How to Manage People Who Are Smarter than You

The best managers hire smart people to work for them. But what if your direct reports are smarter than you? How do you manage people who have more experience or more knowledge? How do you coach them if you don't have the same level of expertise?

What the Experts Say
Getting promoted to a job that includes responsibility for areas outside your domain can be downright terrifying. Your employees may ask questions that you don't know the answers to and may not even fully understand. "When you're a technical expert, you know your value to the organization," says Wanda Wallace, President and CEO of Leadership Forum and author of _Reaching the Top_. "But when you don't have the content expertise—or the 'best' content expertise, you struggle with: what is my value?" Figuring out the answer to that question requires a change in mindset. "Your role is no longer to be an individual contributor," says Linda Hill, a professor at Harvard Business School and the coauthor of _Being the Boss_. "Your job is to set the stage and by definition that means you will have people who are more experienced, more up-to-date, and have more expertise working under you." And while it may feel professionally disconcerting at first, it bodes well for your future. "The higher you go in an organization, the more you're expected to make decisions on which you might not have direct experience or expertise," says Roger Schwarz, an organizational psychologist and the author of _Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams_. "It's a beginning of the shift in your career." Here are some tips on how to make that transition as seamlessly as possible.

Face your fears
It's natural to feel worried or insecure about your ability to manage someone who has superior experience or knowhow. "Business is emotional," says Wallace. "And when you're leading a group that knows more about the day-to-day work than you do, it's scary." According to Schwarz, the first step is to consider whether your fear is based in reality. "If no one has said anything to you directly or indirectly, you need to look deeper and ask yourself: where is this fear coming from?" Hill agrees, adding that it can be dangerous to ignore self-doubt. For one thing, "if you feel threatened, other people will pick up on those signals." For another, "if you don't feel comfortable coaching someone who has more experience than you, you might end up neglecting that person."

Seek counsel
Consider reaching out to other managers who may have experienced similar challenges. "Talking to peers, coaches, and mentors about your feelings and fears of inadequacy" will help you feel less alone and may also give you ideas on how to handle the situation, says Wallace. A candid conversation with your manager might also be worthwhile, according to Schwarz. "Share your concerns and ask what led him or her to select you for the role and what you bring to it," he says. This isn't "fishing for compliments," he adds. "There's nothing wrong with asking for reassurance," and the answers "will give you insight into your strengths and the development needs of your reports."

Get informed
In yesterday's organization, the boss was the teacher and the employees were there to learn and do as they were told. Today, "learning is a two-way street," says Schwarz. Tell your direct reports that you want to learn from them and then be deliberate about "creating opportunities to make that happen," he says. "You don't need to become a technical expert, but you do need to know enough about the details to know where the problems lie," adds Wallace. She suggests shadowing team members for a day or even for a couple of hours and "asking a lot of dumb questions." Find out what worries them, where they get stuck, and from whom they could use input. "Get insight into what your people do," she says. "It's enormously motivating for employees."

Confront any issues
If members of your team express concerns about your ability to lead, or you hear that the office rumor mill churning with spite, you need to address the issue head on. When dealing with a direct report who is openly hostile or out for your job, you should be honest and "willing to be vulnerable," according to Schwarz. He recommends saying something like, "I know you have more experience and expertise than I do, and I understand you have concerns about that." Don't go in "trying to protect your ego." Instead, approach the person with curiosity and talk "about what you can do to help meet his needs." Remember, Hill adds, your goal is to "figure out how you're going to work together and support your employee."

Give—and take—feedback
"It's rather foolish to think about giving feedback" on your direct reports' area of expertise when you don't have the technical chops to do so, says Wallace. So keep your comments to areas where you have authority and legitimacy," she says. "Find the issue that's most relevant and be

specific. Say: 'I want to talk with you about the way you communicate with the sales team.' Give an example, talk about what happened, and the result," she says. But make sure to get as much as you give, adds Hill. "You need to make it clear that you're also comfortable getting feedback," she says. "This is the way you'll all get better."

Add value
Perhaps the best way to gain credibility and trust as a manager is to demonstrate "the value you add to the team," says Wallace. It could be in "how you bring people together, how you use your network to get work done, how you communicate with stakeholders, or the broader perspective" you provide. Hill says you should also show a desire to help your employees advance in their careers. She suggests asking questions like, "Where do you want to go? What do you want to learn? And what do you need from me?" Schwarz adds: "You don't need to be the person's mentor, but you need to help the person develop."

