

Paper 121-31

So You Want to Be a Manager? – Summarization of the SUGI30 Panel Discussion On Issues to Consider Before Aiming for a Management Career Path

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ABSTRACT

A panel discussion¹ was held at SUGI30 to explore issues that people face everyday in management positions. The targeted audience was programmers who were thinking about making the career move into management. The three panelists had different experiences. One panelist moved into management - and then moved out of management. Another juggled management responsibilities with coding responsibilities. The other panelist focused on managing people and projects. The panelists shared their professional experiences and engaged in an active question-and-answer session with the audience. This paper summarizes the three views of the panelists with additional insight from another year in management.

INTRODUCTION

People enter the management arena for different reasons. Some search out management opportunities aggressively, others are forced into it, still others are in the right spot at the right time. What do people find when they become managers? Chances are good that they are overwhelmed by the responsibility that now rests with them and are not prepared for the myriad of new tasks that await them. In addition, these people are forced to learn the art of management.

So what is management? For this presentation it can be defined as any responsibility for work other than your own and/or supervision of people other than yourself. How do people succeed at becoming good managers? What don't people think about before going into management? How do I get my old job back once I determine management is not the place for me? The paper looks at some management issues as presented at SUGI30.

SUGI30 PANELISTS

STEPHEN M. NOGA: Manager and Programmer

I am the Director of the Statistical Programming group (all SAS[®] programmers) for a contract research organization, which means that I am expected to be a manager 100% of the time. This doesn't mean that I spend my entire day managing the department. On the contrary, I still continue to program (in SAS) about 40 to 50% of the time. However, my management responsibilities are always present and occasionally they cause havoc with my programming duties.

LAUREN HAWORTH: Fulltime Manager

After working 11 years as a programmer, Lauren moved into management on a part-time basis. When her manager departed, there was no one else to fill the void, so she stepped in. To her surprise, she found she liked it. From that point onward, she sought out management positions. For the past 8 years, she has been in a full-time management role.

ANDREW T. KULIGOWSKI: Former Manager, Fulltime Programmer

Power. Prestige. Money. Aren't those supposed to be the benefits of a position in management? If so, why would anyone agree to surrender them? Andy used to have managerial responsibility, but voluntarily gave it up to return to a programming position.

Why Go Into Management

So, you're ready to take that next career step? Your reasoning for wanting to make the move to management has hopefully been thought out and you are comfortable with the decision to move forward. Lauren developed the following top-10 list of reasons why someone might want to make the move into management. Do any of these reasons sound familiar to you?

1. Making More Money

We may say that we want to become managers for the challenge, for the benefit of the company, etc., but if we're being honest, the pay scale is a key factor. Everyone knows that the managers get the big bucks, right?

2. Telling People What to Do

Another reason to move into management is to be in charge. You know there are better ways to do things. Maybe you'd like to improve your company's standard reports by using new ODS techniques, or improve efficiency by using PROC SQL instead of multiple data steps. By becoming a manager, you can tell people how to write their SAS code, right?

3. Hiring and Firing

One area where you do have decision-making authority is in selecting your staff. Over time, you can build the team you want by hiring the right people, and facilitating the departure of staff that haven't been performing as well.

4. Buying Cool Tools

As a manager, you have a lot more say in software and hardware purchasing decisions. You get to decide things like: when to upgrade to the new version of SAS, whether or not to license add-ons like SAS/Intrnet, which operating system is best for the SAS server, when to upgrade to a new server, and whether other reporting or presentation tools should be explored.

5. Ensuring Adequate Resources

As a programmer, you may feel like you've got too much work and not enough staff. You can complain to your manager and/or work longer hours, but there's not much you can do to solve the problem. A manager can control the situation.

6. Designing SAS Training Programs

You can't tell a programmer that you want them to change their programming technique and expect to get results. Programmers are a stubborn bunch and not likely to follow your advice. However, you can get away with telling a programmer that they must take a certain training course.

7. Keeping Yourself Challenged

If you keep working as a programmer long enough, at some point you're going to start getting bored. Some people will choose to learn and use a new technical skill (web development, statistical analysis, application development, etc.) to keep themselves challenged. Other people decide to go into management.

8. Working with People

Programming can often be a solitary task. You may have team meetings to plan strategy, but you still do the majority of work by yourself, sitting in front of a computer typing in SAS code.

