

Promoted but Unprepared: Navigating the Leadership Gap

How I went from a high-performing individual contributor to a struggling manager—and what I wish I knew.

Thrown Into the Deep End: My First Taste of Leadership

I still remember the day I stepped into my first management role. It was at Colorado State University, right at the bustling information desk in the Lory Student Center. Before my junior year, I landed a high-profile campus position, helping answer countless questions in person and over the phone. We were the human version of Google before Al Gore invented the internet (IYKYK).

Going into my senior year, I interviewed for the manager role at that very same desk. To my surprise, I got it. As a business management major, I was confident—maybe a little too confident—that I knew how to lead a team. After all, I understood management principles from my classes. How hard could it be?

Boy, was I wrong.

The Harsh Reality: Leadership Is More Than Performance

I was promoted because I was a top performer, but I had no real experience managing people—especially peers I had just worked alongside. No one coached me on transitioning from being a teammate to the boss. I made mistakes—a lot of them. I treated people poorly, not out of malice but out of ignorance. I vividly remember butting heads with my assistant manager. She believed she could do the job better than I could. That tension escalated into backstabbing, undermining, and even a false accusation of sexual harassment. It was a painful and humbling experience. I had to fight for my job, reflect on my

behavior, and make serious adjustments. Eventually, I was cleared, but the damage to relationships and trust lingered.

That season of trial by fire left a mark on me. I didn't lead well. I didn't manage well. And frankly, I had no support system to help me grow into the role.

The 10-Year Leadership Gap: Why Many Managers Struggle [1]

Here's why I share this story. Most people who get promoted into management roles are top-performing individual contributors—just like I was. But being a high performer doesn't automatically make you a great leader. A recent study revealed that the average age someone steps into their first people management role is 30. Guess when they typically receive formal leadership training? At 40. That's a ten-year gap. Ten years to develop habits, behaviors, and mindsets—good or bad—with little guidance.

No wonder the transition from individual contributor to people manager is so difficult.

Four Ways to Prepare for Leadership Before You Get the Title

But it doesn't have to be. Whether you're eyeing a leadership role or have just stepped into one, here are four things you can start doing now to prepare for successful people leadership:

1. Develop Self-Awareness and Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

The higher you rise in an organization, the more emotional intelligence matters. You can be the smartest person in the room, but if you can't understand and manage your emotions—or empathize with others—you'll hit a ceiling. EQ is about self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

Start by reflecting on your strengths and weaknesses. How do you handle stress? How do you respond to feedback? Emotional

intelligence isn't innate; it's a skill you can build. Practice mindfulness, seek feedback, and observe how you react under pressure. This foundation will set you apart as a leader.

2. Master Communication Skills

Leadership lives and dies by communication. It's more than just giving clear instructions—it's about listening, showing empathy, and encouraging others. Learn to ask thoughtful questions and genuinely listen to the answers. Recognize the power of nonverbal communication and how tone and body language can impact your message.

Encouragement is another critical component. People want to feel valued and heard. Small moments of recognition can go a long way in building trust and morale. The best leaders make their people feel seen and understood.

3. Learn to Influence Without Authority

One of the best ways to prepare for leadership is to practice leading projects involving people who don't report to you. Whether it's a volunteer team, a cross-functional project, or a community initiative, learning to motivate and inspire others without the crutch of authority is invaluable.

When you can't rely on titles or paychecks, you're forced to build trust, communicate vision, and inspire action. That's real leadership—getting people to follow you because they want to, not because they have to.

4. Find Mentors and Learn from Them

Show me your mentors, and I'll show you your future. No one becomes a great leader alone. Seek mentors who can guide and challenge you and offer insights from their own experiences. Shadow leaders you admire. Ask them about their mistakes, lessons learned, and how they navigated tough situations.

Mentorship provides a mirror and a map—reflecting your blind spots while helping you chart a path forward. It accelerates learning and expands your perspective in ways self-study can't.

Leadership Is a Journey Worth Taking

The transition from individual contributor to people manager is one of the most challenging shifts in a career. But with intentional preparation—developing emotional intelligence, honing communication, learning to influence, and finding mentors—you can successfully navigate that transition.

I wish I had known these lessons back at that CSU information desk. But my failures then shaped the leader I am today. And if my story can help you avoid the same missteps, it's worth sharing.

So, are you ready to lead?

Start now. Because leadership isn't about a title—it's about influence, growth, and your impact on others. And trust me, it's a journey worth taking.

Ready to become the kind of leader others want to follow? Explore more leadership insights and resources at [PrestonPoore.com](https://www.prestonpoore.com) and start growing into the leader you were meant to be.

[1] <https://welearnls.com/age-of-leaders-in-the-workplace/>, <https://www.hrmanagementapp.com/leadership-development-if-not-now-when>