



By Mac McIntire

Why Some People Become Jerks the Moment they are Promoted to Management

Have you ever noticed how some people, who were great employees, turn into jerks the moment they become managers? This article explains why that happens and what to do about it.

Have you ever known someone who seemed to turn into a jerk the moment they were promoted to management?

If you ask front-line employees if they know any managers who are jerks, they'll tell you there are a lot of them. But don't worry; I'm sure *you* are not a jerk! In fact most of the managers who employees think are "jerks" aren't jerks either. They just appear that way to the employees.

This article explains why some managers seem to turn into jerks the moment they are promoted to management.

Discovering Why Jerks Become Jerks

Several years ago I was consulting with a large casino property in Las Vegas. I was asked to come in and assess why they were having such significant customer service problems in their coffee shop. The employees had bad attitudes and it reflected heavily in their service. The General Manager of the property assumed there were deep-seeded morale issues in the department and called me in to discover the root cause.

To my surprise I discovered the primary cause of the service problem in the restaurant was a toaster — or, rather, the lack of one. The employees were upset with management because there was only one toaster in the coffee shop, which wasn't enough. They needed another toaster. But management refused to buy an additional toaster.

Having only one toaster meant the food servers had to compete for the use of the single toaster. The food servers were responsible for making the toast while the cooks prepared their food order. However, normally the food was cooked faster than the toast because the food servers were still waiting in line around the crowded toaster. Consequently, the food would get cold while the food servers prepared the toast. Then when the customers complained about the food being cold, the food servers had to take the food back to be re-cooked. This made the cooks angry. The cooks often yelled at the food servers for not getting the food out fast enough. The food servers yelled at the cooks to stop yelling at them. The food servers also yelled at each other as they

once again started the cycle of competing for the toaster. This, of course, made everyone want to yell at management.

Full-scale battles often broke out around the toaster as food servers accused other food servers of crowding in before them, or, worse yet, stealing their toast.

The employees hated coming to work. They hated cooks who were angry at them all the time. They hated their fellow employees who would stoop so low as to steal toast. But mostly they hated management for being "too cheap" to buy a new toaster.

Betty Gets Promoted

Now imagine the following scene. One day a management position becomes available in this coffee shop and one of the food servers, Betty, gets promoted. All of the other food servers are happy for Betty. They congratulate her. They tell her what a wonderful job she will do. They throw a celebration party in her honor. They are happy for her.

But mostly the employees are happy for *themselves* because they know that now that Betty is in management, she'll finally get them a new toaster. Betty knows how bad they need the toaster. She's a former food server. She's one of them. She knows what it is like to work in the trenches. She won't forget her friends! She'll get them what they need.

But then something eerie happens to Betty. Somehow, overnight, she changes. Like the victim of an unseen vampire, bitten by management's bite, she instantly becomes one of "them." She becomes a manager. Betty turns into a jerk!

A week after Betty's promotion there is no new toaster. The employees are antsy. They expected Betty to get them a new toaster right away. They're surprised Betty hasn't done it already, but they're confident Betty will get the toaster soon.

Another week goes by. Still no toaster.

"What about the toaster?" the employees ask.

Betty gives them the typical management answer: "I'm working on it."

More weeks pass. The workers are becoming disgruntled.

"Hey, when are we going to get a toaster?" they query. "You haven't forgotten us, have you?"

"Leave me alone!" Betty huffs. "I'm doing the best I can."

It's now months later and still there is no new toaster. The employees gather in small groups and talk about Betty behind her back.

"I can't believe it," one says. "I never thought Betty would become one of *them*. Now that she's a big-wig she's forgotten about us peons. She hardly even talks to us anymore. Have you noticed how she always hangs out with other managers?"

Suddenly Betty walks in. The workers scatter. Finally one out-spoken employee inquires sarcastically, "So, Betty, do you think you'll *ever* get us a toaster?"

"Look!" Betty snaps back. "You just do *your* job and let me do *mine*!"

The disgusted employee quickly turns and stomps off.

"What a jerk," he mumbles under his breath.

Betty Has Changed

What happened to Betty? Why doesn't she buy the toaster? Why has she isolated herself from people who used to be her friends? Why is she so curt when she speaks to them? Why does she act like such a jerk?

Why? Because something *did* happen to Betty when she was promoted to management. She didn't notice it, but it happened almost immediately. And it happens to *every* new manager.

The moment Betty took on her new role as a supervisor, her **perspective** changed. Instantly she began to see things from a different view — from a *management* perspective. She learned how much industrial-grade toasters cost. She found out how miniscule the profit margin is in a restaurant. She was informed of expensive capital improvements that had to be made at the restaurant because of legislated ADA requirements. And she learned of other big-ticket items that needed to be purchased for the coffee shop. Since she was now responsible for balancing her budget, she began to prioritize her expenditures. The toaster was still on her priority list, it just wasn't as important as it used to seem.

