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If you're a manager in a knowledge-driven industry, chances are you're an expert in the area you manage. Try to imagine a leader without this expertise doing your job. You'll probably conclude it couldn't be done. But as your career advances, at some point you will be promoted into a job which includes responsibility for areas outside your specialty. Your subordinates will ask questions that you cannot answer and may not even understand. How can you lead them when they know a lot more about their work than you do? Welcome to reality: You are now the leader without expertise—and this is where you, possibly for the first time in your career, find yourself failing. You feel frustrated, tired and disoriented, even angry. This is the point where careers can derail. If you get to this point, or see yourself headed in this direction, what can you do?

First, you need to resist your natural inclination, which is to put your head down and work harder to master the situation. Leaders who come up an expertise track almost always derail here because they react to the challenge by relying on their core strengths: high intelligence and the capacity for hard work. They frame the challenge this way: “I need to master this subject. Okay, no problem, I’m smart. I can learn.” And so they buckle down, and dive into the mastering the details so they can be an expert again. This is the road to disaster.

It is a disaster because if it took ten or twenty years to master your specialty you are not going to achieve a similar mastery in a new domain in the first 90 days—and 90 days may be all you have before you have to show results. Your staff, who know a lot more about their domain than you do, won’t respect you, your lack of confidence in the details will show when you talk to top management, and your attempt to work twice as hard as you already are will wear you down.

So what should you do instead? To succeed in this situation, you must learn and practice a new leadership style. Your old style of management, which I call “specialist management”, depended on expertise. You need to put that behind you and adopt a new style of management: the generalist style. Based on my work with leaders who have successfully made the transition, here are the four key skills to develop and practice:

1) Focus on relationships, not facts

One of the profound differences between the two managerial styles is that the specialist leader focuses on facts, whereas the generalist leader focuses on relationships. A specialist manager knows what to do; the generalist manager knows who to call. The specialist leader tells her staff the answer, the generalist brings them together to collectively find the answer.

How to focus on relationships: The single best tip for building relationships is to think about how you build relationships with clients and apply those same skills to colleagues. Spend a lot of time, face to face, getting to know people as individuals. In the generalist style you are constantly adapting your approach to the individual and the situation and that means knowing people very, very well. Flying overseas just to have dinner with an important colleague is not a waste of time—any more than it would be a waste of time to do so for a key client.

2) Add value by enabling things to happen, not by doing the work

As the expert leader it was easy to see your contribution: you were making decisions based on your unique knowledge. As a generalist you cannot do the work directly, but you can enable things to happen. A big part of enabling things to happen when you are not the expert involves knowing when to leave things alone and when to intervene. This isn’t easy because you have a broad array of responsibilities and you need to be able to tell at a glance where trouble lurks.

How to know where to intervene: How do you know where trouble lurks? One useful tactic is to sit in on a meeting between a direct report and his subordinates. If the conversation is two-way, that’s a good sign. If the manager does all the talking and the subordinates are passive, that’s a bad sign and

you need to dig more deeply. Notice that you don't need any expertise on the subject they are discussing; you just need to decide if the conversation is healthy.

Another tactic is to get feedback from your network—a network which exists because in the generalist style you focus on relationships. If your network says one of your teams isn't delivering, but the team leader insists everything is on track, then you know there is a problem. Notice that if both the team leader and your network agree things are on track then you probably don't need to intervene—the team leader will ask for your help if she needs it.

3) Practice seeing the bigger picture, not mastering the details

As a generalist leader much of your value comes from your ability to see the big picture better than others around you. You might think of the specialist leader as heads-down, deep in concentration, plotting a detailed course on a map, while the generalist is heads-up, looking around and noticing what is going on.

How to develop a generalist perspective: A useful tactic from consultant [Rob Kaiser](#) is to take the problem you are focusing on and see how it is affecting the people two levels below you. Then think how the problem is affecting people two levels above you. It's a simple tactic to describe, but it really challenges you to think deeply, and you can develop a perspective that will make a real difference to the organization. Having a perspective that makes a difference is the value generalist leaders bring to the organization and one that may be noticeably absent in heads-down specialist leaders.

4) Rely on “executive presence” to project confidence, not on having all the facts or answers

When you make a presentation in your area of expertise you are confident in the facts and the facts speak for themselves. But what is it that “speaks” when the facts can't do it for themselves? Where does the confidence come from when you are outside your area of expertise? As a generalist you must draw on that elusive quality of “executive presence” to inspire confidence in others.

How to develop executive presence: Executive presence isn't a mystery any more than project planning is; it is a skill you develop. The most useful thing you can do is pay attention to presence. When someone who has presence walks into a meeting notice how they dress, how they speak, how they stand—these are not personality traits, they are skills. Watch some videos of world leaders on the [World Economic Forum website](#). The specialist manager in you will want to pay attention to what they are saying, but the generalist should want to see how they are creating executive presence. Notice the relaxed body stance, the calmness in their voice, how their sentences are crisp and to the point. Notice how they connect to the audience through sincere emotion. Notice the behaviors, practice them, and get feedback—that's the path to executive presence.

The transition to generalist management can signal the end for successful specialist managers. But if you realize that you no longer have to be, or even should be, the expert, this can be the most fulfilling and satisfying moment in your career. Your role as a leader is to bring out the best in others, even

when they know more than you. The good news is that the tactics described above have helped many leaders across this treacherous gap, and they can work for you too.

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