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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
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Don't Delay Tough Talent Decisions

The best way for a manager to be successful is to build a top-notch team. But when most managers take on new positions, they hesitate to act quickly in replacing incumbents that may not have ability to perform as needed. Months later, when reflecting on what they could have done differently, almost all of these managers say that they should have moved faster in making the tough “people calls.”

Why are these tough calls so tough to make? Let's look at three possible reasons:

First, many managers don't trust their own instincts. They've been taught in business school to analyze situations rationally and to use as much data as possible – but when taking over a new team, the data can be limited. Sure you see past performance information, but it often comes with explanations, excuses, and rationalizations. So in the absence of rock-solid data, many managers simply decide to collect more data, get more input, and see how their subordinates perform in the next quarter, or two, or three. It's a time consuming strategy. The reality is that you'll never have complete and perfect information about each person, and will eventually have to make a decision based on imperfect data.

Another reason for hesitation is what I call the “Darth Vader syndrome.” Like all human beings, managers want to be liked and respected, and don't want to be seen as distant and scary. So to avoid coming across as a bad guy (or gal), managers pull their early punches, convey encouraging messages, and give everyone the benefit of the doubt. While this creates a certain amount of comfort within the team, it also delays the inevitable weeding out of second-rate performers.

The third reason why managers delay these calls is that they don't want to offend key stakeholders who may have strong relationships with some of the individuals on their team. In one recent case, the new manager's predecessor, who had selected most of the team, continued to be on the company's executive committee. As a result, the manager was afraid that removing any of her people would come across as a personal criticism of her ability to hire and develop. In another company, the weak performer had a strong relationship with a key customer, and the manager didn't want to risk upsetting this customer until he had established his own relationship.

The unfortunate thing about these reasons for delay (and probably others) is that they all make sense in the short-term. As such they make it easy for a new manager to convince himself that he shouldn't take any precipitous steps. “After all,” he can say to



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himself, “the data is imperfect, I want to get off on the right foot with my team, and I don’t want to anger any important people.” So the wise thing to do is to stay with the team that’s already in place.

Unfortunately, this is rarely the right strategy.

Most new managers are not hired or promoted to be business caretakers and status quo maintainers. Instead they are expected to take their department or unit to a next level of performance – and putting the strongest team on the field as quickly as possible is one of the keys to making that happen. That’s why a CEO recently said to me that the ability to make tough people calls was the most important leadership characteristic he looked for in members of his own team.

Of course that’s easy to say, and tough to do. But if you want to hit the ground running in a new managerial position, take a hard look at whether the team you inherit can help you win. If you have doubts about some of the key people, test them quickly with a stretch assignment; or do a rapid performance assessment by talking with their subordinates, peers, and business partners. And if you’re still not convinced that this is the right team, maybe it’s time to make some tough calls.

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