



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H01WYW
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MARCH 06, 2015

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Mark, a ten-year veteran of the pharmaceutical R&D world with a Ph.D. in statistics, was the obvious choice to lead the SAS software and data management group of a global healthcare corporation when the current director suddenly departed. Having managed a small team of bio-statisticians successfully over three years, promoting him to director seemed like a no-brainer. Yet, within six months, despite being viewed as “high potential” by the C-suite, he had managed to alienate just about everyone.

As a team leader, he had proven himself effective—delivering results, improving processes, and directing junior staff. So why, when given the chance to manage a larger, more diverse group of top performers, would he flame out so spectacularly? The answer was simple: Mark was bossy.

By the time a coach was brought in, there was an alarming downward trajectory of morale and productivity. 360 feedback suggested that although Mark was respected for his expertise, his management style wasn’t working with this more experienced team. Some of his new team members matched his technical skills, and all of them were used to a great deal of autonomy.

As Mark painfully discovered, trying to run a seasoned, highly skilled group with the traditional type-A, command-and-control style is doomed to fail. Today's knowledge workers demand what leadership experts call a "post-heroic leader": one who is emotionally and intellectually agile, able to modulate their style as needed from authoritative to collaborative—and back again—in order to optimize team performance. Post-heroic leaders recognize that the key to success is not adhering to hierarchy or position power, but mastering a complex set of seemingly contradictory organizational dynamics—autonomy *and* shared decision-making, individuality *and* teamwork.

Mark's situation called for a change in mindset about what it means to be a good manager. To his credit, he was open to coaching. Yet coaxing him to become more easy-going or to let go of control was not enough. He was used to driving people hard for results. To help him, Mark's coach re-focused the same deep desire to excel that had made him a great statistician on adjusting his style and provided a framework for change, suggesting several shifts that Mark must undertake:

From self-awareness to social awareness. This shift occurs when a manager realizes that effective leadership calls for more than just knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses. Social awareness calls for a heightened sensitivity to how one's behavior, in words and deeds, impacts others. To help build this awareness, Mark's coach asked him questions like:

- What is the impact of your management style on others?
- How do you know what others are thinking or feeling?

From directive to inquisitive. When seeking to improve processes or engender creativity from an expert group, the manager needs to shift from a stance of declaration to one of curiosity. Questions that help managers make this shift include:

- How much time do you spend listening rather than speaking?
- How do you know if you are truly listening to your people?

From power over to power with. When a manager lauds authority over subordinates, A-players tend to shut down (and look for the exit), while B-players tend to acquiesce, hide out, and fail to grow. As a result, the potential of the entire team is lost. To facilitate this important shift, a coach might ask:

- How do you stimulate the best thinking from your team?
- What is the role of your subordinates in making decisions?

From teamwork to teaming. Traditional managers tend to rely on static definitions of who is "in" and who is "out," fostering a culture of conformity and internal competitiveness. Adaptive managers evoke commitment through common values and aspirational goals, not structure. Good coaching questions include:

- How do you create a sense of belonging when the boundaries of a team are porous?

- How do you leverage diverse talents, skills, and perspectives, getting the best from everyone?

This framework gave Mark tangible guidelines to work with—not just generic admonishments to be more democratic. Coaching provided the space to acknowledge his fear of “losing his edge” and his hard-earned respect from the C-suite while exploring a different possibility: that he could have both—remaining directive when needed, but “flexing” to accommodate a variety of work styles.

Within a few weeks, he had made significant progress on two of the shifts—from power over to power with and from teamwork to teaming. The changes he made included:

1. Setting up a series of brainstorming sessions for process innovation, utilizing an outside facilitator so that he could participate as a team member—not as the boss.
2. Enlisting expert “thought partners” on his team to help make specific decisions that impacted work flow and initiatives.
3. Pairing senior staff with junior staff for mentoring and coaching.
4. Sending a personal note to each team member, asking them to share what activity, structure, or process would support them to do their best work.
5. Holding an offsite “values summit” to explore what his people cared about most—out of which they created their own internal values statement and a list of operating principles.

Initially, Mark’s team was skeptical about his sudden transformation, but with consistency and repetition, he earned their respect and morale improved dramatically. Encouraged by his coach to see himself not so much as “the boss” but as a role model, he began communicating with greater candor and vulnerability.

For any manager that finds herself across the table from a traditional heroic leader, like Mark—one who defaults to position power and authority—the challenge is to accelerate the shift to a more adaptive approach. Start by helping him re-connect to his aspiration to excel, not just as a functional expert but also as a leader. Then provide a framework for considering new options, a safe space for experimentation, and most important, ask thought-provoking, open-ended questions to spark his creativity. With the right kind of support, an old-fashioned manager can make the post-heroic leap, and soar.

Jeffrey W. Hull, Ph.D. is the director of education and business development at the Institute of Coaching (a Harvard Medical School affiliate), a clinical instructor in psychology at Harvard Medical School, and an adjunct professor of leadership at NYU. Over 20 years, he has served as a coach and consultant to hundreds of organizations around the world, specializing in leadership development and organizational strategy, design, and transformation.
