

Great leadership takes place
every day, in the smallest of ways.

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NOW YOU'RE A LEADER The Journey Begins

So, now you're in charge.

When you accepted your first leadership job—or even seriously considered putting your hat in the ring—you took one of the most important and courageous steps in your career. You're a boss! You're going places.

How's it going? Are you sure? How do you know?

Chances are, you're perched precariously on an emotional range from “awkward excitement” to “abject terror” and back again, with a constant baseline of “stressed.” This shouldn't come as a surprise; you have a lot to prove. (Or, if you've been in the position for a while, you might have a lot to repair.) For over 45 years, our firm, DDI, has been an innovator in the field of talent management, which is a fancy way of saying that we help companies transform the way they hire, promote, and develop leaders. This book is based on what we've learned from developing more than eight million frontline leaders over four decades, in virtually every country and industry around the world. First-time leaders who transition well are more able to make a positive, lasting impact on their teams, families, and careers. Our approach helps people become engaged and more productive more quickly.

Speaking of stress, our research shows that a transition to a leadership position is among life's most challenging adjustments, ranking somewhere between personal illness and managing teenagers. In fact, only one in three leaders in our

first transitional study felt they were effective in handling transitional challenges.¹ For first-timers, the stress can be particularly acute. You are taking on not only a new type of role, but also one that exists in a business environment defined by fast-moving challenges: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. And you're in a unique position where your performance—or lack thereof—will determine whether your team will thrive or stall (along with your career). Are you as good as you need to be? Do you know what it means to get the best work from the people on your team? Will they hate you on sight? How will you determine if you're on track before it's too late?

The transition you're experiencing is profound enough for us to make a bold claim: Nobody comes to his first leadership position knowing everything he needs to know to succeed. When you get into truly unfamiliar emotional territory, your instinct might be to throw up your hands and try to do everything yourself. Perhaps you'll micromanage your team, take critical assignments away from direct reports as deadlines loom, or fail to give the kind of feedback that will help your team members do their jobs.

But let us make another bold claim: You'll find few greater rewards in your career than on the leadership journey you're about to begin. What you learn will transform the rest of your life in many wonderful ways. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is what you'll discover about your own ability to grow and be effective in the world. We believe that over time, the skills you'll learn can help you communicate more clearly with the people you love, become a more active member of your community, and make a difference for the causes you care about. This is a journey that leads to a happier life.

When I first got the job, there was a lot of pressure, Karen told us. She became a leader by surprise and default when her own supervisor took ill and needed an extended leave. Karen was an expert telecommunications engineer, but she suddenly had 30 more-senior people to manage and a big project to finish. I could tell that there was a lot of skepticism about me. And there already had been many failures in the project, like when a contractor failed to deliver. But Karen was able to find effective ways to get the work done—on time!—through the people around her, and has earned the respect of her peers. It has been the most gratifying thing! I was able to help them work well, and I still felt like myself. And we've been able to deliver a lot, and move the project to the next level. And now the whole company knows who our team is. Best of all, she now looks at her life differently. I learned I could be a real leader. I can make a contribution in lots of places.

Joe, a supervisor in a landscaping business, learned that deep satisfaction comes from being a key part of helping others reach their true potential. *The very thing that is satisfying to me is watching the guys under me grow*, he said. Joe had been unable to find a job in teaching, and instead worked his way up in a national landscaping company. Many of his direct reports were untrained, non-native English speakers, and their work could be a gateway to better things for them. That's when he realized that he had a role to play in their lives. *I saw the other supervisors, and all they want to do is show up every day, do the work, and go home.* But Joe saw an opportunity to share what he knew about leadership and business and to develop his team in a deeper way. *I got dirty with them in the field, worked with them side by side. They began to trust me. And now I'm in a position to really watch them develop. Now I see that leadership goes back to the very reason I was interested in teaching in the first place.*

The real opportunity of leadership, as we see it, is a deeply human one. But precisely because humans are involved, lots of things can go wrong. As an example of the type of challenge you may encounter in your first leadership role, meet John, 42, an urban planner. *I got ambushed!* he says of his most problematic direct report. John ran a loosely knit team of eight, but it was one young engineer who derailed him. And he didn't see it coming. *She gave me no feedback of any kind. And then called me the worst boss in the world.* It was John's first attempt at leading a team—something he knew pretty well. Or, so he thought. He'd worked well as an individual contributor on interdisciplinary teams, and like most people, had strong feelings about what a leader should and shouldn't do.

At first he was hands-off, figuring that everyone liked to work independently. *I don't like working for people who are looking over my back all the time. So my approach was "you go do your thing, and I'll come to you when there's a problem."* When he felt the need to give input, *I came in and took over, and it seemed like micromanaging. But nobody said anything to me.* Until his six-month performance review. *I was completely shocked when my boss told me what she [the young engineer] had said.* Her complaints: John didn't set priorities, didn't pay attention to her work, took projects away from her with no explanation, and focused only on his own work. John realized too late that his hands-off style had backfired. And waiting for her to tell him what she needed out of a boss? *I was told that because I was more senior, I should have known better. And I think that's right.*

In our experience, it takes about 6 to 12 months for a new leader to hit stride or hit the skids. And that's exactly what happened to John. And once a major problem occurs, it might be hard to find the advocates you'll need to turn things around.



