**Shifting from Star Performer to Star Manager**

by [Annie McKee](https://hbr.org/search?term=annie%20mckee), October 20, 2015



You’ve always been a high achiever—top of your class, captain of your sports teams, star performer at work. Now, you’re going to be managing a team of high-performers in a division of your company that everyone’s buzzing about. You’re confident that you can navigate this new challenge with characteristic success.

You’re pumped. You set clear goals for yourself and targets for the division. You’re well aware that you’ll need to rely on your [emotional intelligence](https://hbr.org/product/emotionally-intelligent-leadership-hbr-article-collection/12088-PDF-ENG) skills to understand and work through your new team’s dynamics. You’re focused on achieving your goals and getting results… but before long, you’ve got problems. Your team doesn’t seem to be on board with your plan and they’re not delivering. Worse, [they seem to be shutting you out](https://hbr.org/2015/09/what-to-do-when-you-dont-trust-your-team). In desperation, you go to a few trusted mentors who tell you: “You’ve inherited the cream of the crop. I’m not sure they even really need a manager, they’re *that* good and *that* motivated.” “These are our stars. You noticed, I’m sure, that you’re the third new manager appointed in the past two years?”

It turns out it’s not so easy [to manage ultra-smart high achievers](https://hbr.org/2007/03/leading-clever-people/ar/1) — especially when you’re one of them. As a superstar in your previous jobs, you met every goal, every time. You didn’t let anything get in your way — you just did it. While you had decent relationships with teammates, you didn’t really need them. Now you do, because you can’t even achieve your own goals without them, much less the targets set by management. You recognize that you’ve been pushing them pretty hard to achieve your goals, and you suspect there’s something about what’s driving *you* that’s the problem here. And you’re onto something.

The late, great scholar [David McClelland](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/David_McClelland) [studied three human needs, or motivators](http://www.amazon.com/Management-Focus-Leaders-2nd-Edition-ebook/dp/B00BPYPNVG) that are profoundly important when it comes to managing people: the need for achievement, the need for power, and the need for affiliation. He points out that these motivators can serve us well in our work and interactions with people. But, if we don’t understand and manage these needs, they can backfire. Let’s look at each motivator in turn.

**Need for Achievement**

Your achievement drive is most likely a big part of the reason why you’ve been so successful all your life. You love to excel. You [set challenging goals](https://hbr.org/2011/02/making-sure-your-employees-suc) for yourself, then you align all your personal resources so you can meet and even exceed your expectations. You want to win, and you usually do. And you expect the same of your team members. That can be a very good thing — as long as you [manage your achievement drive](http://www.amazon.com/Primal-Leadership-With-Preface-Authors/dp/1422168034) and don’t let it manage you.

Unfortunately, a lot of star performers have a really hard time re-directing their achievement drive away from their personal goals and toward others’ success. For example, you might think you’re helping people when you dive in to complete a report or put the “finishing touches” on someone’s slide deck. But, people see that you really care about your goals, your standards — not theirs. Very quickly, they learn not to trust you. And your hard-driving impatience and tendency to correct people’s work can actually be insulting.

The right way to use your achievement drive is to bring it out to help *others* find and achieve challenging goals. You must learn to step out of the spotlight and shine a light on others’ accomplishments. It makes them feel great, while inspiring their peers. Your need for achievement isn’t going to go away, of course. You just need to learn to balance it with concern for others’ desire to do a good job, on their own terms. This takes tremendous emotional intelligence, starting with self awareness. Then, you need empathy, a willingness to understand others, and self management.

**Need for Affiliation**

[We all need friends at work](https://hbr.org/2014/11/being-happy-at-work-matters). But as a new manager, it can be really hard to strike the right balance in your work/personal relationships with your direct reports. Part of your success to date has been linked to your ability to make people like you. You’ve navigated being top of the class without having people hate you by being everyone’s friend. You’re likely still relying that strategy now.

But you need to be really careful. [The boundaries between you and your employees are real](https://hbr.org/2014/11/can-you-be-friends-with-your-boss). They *work* for you. That doesn’t mean you can’t be friendly and human. In fact, learning to be warm and authentic with people who report to you will serve you for the rest of your life. But, beware the jealousy factor. No doubt you’ve inspired a bit of envy on the way up. And now that you’ve been tapped to become a manager, it can tip people over the edge from envy to jealousy. Jealousy is a dangerous, destructive state — for you and for them. And, while you can’t control others’ emotions, you can certainly do a few things to help people through. Don’t inadvertently compare their work to what you used to do in that job. Shine a light on their successes, give them credit, and build them up — authentically.

There are lots of other reasons why it’s really hard to be true friends with your direct reports — you control your employee’s schedules, workloads, promotions, and salaries, to name a few. And sometimes you have to make tough business decisions that can strain personal relationships. But, there are people at work with whom you really *can* be friends. Now’s the time to look around, not up or down. Seek out your *peers* for friendship. This might be hard for you, because coming up, most star performers focus on the boss, not their peers. But your peers will either help you succeed or pull you down as you move up. If you build trusting relationships with peers early on — and what better way to do that than through friendships — you will be better off later.

**Need for Power**

Most of us have a love/hate relationship with our power drive, partly because power is [considered a bit “dirty”](https://hbr.org/2015/01/office-politics-is-just-influence-by-another-name). So, some of us try to ignore it or tamp it down. But, as David McClelland pointed out, the [need for power](https://hbr.org/2003/01/power-is-the-great-motivator) is very human.

And if you’re a manager, you do in fact need to have influence over others. This drive, however, is probably the one that can get you in the most trouble if you don’t learn to manage it well early on. That’s because it is easy to slip into allowing our natural need for power to escalate as we are granted legitimate authority — especially if our “star status” has given us special privileges.

Even good people fall prey to the temptation to use power for their own good. This is what McClelland called “personalized power.” You can, however, channel your need for power toward the betterment of others, and of the group — this is [socialized power](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=psycd_fac). It allows you to satisfy your very human need to have, and be seen to have, influence while also doing good for people and your company. For star performers who are now managers, this is particularly important, because people will be watching your every move to see if you’ll continue to succeed. Your direct reports are hypersensitive to your use (or misuse) of power. And those around and above are checking you out to see if you’ll be able to stay the course. And they’re not looking at results only — they are looking at how you manage your new role and the power that comes with it.

There’s a lot to learn when star performers like you take that first big management job. And the most important learning has little to do with the technical aspects of the job, and a lot to do with you as a person. Most of us don’t think too much about what motivates us to behave as we do, but learning to use your emotional intelligence to understand *why you act the way you do* is a first and often-missed step in becoming an excellent manager — and a great leader.

In essence, you need to understand what drives you and learn how to use your motives to build positive relationships to serve others first, yourself second. That’s not always easy for people who have been at the top of the class all their lives. In fact, it’s a major shift that takes concentration and effort. Most of all it takes emotional intelligence. [Developing your self-awareness, empathy and self-management](https://hbr.org/2015/06/quiz-yourself-do-you-lead-with-emotional-intelligence) will help you understand and manage your motives. And the pay off: as you leave your star performer self behind, you’ll become a successful, well-liked manager.