9. Someone's Got to Do It

If there weren't managers, there wouldn't be anyone out there to hire programmers and assign work. Some programmers get forced into management because there isn't anyone else available who knows anything about how to manage programming projects.

10. Avoiding Real Work

As one manager told me, "Prior to becoming a manager I remember thinking how nice it would be to have that cushy job, just sit around and tell others what to do."

Reality of Management

Let's take another look at Lauren's top-10 list and see what the panelists had to say about each of them.

1. Making More Money

Lauren: In the long run, this may be true. However, an entry-level management position often pays the same or less than a senior programming position. You're going from being an expert at your job as a programmer to doing something where you have little or no experience. There's no reason for your company pay you more at this stage. You're going to have to earn that big pay raise. Eventually, a senior manager is eligible for higher pay than a programmer is, but the difference isn't as big as you might think. If this is your main reason for wanting to go into management, think again.

Andy: I never had any trouble with the concept of putting in long hours at the office, and with taking work home. Unfortunately, I had the equation inverted - I had a problem with the concept of "putting it behind you", to the point where I would wake up in the middle of the night wondering if I had properly explained the criticality of Task X to the team, or had forgotten to delegate Task Y, or ...etc...etc...etc. I value the ability to sleep through the night far more than I value a larger office. Besides, the truth is, there was very little difference in the power, prestige, and money separating a high-level programmer from a low-level manager.

2. Telling People What to Do

Steve: If you are still programming then it will be up to you to assign programming tasks to yourself. While you might think it will be really cool to assign all the interesting or even easy tasks to yourself, I bet your group would not think the same thing. If you supervise teams of programmers a team lead may ask for your assistance with a programming task. In cases like this you need to act as a programmer and let the team leader lead.

Lauren: As a manager, you can occasionally get away with dictating programming technique, but you'll have a very unhappy staff if you do it very often. Not that you can't convince a programmer to do what you want. You just need to make it more of a discussion. Lay out the issue. Ask for their suggested solutions. Add your own ideas. Then let the programmer make the decision. A good manager can get things done with out telling people what to do.

Andy: I couldn't step in and handle all of the production problems myself. The team would never gain experience if they didn't get to work on things themselves! Nor was there time for me to both code and manage – I could delegate coding tasks, but not managerial ones. My superiors recognized the need for patience in order to develop the team, but that understanding only lasted as long as it took the phone to ring from an impatient client.

3. Hiring and Firing

Steve: You will have input, either partial or full, on the hiring of new employees. You are now the interviewer instead of the interviewee. What kind of interview do you want to run? If the company has a HR department then you will be working with it to ensure that you are not wasting your time interviewing non-qualified candidates. What are the traits that you will look for in a prospective candidate? You will need to learn and follow federal, state, and local employment laws and learn what you can and cannot say while interviewing a prospective employee.

You will have input, either partial or full, on the firing/laying-off of employees. Do you think you can make the call to get rid of an employee, and then actually tell that person they no longer have a job?

Lauren: While it's tempting to hire the best SAS programmers you can find, don't forget the other skills. You don't want a team of prima donnas that can't work together. In interviewing, be sure to focus on the softer skills. I highly recommend taking a behavioral interviewing course before doing any interviewing or hiring.

Remember that if you hire someone who is brilliant but difficult to work with, it's you as their manager who will have to deal with the disgruntled customers and coworkers. Find the people who are a joy to work with, even if they are newer to SAS. You can always improve their SAS skills. Changing someone's personality is much harder.

Hiring good people is a lot easier than getting rid of those that don't work out. Legal issues can make it difficult to fire someone, even when you have good documentation of their performance issues. The best managers help their staff figure out for themselves that things aren't working out, and help them exit voluntarily. But if that doesn't work, a manager has to be ready to make the tough decisions and deliver the bad news. Firing an awful employee is hard. What's even harder is telling someone that you like, on a personal level, that they just aren't cutting it as a programmer and they're being fired. If you don't think you could do this, then don't get into management.

4. Buying Cool Tools

Lauren: Of course a manager still needs to get input from the programmers and customers about what they need, and input from senior management on how much they can spend, but a manager has a lot more say in the final decisions.