WE ASKED, LEADERS ANSWERED @Twitter

Q: The first time you managed people (not just a project) the emotion you felt was . . . ? #leadership

@nilofer [awkwardness](#)

@TonyTSheng [terror that i would be revealed as not knowing what i was doing. Which i didn't. lol](#)

@Mallory_C [nervous that I would royally screw it up and be that awful, clue-less boss—always want it to be a productive experience.](#)

@BigM5678 [Overwhelmed. Many years passed before I could delegate w/o feeling I should be doing it myself or it's not going to be right.](#)

This book is targeted to what we believe is the most critical role in any organization, the frontline leader. You're more important than you might think! And now, you're in a unique position to positively impact your entire company by working productively not only with your team, but also with other supervisors, peers in other departments, customers—everyone.

We can help you answer important questions about your ability to lead before you misstep. We can help you experience the joy of leadership sooner by managing the real and powerful human emotions that can block your success. And we'll show you how to master the new skills leaders need to work effectively, such as coaching others, engaging people, delegating, tapping into your new network, hiring, and even running a meeting.

We wrote this book to help you master your new leadership role more quickly, while avoiding some of the headaches and heartaches many people experience. And for those of you who may have already made some key mistakes, we can help you put things back on track.

“Frontline,” “First-Time”—What’s in a Label?

Throughout this book, we use the terms *frontline* leaders and *first-time* leaders interchangeably. First-time is fairly straightforward, referring to people either in their first leadership job, or those pondering a move into one. Frontline is more about the level of leadership. A frontline leader directly manages individual contributors. This leaves out higher-level employees, like middle managers or senior executives, who manage other leaders. Other terms for frontline leaders include *supervisor*, *team leader*, *foreman*, or *manager*.

How Is This Book Different from Other Leadership Books?

This book isn’t based on one person’s theory, a cobbled-together dataset, or an inspiring true story of running one campaign or landing a plane under difficult circumstances. (Some of these books are terrific, and we love them. They’re just not what you need right now.) Instead, we’re giving you specific, actionable information about what to do and how to do it, based it on a combination of hands-on experience and decades of solid research.

We include what we’ve learned from helping companies make thousands of frontline leadership selection and promotion decisions each year. We tell you about the competencies and attributes that lead to successful frontline leadership performance based on extensive job analyses we’ve conducted with hundreds of organizations—and how to develop them within yourself, starting today. And perhaps, most of all, when we call something a best practice, that claim is backed by dozens of research studies that demonstrate the impact of that practice on organizational performance.

At DDI, we believe that better leadership is far more science than art. Yet, it is based in a deep respect for and understanding of the people side of leadership. We believe that people can transform their relationships in work and life by modifying their behavior in simple, clear, and measurable ways. We’ve trained and sat with hundreds of new leaders just like you and personally shared the advice that’s in this book. You’ll hear some of their stories in these pages.

Although you can open this book at any point and find immediate solutions to problems you may be experiencing, we hope you first spend some quality time on the first section. These nine chapters distill DDI’s work on early leadership and provide the best foundation for starting your leadership journey.

The second section is a deeper dive into some of the key skills you'll need to master in order to succeed. These mastery and leadership skills chapters can be read sequentially, or you can jump to the chapter that best meets your current need. Expect short, specialized content to help you tackle the nuts and bolts of mastering your new position. You'll also find checklists and discussion guides that you can use immediately in your working life. Revisit them often. And through our "Your First Leadership Job" microsite, we offer links to bonus chapters, online resources, content, and communities that can help you connect with other leaders in transition. You'll want to bookmark this site and return to it frequently:

www.YourFirstLeadershipJob.com

The book also includes exercises, quizzes, diagnostics, and other interactive tools in every chapter. We encourage you to explore them. Designed by organizational psychologists, they've been proven effective over the years. Use them and you'll be more successful . . . and find your job more enjoyable.

In addition to the research cited throughout this book, you'll meet real people who have shared their experiences as first-time leaders. Each story conveys a lesson, insight, success story, or cautionary tale. (We've changed names and masked companies to encourage candor.) We've also queried people via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Quora, looking for stories and inspiration from their own leadership journeys. You'll find results from our questions and surveys throughout the book.

If you have one takeaway from this book, it should be this: Great leadership takes place every day, in the smallest of ways. It is reflected first and foremost in your conversations, the way you influence others, and how you interact with the people on your team and in your network. But the first step in your leadership journey is to think of yourself not as a boss, but as someone who can and should ignite a chain reaction of effectiveness that positively impacts direct reports, customers, vendors, peers, and supervisors alike. Your journey starts with a very specific kind of spark.