From Me to We

Saturday, July 01, 2017 - by **William A. Gentry**

Six research-based ideas to help new managers flip their thinking from *me* to *we*.

Do you remember the first time you learned something new? Maybe it was a sport, a hobby, or a musical instrument. Maybe it was how to drive a car. Perhaps it was something you were going to do for the first time, such as getting married or having a baby. No matter what it was, I bet there is something in common among them.

For instance, when I first learned how to play golf, I read books, but I also had an instructor help me understand how to grip the club, take my stance, and swing. When I first learned how to drive a car, I attended a class where I was in a simulator, took lessons from a skilled teacher out on the road, and my parents went out with me too. Before I got married, there was pre-marriage counseling with readings, assessments, role plays, and talks with the minister. If and when the important "first born" comes, I'm told Lamaze and parenting classes will be in our future.

You probably realize what the commonality is. No matter the topic, in most "firsts" in our lives, there is almost always some sort of training and support for everything new we are about to learn. But it's not like that for the majority of those in organizations who become a leader for the first time.

How bizarre is that?

No training means little success

Newly minted first-time managers and new leaders are usually part of the biggest population of leaders in any organization: frontline, first-line, and entry-level managers, supervisors, and directors. They directly manage more people than any other managerial level; have a closer connection to the customer than any other managerial level; affect some of the biggest key performance indicators of organizations, such as employee engagement and productivity; and shape the future of your organization's leadership pipeline. Yet the stats keep showing that most first-time managers and new leaders get no training or development when they transition from high-performing individual contributors to leaders. And those who do get way less than more senior-level executives with more tenure and experience as leaders.

Is it any wonder why employee engagement is so low? Is it any wonder why, from my research, half of managers are ineffective in their roles? Or why after an average of only 20 weeks (143.8 days to be exact), organizations know whether new managers have failed in their first leadership position? If we are not setting up new leaders for success from the beginning, organizations and talent pipelines suffer, not to mention the morale, engagement, productivity, and health of those who directly report to them.

Time to flip

I have become passionate about bringing awareness and building a community of people to help new leaders (and those who have been leaders for a while, but never got the support and development they should have gotten in the first place). Imagine the positive changes we can make in the workplace if we are able to give the time, resources, support, and development all new leaders on the front lines deserve. Employees would be more involved and engaged in their work, more committed to their organization, and happier and healthier.

To achieve that, we need to help first-time managers and new leaders on the front lines "flip their script" to be successful. Here's what I mean.

As an individual contributor, the script is all about "me, myself, and I"—success is all due to my own unique, individual talents, my motivation, my smarts, and my technical skills and mastery that no one else can do. That script obviously has served individual contributors well and it most likely earned them their promotion into leadership. At that time, there was nothing wrong with living that script.

But when individual contributors become leaders working on the front lines, that particular "me, myself, and I" script becomes outdated and obsolete in their new leadership role. To

be successful in their new leadership role, they must flip their script from *me* to *we* and realize, "It's not about me anymore."

My recent research of nearly 300 new leaders identifies six aspects of their script that must flip to be effective in their new leadership role. As talent development professionals, we must help new leaders in these six ways to ease their transition from individual contributors to leaders and maximize their chances of success in their new leadership roles:

Flip your mindset. My research on new leaders found that those rated as less effective by their own bosses had a different mindset when it came to learning and development than those rated more effective. Poorly performing first-time managers tend to concentrate more on themselves, focusing on gaining personal recognition when it comes to learning and development. More effective leaders flip their mindset to a love of learning and a belief that learning and development is fun, exciting, and intrinsically pleasing. They have more of what Carol Dweck and others call a growth mindset.

Flip your skill set. Many new leaders still rely on their technical skill and expertise when they get promoted into leadership. It's what made them special before, so that's what they continue to do. But to be effective in their new leadership role, it's not about being a subject matter expert with technical expertise anymore. New leaders must flip their skill set to build and enhance communication and influence—two prominent skills gaps of new leaders uncovered in my research that are crucial for success, yet are ones they tend not to perform well.