Also, if your ego needs stroking, just show up at a conference or trade show, walk into the exhibit hall, and let people know you're a manager who can make purchasing decisions. You'll shortly be swarmed by salespeople who are only too happy to tell you how great you are and to send you all sorts of demo software. There is a downside to this, however. I highly recommend never giving out your phone number to salespeople, or you'll never get any work done once you're back at the office.

5. Ensuring Adequate Resources

Steve: If your company has given you the responsibility for having the right number of people in your group then you will have to determine the right size for your group. What kind of workweek do you want for your group? If you have too many in your group then chances are good that they will not have enough work to keep them busy. This is not a good situation for you because upper management expects your people to be working for their paychecks, not taking it easy, and it is not a good situation for your group if they are clock-watching during the week (very boring). You will have to find meaningful work (not an easy task) for your group. On the other hand, your group being overworked is not a good situation for you or them either. This will lead to burnout (you/them), shoddy work, low morale (didn't know you needed to be a morale officer, did you), and possible resignations (you/them).

Chances are you will be required to keep your group and their projects within the budget allotted. You will most likely have input on new budgets. Budgets affect everything in your group. Will the company let you hire at will? Will there be a hardware/software budget for your group? If your company does individual raises/bonuses instead of company-wide one then you will have input on what these will be for your group.

Your input may be needed in determining time to complete tasks. If your company submits proposals for client work, upper management will use your input for proposal budget numbers.

Lauren: As a manager, you're involved up front in staffing and budget planning. If you do a good job forecasting needs and negotiating your budget, you can resolve resourcing issues. It's very rewarding to see the look of relief and gratitude on a programmer's face when they come to you asking for more help and you're able to deliver.

Andy: One of my former managers, Ann Goodwin to give the credit deserved, advised me "In order to be a successful manager, you have to place your success totally in the hands of others." Looking over my team roster, I had all of the skill sets necessary to support the software our team was responsible for. However, very few of the members of my team had experience in our team's applications – except for me.

I couldn't step in and handle all of the production problems myself. The team would never gain experience if they didn't get to work on things themselves! Nor was there time for me to both code and manage – I could delegate coding tasks, but not managerial ones. My superiors recognized the need for patience in order to develop the team, but that understanding only lasted as long as it took the phone to ring from an impatient client.

After mulling over the situation, I determined that the ideal solution to my problem was to assign myself to the pool of coders, and let another manager take over the reins of the team. You can hire management candidates from outside the organization, but you have to grow experience from within.

6. Designing SAS Training Programs

Steve: You may have to develop and institute a professional development policy for your group if the company does not have one. I do not think your group will be pleased with you if you choose to attend the best conferences in the best locales and leave the rest for them. Will you require papers to be presented in order for an employee to attend a conference?

Lauren: If you have a new technique you want people to start using, you can set up a training class or a demo to entice them into learning and incorporating the new technique. If you have a team of programmers who are good at data step programming, but their reports are basic and ugly, send them off to an ODS class or a SAS conference to they can see the advantages of newer technologies.

Even if you can't teach the old dogs all of the new tricks, as a manager, you get to set up how your new junior programmers are trained. You can groom your staff to do things the way you like it. This could include areas such as programming style, documentation, use of macros, and reporting techniques.

7. Keeping Yourself Challenged

Steve: What is the time commitment to management vs. programming? Are you still programming? If your new position requires you to do both then you will have to hone your time-management skills in order to complete your own work in addition to managing your group's work.

You are going to have to choose your battles wisely both within your group and the company. Sometimes you have to fight the good fight and hope for a favorable outcome, while knowing that you may have to accept an unfavorable one. Other times it is better to deal with an issue as is and save your ammo. As with life, you cannot win every time. Strive for the wins that will help your group the most.

Think of yourself as a Fire Marshal. It will be up to you to know the difference between a trashcan fire and a forest fire, and also how to prevent the former from turning into the latter. Neither your group nor upper management will respect you if you treat every bit of adversity as a crisis. Hopefully, in your current position you have learned to ask the right questions and also know when to call in the cavalry. In management, not only will you need to apply these skills to your own work, but also to the work of your group. You may have a team lead who is determined never to ask for help, even to the detriment of the team or group. It will be up to you to know when that team is in trouble and get them the help they need.

Most of all you need to remember that Life Happens! You need to be flexible and think on the run.

