Meet the new boss

Whether you’re managing a new team as a result of a promotion, job change or an organizational restructure, stepping in to lead a pre-existing team (and the established dynamics, group norms, systems and expectations they tend to possess) demands a sound management strategy. Here are a few expert tips on how to manage a team, when you’re its only new member.

Be transparent. The reasons you’re managing a team may be innocent, but don’t assume the team collectively understands the reasons for your new role, or knows the facts about why you’re taking the lead. To ease any underlying concerns about you as their new manager, Lawrence Polsky, author of the book Perfect Phrases for Communicating Change recommends calling team members together as soon you step into your role, for the sole purpose of openly sharing your professional background and how it’s relevant to your new role (and theirs).

“Apprehension is a factor when established teams get new leaders. Employees want to know their new manager’s background and specifically how it relates to the challenges they are facing,” says Polsky. “Be prepared to answer common questions with the intent of alleviating fears and uncertainty.”

Trust that actions speak louder than words. Regardless of the success your predecessor had (or lacked) in leading the team you’ll now manage, familiarity is a sense of comfort for people. “All change is emotional,” says seasoned business management consultant and change leadership expert Keith Kemph of the consulting firm CC Pace. To respect that reality, Kemph advises that you not make immediate changes, or announce what you intend to do differently—even if the changes will improve upon current processes. Instead, focus on how to demonstrate your leadership style and managerial ideologies in small, tangible ways that will help you eventually gain the trust, respect and confidence of your new team. If you’re a manager who believes in teamwork and openly recognizing people for their successes, for example, Kemph recommends crafting the language you use in meetings and emails to strategically demonstrate that ideology. With an “actions speak louder than words” approach, you’ll demonstrate your leadership style in a way that is believable and sincere, making larger initiatives you try to implement later far less jarring.

Spend time as a bystander. Great managers spend at least the first 30 to 45 days on the job learning about the department and the people they manage. Ask questions about why things are done in their current manner; invite feedback from employees for their perspective on what works, and what could be improved upon and why.

Ask about any previous change initiatives that may have failed (and why), to understand the team’s historical perspective with management (and to ensure you don’t waste time implementing solutions that have been proven ineffective). Perhaps most importantly, admit what you don’t know, particularly when it comes to processes and procedures that may be unique to the infrastructure of a department, the company or a specific client. “You earn your staff’s respect by respecting and recognizing the collective history of the team,” says
Make your team’s perspective a top priority. In your chats with employees, take note of how their input reveals what motivates them, allowing you to gain a sense for how to effectively lead them, in addition to the business needs of the organization.

Be present in all conversations, and make it known that any input an employee chooses to share is valuable, provided it is constructive feedback.

“As you ask the questions, actively take notes to show people you’re listening. You may even consider asking them to rank improvements or challenges they share about their role, or the team, in order of importance on a scale of 1 to 10,” says Kemph. “This will go farther than any kind of rewards system you put in place to buy their support, and will help you define a priority list of what needs to be done.”