

Now You're the Boss: Learning How to Manage Former Peers

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By the Mind Tools Content Team

Becoming "the boss" can change almost everything – and it can change nothing. Sure, you have more power. And you can influence your former peers in completely new ways. But you're still the same person.

Suddenly, though, the things you say have more importance, and your former teammates look to you for answers, not just ideas.

What do you do with this newly found power? It may be tempting to make the changes that you always wanted, order people to do what you want to be done, and feel good about your new promotion. However, this type of behavior may not win you much respect or cooperation.

But you probably don't want to use the opposite approach either. A new boss who tries to remain "one of the team" can end up frustrating everyone. When you're more concerned about friendships than results, poor decisions are usually inevitable. If you're afraid of being called "bossy," you may not hold people accountable, or you may avoid making unpopular decisions.

So, how do you manage the difficult learning curve of becoming a boss and the delicate balance of leading former peers? There's no immediate or easy solution, and you won't be perfect. However, by understanding the challenges and by keeping an open mind, you can develop new ways to relate to your team that are effective and produce results.

Tip:

Delegating is empowering. It's motivating, and it builds trust. The quicker you can establish trust, the stronger your new team will likely be. Our article on [Leading Peers](#) discusses empowerment and provides some other ideas for easing into this new relationship.

The Changes and Challenges

As a newly promoted boss, many or all of the following may apply to you:

- **You know how people on your team operate.** This can sound like an advantage – until you realize that instead of just accepting people's behavior, you're now responsible for making sure that their behavior aligns with your team's goals. In the past, you were part of the way your team worked, good or bad. Now, you have to make sure that things are done right. Before, you may have been able to avoid the people you don't like. But now, you have to help them develop – or you may need to get rid of them altogether.
- **You used to compete with these people.** There's often a bit of rivalry among peers for things like recognition, authority, and status. As the new boss, some will see you as the winner of this competition. This may increase previous tensions and bring out feelings of resentment. You may have had difficulty with past peers whom you now need to support and praise.
- **You used to communicate freely.** As a boss, you have to be selective about the information you share. You probably can't tell people everything as you used to. This works both ways: your team members may stop telling you everything as well. This often means that your team tells you only those things they think you want to hear, which may lead to distorted information and bad decisions.

- **Your opinion used to hold equal weight.** Now that you're the boss, what you say probably has much more influence. As a result, your team may not argue with you as much, and you may not have the benefit of hearing what they really think. This can limit the effectiveness of your decisions.
- **You used to have close personal relationships with members of your team.** As the boss, you have to maintain a little distance from the people who report to you. You need to treat everyone equally, and you can't allow yourself to be influenced by certain people more than others. You also can't let personal feelings get in the way of honest feedback and discipline.

When you understand that your relationships with people on your team are now different, you can find ways to move forward. It's when you try to keep things the same that you'll have problems.

Strategies for a Successful Transition

When moving from peer to boss, the most important thing is to give up the comfort of being liked. In the past, you've said many things about your bosses to your colleagues, family, and friends. Similar things will now probably be said about you. That's OK – as long as you continue to earn respect. You'll likely achieve this by treating people honestly and by trusting them.

Here are some strategies that you can try:

- **Be humble.** Accept that you'll probably make mistakes, and be willing to admit to them. It's also important that you don't boast about your new position or success. People can brag or show off in subtle ways, so be careful. Every leader or prospective leader should read Bruna Martinuzzi's [wonderful article on humility](#).

Tip:

An unfortunate reality is that some people may choose to focus on, and enjoy, your mistakes. You may even encounter outright resistance or sabotage. Watch out for these behaviors, and deal with them immediately and proactively. As much as we'd like to believe that professionals don't behave this way, experience tells us otherwise.

- **Talk.** Communicate with your team right from the start. As far as you can, share your concerns about the transition, and invite them to comment. Our article, [Gaining the Trust of Your New Team](#), has more great tips on setting up this new relationship. You may also have to address the feelings of those who also wanted your new position. This can take a great deal of diplomacy, sensitivity, and understanding.
- Clarify and regularly update your expectations. The sooner you start a pattern of open communication, the better. **Communicate your expectations.** Your new team isn't used to working with you as a boss. Figure out your routine, and let them know what to expect. Will you have regular team meetings? Will you have an "open door" policy? What are your priorities? How will you communicate? What are your objectives? How will they be evaluated?
- **Establish boundaries.** You know that you can't be everyone's friend the way that you were before. Think about what this means and how your relationship with others will change. Give everyone equal attention – avoid spending time with just one group of people. Attend team social functions, but leave early so the team can talk freely among themselves. Build a social network with your new peers (your former bosses). Dress differently – this can be a subtle indication that your position is now different.

Note:

Because you know your former peers, you should be able to find ways to have conversations. Not everyone responds to openness in the same way, so remember to be sensitive to these differences, and adjust your style accordingly.

- **Be careful about what you say.** Unfortunately, you probably can't be as free with your opinions as you used to be. When you express dissatisfaction with something, you may influence your team. If you say that you don't like someone, you may affect your team's attitude toward that person. As a boss, you have to watch what you say and understand that your words have the power to influence the opinions and behavior of your team members.
- **Delegate.** As a new leader of former peers, your job has changed from "getting things done" to "managing people to get things done," so it's extremely important that you [delegate effectively](#). Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can do it all because you're the boss. You still have the same skills and abilities as yesterday (when you were one of the team). However, by not delegating, you may unintentionally communicate, "I don't trust you to do as good a job as I do."

Tip:

There's another reason that you **must** learn to delegate: if you don't, you'll quickly get overloaded and stressed, which probably means that you'll be ineffective.

- **Ask for training.** All too often, new bosses are left to sink or swim on their own, with no guidance – on-the-job training is not the best teacher, here. Ask for formal training, if available (and remember that you'll find a huge amount of help here, at Mind Tools). Look for someone to mentor you. Be proactive in your own development, and look for opportunities to improve your leadership and management skills.

Key Points

It can be difficult for team members to deal with a former peer becoming their boss – and it can be difficult for you, as the new boss.

You need to accept that you may not always be liked, and you have to be careful of what you say. Some people may resent your promotion, and changes in expectations can cause confusion.

To manage the transition, be aware of the obvious and subtle ways that your relationships with team members have changed. If you find ways to communicate openly and honestly about expectations, this will help you be successful.

Being respected is more important than being liked – and understanding this is the first and most important step in beginning to lead your former teammates.