Lauren: Learning how to be an effective manager is not easy, and you will be anything but bored in your first year or two on the job.

Andy: A successful manager must have the ability to successfully juggle multiple priorities. Let's look at a hypothetical situation. At 9:00, a client sends in a query, wondering why a particular number on a report does not appear to trend with the others on the same report. They'll be calling back before noon for a status update. Your manager would like you to look at it personally. At 9:15, very senior management requests a summary of the team's significant accomplishments for the year for a presentation they are giving later that week; they want a response by noon. Question: Which of these tasks is more critical? Answer: Both of them! (This was an easy one!) Failure to complete either assignment by their requested time would risk the anger of management.

I never did figure out how to squeeze 6 hours worth of work into 3 hours real-time. It never seemed to be a problem when I was a programmer, but situations like that happened all the time in management.

After reviewing the situation, it became clear that I did not want to continue in this role. Fortunately, the option to return to an active coding position was still available, and I decided to take it while I could.

8. Working with People

Steve: What are your people skills like? Can you handle conflict or will you hope that the problem goes away if left alone (bad move)? If you want your group to follow you then you will have to earn their respect. This may mean, at times, acting as an umbrella to shield them when it starts raining from above. Your group stays mostly dry while you get soaked. Get used to it, it is part of the job. Of course you can always deflect blame from yourself or delegate additional work to your group even though they cannot handle their current workload. I'm sure your group would react positively to either of those actions.

You will need to hone your ESP skills. People will expect you to know what you do not know.

Everybody deserves a vacation. No disputing that tenet. However, do not assume that because you are the boss your vacation plans take precedence over those of your group. Unless the company closes for a week or two at Christmas (and some do), assume that most of your group is going to want some or all of that time off. It is up to you to determine a vacation schedule for your group during the holidays and year round that provides coverage to the company. Depend on a client to need something the first week of January, the last week of November or the last week of December.

Lauren: As a manager, your job is all about people. You have to interact with your direct reports, peers, customers, and senior management. You will likely spend the majority of your day in meetings. This includes 1-on-1 meetings as well as team meetings.

At first it seems as if the endless meetings are a waste of time, and that no real work is happening. But this is where the important business decisions get made. Sometimes in formal meetings, other times in hallway conversations before and after the meetings. You can't be involved in decision making if you spend all of your time in your office. This is the real job of a manager. You spend your time meeting with people in formal and informal settings, and negotiating solutions that meet everyone's needs.

My favorite part of the job is working with people to develop their skills. Mentoring your direct reports can be challenging but it is also extremely rewarding. Teaching new technical skills is fun, but the best reward is when you've taught someone a new communication or negotiation skill, and then you see them put it to effective use at a team meeting. It's kind of like watching your child take their first steps.

Andy: A good manager takes pride in the accomplishments of his team. I took a great deal of pride in my accomplishments when I was a programmer. When I joined management, I found that I didn't feel satisfied when a task was completed. The only word I can use to describe the feeling upon the successful completion of a project is "relieved". I got into this profession because I liked doing it. I took great pleasure in my accomplishments! It wasn't worth a few extra bucks to sacrifice this feeling for the next 20 years, counting the days until retirement.

9. Someone's Got to Do It

Steve: You will need to develop a management/leadership style that fits your needs. This is something that you can't learn from a book, but from experience, and it will take time for you to develop one.

You are the boss which translates as 'you have all the answers' to your group. You may not know the answers but you sure better know where to find them.

Lauren: This isn't a great reason to get into management, but it happens. If you're faced with working with an unqualified manager, maybe you'd be better off to take on the job yourself. At least you know you'll be helping out the other programmers on the team.

Andy: A fair and honest annual performance appraisal benefits both the employee and the company. I found that I had no problem in writing what I considered to be an impartial annual review for the members of my team. (My understanding is that this puts me in the minority of Americans, but I don't have any hard figures to back that up.) I was able to look my team members in the eye and explain my rationale for the review. However, I never felt like I was successful in instituting change – bad habits that were documented in December were still bad habits 12 months later, and 24 months later, and ...

The old expression, "Hindsight is 20/20", has exceptions. Looking back, I still do not know what I could have done to better explain the issues, and to effectively encourage progress through the year – if indeed there was anything I could do. I only know that nothing changed after a year.

