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How New Managers Can Send the Right Leadership Signals

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One of the most exciting and — sometimes anxiety-producing transitions in a career — comes when you move from being an individual contributor to becoming a manager. At this juncture, *what you think, what you say, and how you show up* — in effect, your leadership presence — can have a direct impact on those you are now leading and managing for the first time. So, as a new manager, how do you build an authentic and connected leadership presence that has a positive impact on your team and colleagues?

Set a leadership values-based goal. An authentic and connected presence begins from the inside-out. How you define the role and what you value will “telegraph” out to those you work with. As a new manager, spend time to consider the kind of leader you are and hope to be. Set an aspirational goal to serve as a guiding compass. As one new manager shared recently, “my professional leadership goal is to be a genuine and emotionally intelligent manager who inspires others to excellence.”

As Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel describe in their book, *The Leadership Pipeline*, “Though this might seem like an easy, natural leadership passage, it’s often one where people trip... they make the job transition from individual contribution to manager without making a behavioral or values-based transition...They must believe that making time for others, planning, [and] coaching... are necessary tasks and their responsibility. More than that, they must view this other-directed work as mission-critical to their success.”

Increase your emotional intelligence and situational awareness. As the job now shifts to getting more work done through others, recognize that what motivates or influences you may not be how others are motivated or influenced. In advance of important interactions or meetings, ask yourself:

- Who is the other person or audience?
- What might their perspective on this topic be?
- How are they best motivated or influenced?
- What does the situation at hand call for?
- What are the optimal outcomes and tone?

These questions remind us that leadership presence is not about finding a one-size-fits-all solution. Leadership presence is therefore an “and/both” versus an “either/or.” On the one hand, having an effective leadership presence includes being authentic, genuine, and clear on your guiding compass, core values and convictions. And, on the other hand, it includes being adaptive and agile, demonstrating an ability to connect with different kinds of people through many different communication platforms and technologies.

Be clear and direct, always with respect. As your new role will likely increase your interactions with people of many different styles, having an effective leadership presence includes continually building and practicing the skills of being clear and direct while finding ways of making connections and showing respect. Leadership presence is dynamic and fluid, and encourages a two-way dialogue where we can give authentic voice to our views while staying open to the views and perspectives of others as we work towards a common goal, best outcome, or solution. A few examples of things that can help cultivate your own voice and listen to the voices of others:

- **Know what you think.** If you are naturally **strong at listening** and hearing other’s opinions, flex your muscles in getting to your own convictions and thoughts more quickly. Before important meetings or interactions, jot down a few bullet points to yourself: *what are the 3-5 things I believe about this topic or issue?*

- **Ask, listen, and acknowledge:** Conversely, if you are naturally strong at having your own opinions, settle into a greater patience, so that you can make space to hear others. Show you are really listening by asking great questions, clarifying what you've heard, or acknowledging how you're processing the information. In some cases, you might share: *"With this new information, I am experiencing this quite differently. My view has changed."* In other cases, you might end up saying: *"In digesting what you have shared, I am finding I just can't get myself comfortable with that direction. Ultimately, this is coming down to a difference of opinion."*
- **Share the WHY:** As a new manager, it's also critical to share the WHY behind your vision, priorities, expectations, feedback, or requests. Don't dilute your message. Instead, make it more powerful by sharing more about the context. Help connect work deliverables or professional development to what's happening at the organizational level. For example, in giving developmental feedback to someone, you could include additional context such as: *Because the organization is growing so fast, there is opportunity for each member of the team to stretch and step up in the following ways. I'd love to see you take on...."* Or, you can strengthen the message by painting the picture of the aspiration: *"I'd love to see us become best in class at this, and here's what will be required."*

Bring a stable and grounded presence in the face of change, stress, or difficult news. The reality is that most of us can exude an effective presence, especially when business is going well or when we are having a good day. As a new manager, however, it's equally important to ask yourself: *What do people experience when I'm stressed out, tired, under deadline, or when someone is bringing me bad news?*

Recognize that what may feel like a passing or fleeting moment of anger, impatience, or hurried insincerity may end up negatively impacting your team and its overall morale and engagement. As author Daniel Goleman writes in his book *Primal Leadership*: "Quite simply, in any human group, the leader has maximal power to sway everyone's emotions...how well leaders manage their moods affects everyone else's moods, which becomes not just a private matter, but a factor in how well a business will do."

Maintaining a stable and grounded presence increases the likelihood that your team will feel comfortable bringing you important information, even if it's bad news, so that you can help to remove obstacles, reset priorities, or get the team back on track. Professor Amy Edmundson's research finds that teams can optimize their learning and performance when there is an environment or culture — most often set by the manager — that promotes both [psychological safety and accountability](#).

To help maintain and sustain a more stable and grounded presence, be sure that you are [setting the right priorities for yourself](#), and that you have strategies for [managing the workload of being a leader](#), as you take on this larger role and responsibility as a new manager.

Becoming a new manager is an important leadership passage in your career. Step back and think about your leadership presence and if you are *thinking, saying, and showing up* as you most hope to and intend. Set a values-based leadership goal, increase your emotional intelligence and situational awareness, be direct with respect, and find strategies to maintain and sustain a stable and grounded presence. It's easy in our humbleness to underestimate the impact we have on other's lives as managers.

As professor Clayton Christensen writes in his classic HBR article, "[How Will You Measure Your Life?](#)": "In my mind's eye I saw one of my managers leave for work one morning with a relatively strong level of self-esteem. Then, I pictured her driving home to her family 10 hours later, feeling unappreciated, frustrated, underutilized, and demeaned. I imagined how profoundly her lowered self-esteem affected the way she interacted with her children. The vision in my mind then fast-forwarded to another day, when she drove home with greater self-esteem — feeling that she had learned a lot, had been recognized for achieving valuable things, and had played a significant role in the success of some important initiatives. I then imagined how positively that affected her as a spouse and a parent. *My conclusion: Management is the most noble of professions if it's practiced well. No other occupation offers as many ways to help others learn and grow, take responsibility, be recognized for achievement, and contribute to the success of a team.*"

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book [The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day](#), and co-author of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#) with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.
