

# Building Better Managers

## The Skills New and Emerging Leaders Need Most

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Organizations often promote high performers into management roles with the hope that their strong work will naturally translate into strong leadership. But being great at the work and being great at leading people are two very different skill sets. New managers quickly discover that the habits that made them successful as individual contributors don't necessarily help them communicate expectations, navigate conflict or build trust within a team. Without the right support, even the most capable new managers can feel unsteady.

Stepping into leadership for the first time is one of the most consequential transitions in any career. A manager has more influence on day-to-day performance, engagement and retention than almost any other factor in the workplace. Teams look to their manager for clarity, consistency and direction — yet many new leaders begin the role without the tools or guidance they need. They often rely on instinct, trial and error, or what they've observed from past supervisors, whether those examples were effective or not.

The result is predictable: uneven communication, unclear expectations, and avoidable friction that slows work and strains relationships. With a few foundational skills and consistent, practical support, new leaders can show up with confidence and create team environments that are both productive and healthy.

# Great managers aren't born. They're built.



**At the heart of effective management are a set of core competencies that translate across industries and team structures. These are skills that can be developed through intentional practice and small adjustments to how leaders communicate and engage with their teams each day.**

## **Setting Clear Expectations**

One of the most common challenges for new managers is assuming their team “just knows” what good looks like. Clear expectations — what success looks like, who’s responsible for what, and how progress will be measured — give teams direction and reduce confusion. Even a short conversation at the start of a project can make a meaningful difference in alignment and accountability.

## **Communicating with Consistency**

Teams thrive when they understand how decisions are made, what’s changing, and why it matters. New leaders benefit from developing predictable communication rhythms: weekly touch points, task follow-ups, and quick clarity checks. Consistency builds trust and reduces the anxiety that comes from mixed signals or unclear priorities.

## **Navigating Conflict and Difficult Conversations**

New managers often shy away from conflict because they worry they’ll make things worse. But unresolved tension rarely goes away on its own. Managers who learn to approach conflict with curiosity, clarity, and respect quickly discover that even hard conversations can strengthen relationships and improve performance when handled well.

## **Developing Staff Through Coaching**

A manager’s greatest impact comes from helping others grow. Coaching isn’t a formal event — it’s a way of interacting. Asking open-ended questions, offering specific feedback, and acknowledging strengths helps employees feel seen and supported. These small moments build capability and confidence over time.

## **Modeling the Behaviors They Want to See**

New managers often underestimate how closely their teams watch them. The tone they set, the way they handle pressure, and the consistency of their follow-through shape the team’s norms more than any policy or training. When managers lead with clarity, steadiness, and respect, teams often rise to meet that standard.

Together, these skills form the backbone of effective management. They’re not complicated, but they do require attention and practice — something new managers rarely have the time or support to develop on their own.



# Strong management doesn't emerge from a promotion, it grows through steady, well-supported development.

If this [Insight](#) sparked ideas about how to better support your new or emerging managers, you'll find a complimentary **90-Day Success Plan for New Managers** below.

It reflects the kind of practical tools and steady support Mainline can bring to help organizations strengthen core leadership competencies and build a consistent, repeatable onboarding experience for every new manager.

## References

[“Why New Managers Need More Training” – Harvard Business Review \(Knight, 2019\)](#)

[“Developing New Managers? Set Them Up for Success” – Center for Creative Leadership \(CCL\)](#)

[“How New Managers Become Great Managers” – Harvard Business School \(Working Knowledge, 2003\)](#)

[“Leadership Development Best Practices: What Works Best – and What Doesn't?” – Center for Creative Leadership, 2025](#)



When you're ready to explore how to deepen leadership capability across your team, we're here as a partner to move that work forward in a way that fits your goals and your reality.



# 90-Day Success Plan for New Managers



A practical roadmap for building confidence, clarity, and strong team relationships in the first three months.

The first 90 days set the tone for how a manager leads, communicates, and supports their team. This plan outlines focused actions across three phases: Listen, Align, and Lead — helping new managers build trust, establish clarity, and develop the foundational habits that strengthen team performance.

## **For Directors**

Use this plan as part of new-manager onboarding, performance support, or coaching. It ensures new leaders start with structure and clarity.

## **For New Managers**

Review this plan weekly. Identify small actions and steady practices that build leadership confidence without overloading your first 90 days.



# Days 1–30



## Listen & Learn

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### Goal

Understand the team, the work, the expectations, and the environment before making major changes.



### Key Actions

- Meet with your leader to clarify expectations, priorities, and decision boundaries
- Hold initial 1:1s with each team member to learn strengths, needs, workload, and communication preferences
- Review existing workflows, goals, and performance indicators
- Observe meetings and team interactions to understand norms and dynamics
- Identify quick wins that improve clarity or reduce friction without disrupting the team
- Begin a weekly reflection habit:  
What's working? What's unclear?  
What do I need help with?



### What Good Looks Like

- Foundational trust with team and supervisor
- A clear understanding of what matters most in the role
- Insight into team strengths and pain points
- No major changes made without sufficient context

# Days 31–60



## Align & Clarify

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### Goal

Establish expectations, create consistency, and build communication routines.



### Key Actions

- Clarify team roles, responsibilities, and ownership – with alignment from your leader
- Set or refine expectations for meetings, communication, and follow-through
- Create predictable communication rhythms (1:1s, team meetings, updates)
- Align goals and priorities with your leader and translate them into clear action steps for the team
- Introduce light structure where needed: decision norms, project trackers, meeting agendas
- Begin practicing coaching skills through feedback conversations and developmental check-ins



### What Good Looks Like

- Team understands expectations and how success is defined
- Work feels more structured, predictable, and aligned
- Leader sees consistent communication and proactive updates
- Early signs of improved accountability and clarity

# Days 61–90



## Lead & Strengthen

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### Goal

Demonstrate steady leadership, reinforce expectations, and start shaping the team culture you want to build.



### Key Actions

- Address lingering friction or unclear expectations through direct, respectful conversations
- Use coaching techniques to deepen capability and ownership
- Start empowering team members with small stretch assignments
- Strengthen cross-functional relationships with peers and partner teams
- Revisit priorities, roles, and workflows with your leader to ensure alignment
- Reflect on your leadership approach: What's resonating? What needs adjustment?



### What Good Looks Like

- Stronger trust and communication across the team
- Clear momentum toward shared goals
- Team members demonstrating more ownership and capability
- Manager showing confidence, steadiness, and consistent follow-through

When you're ready to take the next step, Mainline is here to support you and your team in turning these insights into meaningful, lasting growth.

