their trust in you will grow and firm up. At the same time, they will relax into getting their jobs done without concern for the support they know they are receiving from you.
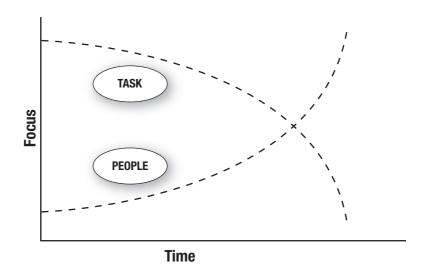
Trust and respect will inevitably and rightly produce some sense of **distance** between you and your team members. This is psychological distance born of the need to be able to exercise authority in those situations where you need to take a stance as leader. One ongoing example of this is your need to be able to give feedback on your team members' performance without fear or favour.

You will probably have socialized with team colleagues in the past. Continue to do so by all means, but when that Friday evening drinks session comes along, make sure you leave earlier than you would have done in the past before tongues become too loose and you may say something that adversely affects your credibility. Equally, seek out new networks outside the team. This will give you contacts with other managers with whom you will now have more in common from a daily work standpoint, and give you the natural opportunity to cut down your sessions with 'the lads'.

1.4 As a skilled technician, I don't want to abandon my technical skills entirely. What should I do?

Case study

Frank is a footballer in his mid-thirties. He has been and continues to be a great player for his club. He is held in high regard by his team mates. Following a typical, sudden departure of the manager, Frank agrees to take over. He begins his new role by continuing to include himself in the team for all the games, but soon realizes that the managerial responsibilities he has taken on are preventing him from fully concentrating on his footballing skills. Frank therefore concludes that if his playing days are to continue, he must drop back to a substitute's role. This he does, but again soon discovers that his fitness and on-the-field vision is deteriorating, and within six months of becoming team manager, he hangs up his boots and decides to concentrate his energies entirely on being a manager.

This is what is called the **player/manager syndrome**, and the footballing analogy applies equally to your own new role and how you are going to deal with it.

However, we live in a business age where the traditional concept of the people manager doing nothing but managing has gone. All managers are required to get their hands dirty to some extent, and this is why leadership, delegation and empowerment are now so important for the skilled manager to practice. Nevertheless, managing people effectively is a time consuming activity, and getting the balance right is critical. Depending on the size of your team and the nature of its work, you will be spending between no less than 40% and probably no more than 80% of your time on people management. Any less than 40%, and you will be failing in your role.

So the first word is of comfort to you – there will still be some technical tasks for you to do, but select their nature and amount wisely.

There are other ways to keep your hand in. Like Frank in the case study, one of your functions as a manager will be to coach your juniors. This in itself will keep your technical skills fresh. Equally, there may be occasions during holiday periods or temporary under-staffing where you need to spend more time than usual back at the

coal face. Or you could tackle technical issues from a completely different standpoint; for example, by setting up new operational systems and then monitoring and evaluating them.

Whatever you decide in terms of personal technical activity, remember that it is people management that is now your key function.

Summary

Here is a summary of some practical tips and techniques to help you over the scary period:

- Think through your task/people focus at present. Where am I on the scale and what must I do to help shift my focus?

- The change process will be difficult. Understand that to a greater or lesser extent you will follow the transition curve, and develop personal strategies to mitigate the effects of the 'down' periods.

- Read the new job description. This will put your planning into context and provide a framework.

- Find a mentor who has gone through this change before and seek their advice and wisdom.

- Begin by holding a general team meeting simply to say 'hello' so that the team can take an early view of how their new manager comes across. It is a truism that you can acquire a 'feel' for someone within the first minute of meeting them.

- Hold chats with all team members individually to find out about their roles, thoughts and feelings about how things are. These meetings will break the ice, and significantly help with the 'people' issues and developing your own thinking about your role and the future.

- Gain your team's respect and resulting trust by developing great managerial skills as soon as possible.

- Don't get too close to the team. Create some psychological distance to enable you to make people decisions without fear or favour.

- Break off your love affair with your technical skills and reduce it to one of simple friendship. Develop new and reduced ways of keeping your hand in with your technical expertise.