

# Rookie managers often left to sink or swim

by WALLACE IMMEN • June 4, 2011

Bill Mitchell still remembers the sheer panic he felt when he moved into his first managerial role.

“The transition from having to account only for yourself to being in a position in which you have to hold others accountable is one of the most stressful in life,” said Mr. Mitchell, now senior account executive for Western Canada for talent management consulting firm Development Dimensions [International Inc.](#)

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Instead of getting support from the organization, “I was thrown in and had to sink or swim. I got frustrated and started to question my own competence and confidence. That really killed my motivation,” he recalled. As a result, he started looking almost immediately for a [new job](#) and moved to an organization that would support him as he developed into a leader.

It’s a syndrome that strikes large numbers of rookie leaders because they get and take promotions for the wrong reasons and don’t get the developmental support they need from their organizations, according to a new study.

As a result, many face tremendous stress and experience regret during their first year in command.

Only 11 per cent of the 1,130 senior managers in U.S. companies polled by DDI said they were groomed by their company to be a leader. At the other extreme, 11 per cent said they fell into leadership by default, being told by the company to take on the responsibility with no preparation at all. Of the remainder, only a third said they were actually hired to be in management, with an additional 20 per cent saying their promotions were based on their technical expertise, rather than their aptitude for management.

Over all, just 40 per cent said they were happy with the help management gave them to develop into leaders.

As a result, 57 per cent of the managers said they had to learn to lead by “trial and error” and those in that group were 50 per cent more likely than those who had been coached by their managers to describe their first year on the job as “stressful” and twice as likely to say they found their rookie year “overwhelming,” the study found.

While the study was of U.S. managers, it parallels experiences of the company’s clients in Canada, Mr. Mitchell said. “It is a very common thing. The issue was put into the background during the recession, but finding and keeping qualified talent has re-emerged as the No. 1 challenge for organizations.”

For half the managers, money was the prime reason they took on the managerial title and the added work that comes with it. They were much more likely than those who said their main motivation was “to make a greater contribution to the company” to say they regretted taking the promotion, the study found.

Intriguingly, even though they suffered self doubt and regret, 87 per cent of the leaders rated their rookie performance as “good” or “excellent,” which led to another revelation from the study: Many new leaders develop significant blind spots in their performance.

To test that, DDI looked at separate data from 200 managers going through a front-line leader-assessment program. When their self-ratings of their leadership skills were compared to their actual performance, it turned out that 89 per cent rated themselves above their actual skill level on at least one leadership skill and 50 per cent rated themselves higher in at least three areas.

Some cited skills they thought were strengths, which assessments actually identified as deficiencies. Others claimed they had superior abilities in areas in which tests indicated they were merely competent.

The most common blind spots were ability to gain support and commitment from those they lead – with 52 per cent of the leaders scoring themselves higher than their actual performance – and good judgment, in which 46 per cent overrated their performance.

“I think it’s critical that organizations provide some sort of initial assessment to find the gaps and set up a development plan to help them mature their leadership and understand the complexity of the job,” Mr. Mitchell said.

It’s vital to the interests of organizations that they address the issue, he added. “If leaders fail to perform, the results could be catastrophic. They could completely blow it and lose customers. That has huge financial implications.”

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## **BUILDING CONFIDENCE**

Tips on how rookies can gain confidence and avoid blind spots:

### **Ask for advice**

You aren’t likely to be offered help unless you admit you don’t know all the answers.

### **Seek out mentors**

Focus on learning as much as you can about how others handle the hard stuff.

### **Don’t dwell on mistakes**

Everyone makes them; treat them as learning experiences.

### **See yourself warts and all**

Do realistic self-evaluations regularly and seek out feedback from more experienced colleagues on areas you may not be seeing clearly.

### **Learn individual motivations**

Finding out what makes people excel will help you leverage their talents.

### **Strive for respect**

Remember it's not a given; it needs to be earned through consistency and support for others.

### **Be patient**

Don't worry about what you seemingly have no control over now; things get easier with experience.

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