Give employees room
As the leader, one of your most important responsibilities is to "create an environment for talent to be expressed," says Hill. This requires you learn how to step back and enable things to happen. "Your role is not to be the smartest person in the room anymore. Your role is to make space," she says. Wallace agrees. "Keep your hand hovering over the team"—like a parent helping a toddler learn how to walk, she says. "Be there, but don't hold her hand all the time." Transparency is key. "Get smart about what you need to know and how often you need updates," Wallace adds. Tell your team when you need to give senior leaders a progress report, "When direct reports know why you're digging into details, they are tolerant. But when no explanation is provided, it leads to a feeling of 'do you not trust me?'"

Project confidence, but not too much
Even if it sometimes feels as if you're in over your head, it's important to project the right amount of confidence. But "there's a balance," Wallace says. "If you come across as overconfident, your people won't trust you" and you'll be viewed as arrogant. "Equally, if you look scared to death you won't be seen as credible." [Executive presence] is something you must cultivate. There's no secret sauce: Be calm. Be respectful. Take yourself and others seriously. Know when detail is necessary and when it's not. "When your team sees you holding your own among other senior leaders they will give you credit."

Principles to Remember:

Do

- Talk to your manager about the attributes you bring to your role
- Find a way to add value to your team and help employees advance their careers
- Step back and enable employees to do their jobs without meddling too much

Don't

- Ignore feelings of insecurity; confront your negative emotions and seek advice on how to deal with them
- Feel threatened by your direct report's specialized knowledge; instead seek opportunities to learn from him
- Be arrogant; if you come across as overconfident, your team won't trust you

Case Study #1: Get educated about what your direct reports do

Earlier this year, Emily Burns, founder and CEO of Learnivore, the Boston-based start-up that helps people find local instructors, coaches, and classes, set out to hire a chief technology officer.

Her ideal candidate needed to have topnotch development skills, be conversant in multiple programming languages, and have a deep understanding of emergent web technologies . In short, Emily needed someone with knowledge and capabilities that she herself didn't possess. "The hardest part about hiring people who have expertise you don't have is evaluating them," she says. "I realized I needed to get educated enough about what they do."

So Emily did lots of reading; she talked to others in the industry and learned about the cadence of development. "I learned how to gauge the quality of the work product even if I can't do the work myself," she says. "I learned how long it takes to do things, what's doable, and what's not."

This research had two advantages: One, it made the hiring process go more smoothly and, two, it has helped Emily manage Heather, her new CTO. Emily articulates a vision for "what success looks like" to Heather but stops short of blow-by-blow instructions on how to achieve it. "I understand our application architecture at a high level and I can communicate to my CTO what I need done, but how it gets done is up to her," she says.

Today Emily and Heather are working together to put the company in the best position for possible venture funding. They've identified metrics they need to bolster and new features they want to add. "Heather understands the overall business reasons why we need to do these things; she's always finding ways to make our technology perform better, and she often has an idea that will save us time or money," Emily says. "If you know how to do somebody's job, you tell them how to do it. But when you don't, you have to listen and be receptive."

Case Study #2: Provide your team members with resources and support

Early in Meredith Haberfeld's career, she was made vice president of a marketing services company and put in charge of a large team full of people who were "more experienced and more capable" than her. "They understood how to build a business better than I did," she recalls.

Meredith suffered a crisis of confidence: "I thought: how could I lead these people? What value did I provide?"

A conversation with a mentor helped change her perspective. The mentor reminded Meredith that she was put in the job for a reason: the company's higher-ups believed she had something to offer. Her mentor also emphasized that a manager's role was not to do the job of his or her

employees, but to help them do better at their work. "My job was to look for things that they didn't see and help them shine brighter," Meredith explains. "She also told me that my insecurity would only get in my way, so I had to stop worrying about them outshining me."

From that point on, Meredith focused on providing "vision, direction, and strategy," she says. "I made sure my team had everything they needed to thrive."

Determined to develop and maintain strong relationships with her team members, she gave them lots of leeway. She trusted their experience and expertise and didn't worry about how they got their jobs done. "I made people accountable for their results, not their activity, and I gave them a huge amount of room to deliver," she says.

She also showed humility. When her direct reports asked her questions she didn't know the answers to, she "was shameless about finding people who did—whether they were people within the company or outside of it." And she made sure to give them credit for their results. "Sharing public glory was really important," she says. "It showed that I was not looking to be the hero or the expert."

Four years into her job, the company was sold for over $200 million to a public entity. Today Meredith is the founder and CEO of ThinkHuman, the career-coaching group and management consultancy. "I look back on those years as my on-the-court MBA," she says.