

Jonathan Dursi

# Do I Want To Be A Manager?

## Testing new responsibilities before changing careers



# What to do if you're thinking of becoming a manager

Congratulations! Our community needs more new managers with enthusiasm for doing the job well. Your research background has given you a lot of expertise, and some advanced collaboration skills. Moving into management or leadership would help you use that knowledge and those skills to even larger effect.

But it's true what they say – management isn't a promotion, it's a career change. There's a lot of things people find difficult about this transition:

- The work you do is very different - rather than doing the hands-on work yourself, the job is to create and sustain an environment where people can thrive and do the work well.
- You move from being an expert in the hands-on work you're used to doing to being a novice, inexperienced manager.
- Working with people means ambiguous results over much longer timescales. A lot of people find it very hard to give up the comparatively immediate and clear feedback that doing the hands-on work gives for the fuzzy, unclear, very slow feedback cycles of people management or technical leadership.
- Guiding people's professional development, handling conflicts, shepherding work, dealing with upper management and stakeholders can be stressful and emotionally exhausting.

And yet! The satisfaction from supporting individuals in doing their work and in their careers, and in helping build a high-functioning team, is enormous. And doing your work at the scale of teams of people rather than as an individual contributor can mean your impact is larger, even if more diffuse.

In the sections below I'll describe how to test the hypothesis that you'd enjoy the work of being a manager, and in doing so develop a track record of management-relevant work, while still in your current job.

## Do Your Current Job Well

The first thing I tell people who are thinking about this kind of transition is to make sure that they are consistently doing their current individual contributor work reliably and well, even as they develop new skills.

In a way, this is weird advice! I just finished telling you that the role you're thinking of has very different work, requiring very different skills, and being quite good at your current work doesn't necessarily correlate particularly well with being quite good at a lead or manager role.

But it's vital to be seen as someone who reliably gets things done. Ideally, you want your manager, their manager, and related stakeholders to be thinking "when I give X a task, it gets done and I don't have to worry about it." People will give more responsibility to people who they have confidence in executing their current responsibilities. You don't need to be the most highly skilled data scientist/software developer/sysadmin/research facilitator on the team; but you will need to be someone that gets your things capably and reliably done. It's hard to entrust someone with greater responsibility when they're not impressive while handling their existing responsibilities.

## Test The Hypothesis By Trying Out New Responsibilities

The first step is to discuss what you'd like to do with your manager, in your one-on-ones with them if you have those, or as part of some other conversation if you don't. Depending on your situation and relationship with them, you may not want to come out and say that you're interested in a move to a managerial job.

That's doubly true if you're not 100% sure that's what you want just yet! But you can absolutely talk about being interested in taking on more responsibility, and what kind of opportunities would there be on the team for that.

Broadly I'd say there's three important areas where it's often the case that a senior member of an RCD team can often start playing a role, that would both develop skills and visibility necessary to being thought of as a potential leader:

- Take on some responsibility for communicating with stakeholders (including but not necessarily limited to clients, decision makers, and peer teams)
- Take a role in supervising efforts larger than your own

- Supporting someone's professional development

(Others may arise, depending on your team circumstances: if your or a peer team is going to be hiring someone, for instance, being involved in that process would be extremely helpful.)

If you are able to take on some of those tasks, then the skills you can actively work on include:

- Seeing the larger view - looking ahead in time and more broadly than your own team
- Communicating clearly to different audiences
- Finding out what people need
- Mentoring and coaching
- Effectively coordinating work handoff
- Giving effective peer feedback

So once you've had your conversation with your manager, keep an eye out for opportunities to take on those kinds of tasks. With your manager's support, or at least acquiescence, find one that's not too big a lift for you, take it on, and spend some time to get good at it. Only then start keeping an eye out for second opportunity to grow your role. It's way too easy to let enthusiasm get the better of us, and overwhelm ourselves with new kinds of work! Develop one set of new skills at a time; growing in new directions doesn't happen overnight.

## Communicating with Stakeholders

Taking on some new responsibility for communicating with stakeholders can be a pretty easy way to get started. If you're not already doing it, there's probably opportunities to onboard new researchers, present results, connect one stakeholder with another with a similar interests. A very valuable exercise during those activities or stand-alone is to find out the needs and gaps experienced by those stakeholders, current and anticipated, learn the language used by those stakeholders for describing them, and report back to your team using your team's own language for them. The ability to concisely describe issues and possible solutions, in the ways that matter most to the audience you're speaking to at the time, is valuable as part of any leadership task.

## Supervising Efforts Larger Than Your Own

Take a role in supervising efforts larger than your own can certainly mean being made officially responsible for a project involving contributions from someone else other than yourself. But it can also just mean being more mindful and taking a bit more initiative in coordinating your own work with related work within the team or in a different team. Depending on the situation, this can mean becoming more aware of and communicating what related work is going on, initiating conversations looking for coordinating efforts, keeping track of efforts, letting peers know how it's going (possibly with peer feedback), and communicating results.

## Mentoring Juniors

Mentoring someone else's career development is really something that can only be done if that person wants your mentorship. If someone comes to you for help repeatedly, you can offer to meet with them regularly to offer help, or you can offer to be someone's onboarding buddy or support someone in another team. Either way you can not only help them but practice your coaching and mentoring skills. Mainly that involves making sure you're asking a lot more questions than giving advice, finding out what they're looking for, and facilitating them getting the support they are looking for. That *doesn't* mean you're on the hook for personally giving them that support, it could mean you double-opt-in introduce them to members of your growing professional network that can advice them on what specifically they're looking for.