10. Avoiding Real Work

Steve: Paperwork. You're a programmer. Logic should be one of your strong suits; writing grammatically correct documents may not be. That will need to change. SOPs, guidance documents, memos to upper management, etc. etc.

Meetings, Meetings, Meetings (see Paperwork above).

Lauren: As one manager told me, "Prior to becoming a manager I remember thinking how nice it would be to have that cushy job, just sit around and tell others what to do. It wasn't until I was being called out on the carpet by my manager for department deficiencies, ambushed by a disgruntled employee who insisted he should be promoted, and inundated with paperwork, that I really understand the challenges of the role. By the way, all of this occurred within the first week of my first supervisory position!"

Not only is there a lot of work, but it is less tangible than what you did as a programmer. As one manager put it: "as a programmer at the end of the day I could look back and see what I had accomplished (completed a program, finalized a test plan, delivered a set of tables, etc.), I could actually hold something in my hand that showed I was at work that day. As a manager many if not most days are spent talking to people, at the end of most days I had nothing tangible to show that I was even in the office. It took a long time for me to adjust to that."

Even when you do get more involved in project work, it's generally in a supportive role. One manager told me about her initial experiences: "The biggest surprise was that I had to start producing indirectly rather than directly. I was no longer the one who produced deliverables and presented them to customers and meeting participants. I needed to adjust to being more in the background on the projects and encouraging others to be in the limelight. Instead of answering questions and presenting new ideas, I had to bite my tongue and let my staff person do it. This became easier over time, but I think this is still one of the hardest things for me to do as a manager, especially when the project is exciting to me."

Anyone who says that becoming a manager reduced their workload isn't doing a good job as a manager. If you manage to delegate work effectively and avoid crises, that's great, but it just means you need to take your new free time and figure out how you can use it to improve productivity and job satisfaction for your direct reports and your organization.

Additional Thoughts One Year Later

As was explained in item 3 above, managers do have to let people go (aka fire, RIF, layoff). Because it is a difficult decision to let someone go, the needed decision can get delayed to the detriment of all parties. How does a manager know when to make that move? Sometimes an employee makes it an easy decision for the manager by committing a serious enough infraction that company policy requires an immediate dismissal. Other times, especially if the firing has to do with an employee's skill/talent level, it is not clear-cut.

While reading the book *Good To Great* I came across a passage that answered the 'when' question quite nicely. "But how do you know when you know? Two key questions can help. First, if it were a hiring decision (rather than a "should this person get off the bus?" decision), would you hire the person again? Second, if the person came to tell you that he or she is leaving to pursue an exciting new opportunity, would you feel terribly disappointed or secretly relieved?"² If you answer 'no' to the first question and/or 'relieved' to the second question, it's time to get rid of the person.

I think most people are familiar with the fable about the boy who cried wolf. Unfortunately, a manager does not have the luxury of deciding when someone is crying wolf. Even if a manager suspects there is a high probability that someone's (whether a direct report or someone in a different department) 'real' issue is no issue at all based on this person's past history, the manager must investigate the issue to determine what, if any, action is needed. If the manager does not invest the time to investigate the issue then the manager is risking upper-management's wrath when something goes wrong and it was determined that the manager could have acted to prevent the problem.

CONCLUSION

After being in a management position long enough to make an informed decision, you will have to make the call. If you like the job, that is great and hopefully you will continue to grow with the job. If your management job is not everything you thought it would be then you need to figure out if it is the current job or the management aspect that is causing your dissatisfaction. A management position is no different than any other type of job. The current management job may not be suited for you but that is not to say that the next management job will not be more to your liking. If you choose to leave the management arena, there is no reason to be down on yourself. Not everybody is suited for this track.

You already know programming and you know what you have liked and disliked about your managers. As a manager you will have the opportunity to shape how a lot, but not all, things are done in your department. This responsibility is truly a double-edged sword so be careful. Above all, have confidence in yourself. Do not be afraid to have smarter people than yourself working for you. You do not know it all and you will need your group's help to succeed.

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REFERENCES

¹Noga, Stephen M., Haworth, Lauren, Kuligowski, Andrew T. (2005) "So You Want to Be a Manager? - A Panel Discussion On Issues to Consider Before Aiming for a Management Career Path", *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual SAS Users Group International Conference*, paper 143-30

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