Flip your relationships. When I asked new leaders about their biggest job challenges, two of the top three revolved around relationships. Almost 60 percent said making the transition from peer (or friend) to boss is a top challenge, while another common challenge is going from being part of the team to now leading it effectively.

In turn, new leaders must understand that fairness is a better option than giving their friends special treatment. Further, new leaders must embrace their new team leader role by communicating a distinct vision to team members, providing them role clarity, and motivating them to be fully invested in their work.

Flip your "do-it-all" attitude. Many new leaders fail because they can't let go of the work, particularly if it is work that they self-identified with and that brought them respect, recognition, and rewards. New leaders must flip their do-it-all attitude to understand it's not about doing all the work anymore, but in delegating work appropriately. In addition, they

must concentrate more on coaching, mentoring, and people development, promoting a culture of openness and feedback (both giving and receiving).

Flip your perspective. When new leaders step up into management, some at first have a narrow view of the work. New leaders must now understand the politics in their organization, and flip their perspective by broadening it and navigating the intricacies of managing up, down, and around the organization.

Flip your focus. Many of us are constantly head-down in the work, only focusing on fulfilling the promise of getting it done. New leaders, however, must understand that all eyes are on them with every action they take and decision they make. Their focus must flip.

Lack of experience leading a team with no support or training, coupled with the new and increased performance pressures, might make new managers more vulnerable to lapses in judgment. The major scandals in business integrity—for example, Bernie Madoff, Ken Lay, Martin Shkreli, VW, FIFA, and Wells Fargo—reflect an organizational culture, not the actions of only one person. This culture starts with new leaders on the front line, and can be a weak link in the integrity and performance of an organization if not addressed early on with managers new to leadership.

Sticking with the new script

If you question the amount of time, support, and resources available to train and develop all of your new leaders on the front lines, here are relatively easy, economical, and highly engaging ways to help new leaders stick to their flipped scripts.

Through a live session, a lunch & learn, or taped interviews, have seasoned leaders in your organization share their experiences of learning from mistakes and how they overcame their struggles when they became leaders for the first time. Make these available as on-demand videos for those interested in just-in-time viewing.

Keep the bosses of the new leaders involved in their development. Encourage the bosses to have regular check-ins and provide constant feedback to new leaders. You could provide a script to help them get started, or give them different types of questions to ask in coaching dialogues to make the conversations easier to have.

Use mentoring circles. Pair one to three seasoned leaders who act as mentors with four to eight new leaders who are the mentees. The new leaders will receive mentoring from more experienced leaders and get much-needed peer mentoring from those sharing the same experiences as them in real time. Give them the space and time to share successes,

failures, and what they learned from experience, and to be a support system. Even if there aren't formal mentors at the head of each of these circles, allowing time and space for new leaders to get together will make them feel supported and valued.

Design developmental initiatives around the specific challenges and skills gaps new leaders face. The Center for Creative Leadership discovered the 70-20-10 rule, which states most learning comes from job-related experiences. When you help new leaders flip their script with hands-on experiences, make sure the purpose and what is learned directly connects to their unique challenges in transitioning from an individual contributor to leader, or in any of the six areas the research shows new leaders must flip in their script to be successful.

As the Center for Creative Leadership's Cindy McCauley says, if what is to be learned is useless or meaningless, does not resonate with their challenges and struggles as new leaders, does not address their most pressing development needs, or does not help them meet the role demands they are facing or will soon face, whatever content is supposed to be learned will not stick.

Leadership isn't easy. It's frustrating, confusing, and at times thankless. We must give new leaders the opportunity to be vulnerable, brave, and courageous in making this most difficult transition in their careers. By helping new leaders flip their script and providing opportunities to learn from their experiences, you will have a cadre of thoughtful, engaged leaders and a stronger leadership pipeline filled with bosses everyone wants to work for.