## Supervising an Intern

If you are already doing these kinds of tasks and really want to test-drive being a manager, and it makes sense for your team and the situation, being a supervisor for an intern or summer student is really a full immersion into the work. Working with an intern or student is the whole lifecycle of working with a team member wrapped up into a semester; figuring out what work has to be done, hiring, onboarding, managing work and performance, giving feedback, handoff of work, and off-boarding.

In some working with a student is it's even harder than managing a staff member; pretty much by definition they're much more junior and require more hand-holding. In some ways it's easier, though - it's time-limited, and the student is probably going to be doing some very well-defined pre-specified work.

In issue #[120](#) of the Research Computing Teams newsletter, I gave some advice about hiring a intern - including a [159-item checklist for onboarding, managing, and offboarding them](#) which some readers have found useful. Supervising an intern is a pretty clear opportunity to develop your feedback-giving skills, being clear and specific while being supportive and not overly prescriptive. That's a real challenge for almost everyone. It's also a pretty clear opportunity to build coaching and mentoring skills; again, the challenge there is to help people grow and learn while letting them decide on and do things themselves.

## Take Notes

While doing this - and it will take some time, ideally a year or more - take notes of what you're doing, what works, and what doesn't.

And in those notes, pay attention to your own reactions to the different kinds of work you're doing. Many new managers really struggle with letting go of hands-on work, with its very quick feedback on what you've accomplished and how well you're doing. Moving towards much longer-term efforts, supporting people as they do the work, can be very demoralizing. As you take on some of these new duties, notice how you feel about them. Do you primarily get satisfaction from delivering some code, analysis, or getting a job running? Or do you also find supporting people's growth and watching *them* deliver the work satisfying? Be honest with yourself; there's no right answer here. The more satisfying you find watching the work be delivered even without your direct involvement, the more likely you are to be able to find happiness in a lead or management role.

## Research

While doing this, you can read, watch videos, and listen to podcasts about the work of leaders and managers in technical fields. I've listed some key resources at the end of this document.

In the notes you're taking, keep track of questions that come up, and when you'r looking for new resources evaluate them against how helpful they are with the questions you have and the challenges you face.

## Mentoring And Training

Books, podcasts, and videos are valuable resources - another are people (in or outside your organization) who have jobs related to what you think you might be relevant to the sorts of

jobs you'd be interested in. As a side benefit, these are people who might be able to help you land such a role when the time comes.

So you can and should be looking for advice as well as you do this work; others in your institution and context will be able to offer specific suggestions. Don't worry about looking for A Mentor specifically; look for people whose advice in your situation would likely be helpful, and ask them for their advice. If they are particularly helpful, ask them another question again after some decent interval.

Peers, your current manager, and former managers all might be relevant. Also, don't hesitate to ask people you don't work with in your organization if you could ask them some questions. If it's relevant, ask if they could give their advice about some of the questions you have with your current responsibilities, as you develop those skills. Find out what they have to say about the role of a manager: what challenges they have faced, their advice for new managers, and working in their particular organization.

Also keep on the look out for any training or networking events in your organization. Your HR or Learning & Development department almost certainly offers various kinds of training sessions, or networking events for ambitious individual contributors. Those will vary in usefulness, but you can always learn *something*, and at the very least you'll be meeting a cohort of people in your organization who have similar goals.

Outside of your organization, professional conferences, webinars, local meetups, and other relevant events can be particularly useful.

## Keep Your CV Up-To-Date

As you succeed in your current role, try out new responsibilities, and participate in professional development activities, keep your resume or CV up to date to highlight relevant skills and experience.

For professional development activities, simply list the activities; learning *about* something isn't the same as actually doing the thing, but it will be a signal that you are interested in growing your career in that direction.

For new management-relevant activities you've taken on, add bullet points to your current role about the accomplishments that happened during that work. The project got finished successfully and on time; the intern successfully completed their term and found a full time job using the skills they learned; the collaboration with the new stakeholders was a success

because of clear collaboration, etc. Be ready to answer questions about what you did during that project, what went well and what didn't, and what you learned as a result.

## Conclusion

Management and technical leadership are challenging but rewarding roles that requires an additional set of skills. You can find out whether you'd like the work, and test out learning those skills, in your current job. And while doing so you can meet people, seek their advice, and learn from other resources.

## Resources

Here are my current favourite resources for people considering this career change:

- [\*The Manager's Path\*](#) by Camille Fournier is an extremely well-thought of book describing the path of management and leadership in tech companies in particular. The lessons described there, especially in the earlier sections, are quite general.
- [\*The Leader Lab Book\*](#) by Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger PhD is a casual and well-thought out introduction to some foundational manager skills, and how to combine them in different combinations.
- [Rands Leadership Slack](#) is a 20,000+ strong community of people who are technical managers or leads, or interested in becoming leads or managers. There are always very interesting discussions going on from which you can learn a lot, on any topic.
- I'm quite fond of the [\*Manager-Tools Basics Podcasts\*](#), and their [book](#), although I don't agree with a lot of the material in the podcasts later material.
- I've given a couple of relevant talks: [\*Help, I'm a Research Software Manager!\*](#) and [\*Technology Isn't The Hardest Part\*](#)
- Finally, you might find the [\*Research Computing Teams Newsletter\*](#) valuable; the core of this ebook, for instance, came from [issue #138](#). And you can always [email me](#) or [arrange a quick coaching call](#) if you have questions.



Research Computing Teams is a newsletter covering the work of managing a research technology team - updates on managing individuals and teams, emerging technology, product management, and working with research communities. Find out more at [www.researchcomputingteams.org](http://www.researchcomputingteams.org).