

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2025 Edition

Ask The Expert

Winning the Competition for Your Boss's Job

Dealing with the new reality



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You have competed against a teammate for your former boss's position and you won. What happens now?

When the boss leaves a position, it's not uncommon for direct reports to know they will compete against one another for the vacant spot. When the successful candidate is a former teammate, it can be challenging for the one who competed but did not get the role to adjust. The new boss can help make the transition a success for everyone concerned. Here are a few pointers to keep in mind.

Understand that this will be an emotional time for both parties.

Winning or coming in second in a competition sparks different emotions depending on the seat one occupies. For the successful candidate, it can bring excitement, curiosity, joy and a sense of achievement or accomplishment. For the candidate who needs to try again, the feeling might encompass disappointment, sadness, remorse, doubt, a sense of failure, embarrassment or resentment.

Acknowledge the situation.

Ideally, the new manager will reach out to the other to acknowledge the new reality. It will be hard to know precisely how the former teammate feels, so be prepared to approach the conversation following the notion of 'less is more.' Acknowledge the shift in the relationship and indicate a willingness to figure out the new dynamic. How the relationship has changed and the communication required does not need to be all figured out in one conversation. Instead, just set the stage by being open and transparent. Establish a time for a subsequent meeting after the employee has had time to think about what they need to feel supported in this new reality.

Understand the positional power that comes with the new role.

Positional power is a real thing. It is the type of power you have when you have a rank, title or position of authority in an organization. With positional power comes the responsibility to use that power in a mature and honouring way. Moving to a place of authority from within a team naturally shifts the responsibility for how one interacts with former teammates. Employees will be watching to see what behaviour is acceptable. Establish appropriate boundaries and ensure to be objective and impartial and not treat the one who competed for the role in a way that negatively distinguishes them from others.

Address the expression of any emotion that negatively affects your or the team's working relationships with the one who competed.

It takes social and emotional maturity to handle the disappointment of not getting a position you've competed for. Sometimes, candidates hold a grudge or behave in ways that compromise relationships, positivity and productivity. Sometimes, candidates have other stresses in their lives that coincide with the timing of the news that they did not get the job. While it is important not to jump to conclusions about the root cause of the emotion, it is wise to meet with the team member promptly to address your concerns. If the discontent is about the job competition, it will not likely go away. Acknowledge the situation's complexity and the employee's feelings about the result while holding the expectation of adherence to the

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accepted behavioural norms and working effectively together. If the employee is unwilling to shift behaviour to embrace a constructive working relationship, then be prepared to address this as a performance issue.

Support the former competitor's desire to move to a management role.

Have a conversation with the competing colleague regarding their desire to move into management. Ask what they need to do to prepare for the next competition. Support professional development opportunities that align with available options and compare with what could be offered to other employees.

Allow for time to settle into the new normal.

As with any new role, it takes time to learn the ropes and establish 'new' relationships. And while the players are not new, this is new regarding shifting the reporting relationship.

Be clear with everyone about what's expected and the support they can expect from you to help them be successful in their role.

Support the employee's decision if they choose to leave the team.

Sometimes, the employee who competed for the role finds it too challenging to stay with the team and you as the new manager. If this is the case, acknowledge their contribution, and should they ask, provide a reference that speaks to their strengths. Transitions can be difficult, especially if the change is unplanned. New managers may know their competitors at or near the time of accepting a new role. It's incumbent on the new manager to set the tone and demonstrate the social and emotional maturity to support individuals and lead the team, knowing some members wanted the job. It's not always easy yet necessary work.

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