She also was reminded that management had purchased three brand new toasters over the past twelve months. Those toasters needed to be repaired numerous times because the food servers kept breaking them. In their impatience to get their food orders out faster, the employees pushed the conveyor chain on the toaster with a knife, trying to speed it up. This broke the heating element in the toaster. The food servers only had one toaster because they broke the other three.

Betty was reminded that management had warned the food servers several times that management would not continue to replace the toasters if the employees kept breaking them. The employees would have to take better care of the toasters they already had. Now Betty understood why management refused to buy new ones.

Betty's **goals** also changed when she became a supervisor. As a food server her goals had been pretty simple. She needed to get the food out on time, serve her customers well, and earn enough tips to pay her personal bills.

But as a supervisor, Betty now struggled to ensure the restaurant made a profit. She became concerned about portion control, pilferage, turning the tables, work schedules, inventory levels, equipment maintenance, and numerous other financial matters. The employees were shocked that she now seemed more interested in the bottom-line than in employee morale. To them, she was just like all the other managers. She had become a jerk.

Betty Is No Longer One of Us

Betty used to be one of the gang. When Betty was a food server she was just like all the other food servers. She occasionally became silly and played around in the kitchen area. During slow periods she hung out and gossiped with the other workers.

But now whenever Betty saw employees standing around she told them to find something to do. She expected them to clean their duty stations, fill the salt and pepper shakers, stock the supplies, or, even worse, clock out early and go home. Apparently now that she was making supervisor's pay, she'd forgotten what it was like to have to work every scheduled hour just to make ends meet.

But Betty hadn't forgotten. It's just that she now realized she had to focus on other **responsibilities** and place them above her own personal needs. Now it was her job to make sure the work got done. She expected the employees to work a full eight hours, since that was what they were being paid to do. She was constantly amazed that the employees stood around when there was obvious work to be done. Why did she have to tell them what to do all the time? If they didn't want to work, they should go home. Betty couldn't believe how lazy the employees had become. They seemed to be standing around all the time. She wondered whether they were acting this way just to get back at her because she had become the manager instead of one of them. Maybe they were jealous.

Betty Becomes Isolated

The employees felt Betty had become a snob after she got promoted. She used to be a lot of fun.

She joked around with the customers and other workers. Back then, whenever the employees stood around and complained about management, she was right there with them. In fact, she had promised that if she ever became a supervisor she would never act like management did.

But now Betty spent most of her time with those same managers who she used to joke about. She formed new [relationships](#) and didn't associate with her old coworkers much anymore. When she wasn't in a meeting with other managers somewhere, or sitting in her office talking to another manager, she was having lunch with them in an area reserved for management only. The food servers couldn't remember the last time they saw her in the employee cafeteria or break room.

Betty has heard the employees complain about her never being around. But they just don't realize how busy she is. She doesn't like going to all of those management meetings, but she *has* to be there because that's where she gets the information she needs in order to do her job. She'd like to be able to just stand around like the employees, but she doesn't have time. Every night she takes work home with her. The employees don't do that. Maybe if they'd walk in her shoes for a while they'd realize how hard managers work.

Actually, one of the reasons why Betty doesn't spend time with the employees is because it's difficult to talk to them anymore. It's as if they don't even speak the same [language](#). The employees only talk about their personal lives and personal problems. They seem totally focused on money. No matter how big their tips are, they never seem satisfied. They complain about their pay and are constantly critical of management.

Betty can't listen to these criticisms. If she listens but remains silent, the employees will think she agrees with them. And if she tries to explain management's perspective, the employees will see her as being defensive. Anyway, there are more important things to talk about with the employees — such as customer service, the quality of the food, work station cleanliness, performance standards, and worker tardiness. Betty wonders why she seems to be the only one worried about these things. After all, isn't that the employees' job too?

Betty's Not Happy with Us

Betty doesn't get a lot of [satisfaction](#) from being around the workers. In fact, having to deal with the employees is the least satisfying aspect of her job. She finds that most of her job satisfaction comes from seeing just how productive and profitable she can make her restaurant. She enjoys solving problems and discovering ways to improve

the work processes. She likes manipulating the work schedules and monitoring the purchase orders to get the most bangs for the buck. Her personal [reward](#) comes at the end of each week when she reviews the week's financial statements and production figures. She loves to see an upward trend and knows that if things continue the way they're going, she's likely to get a big bonus at the end of the year.

As Betty sits back and evaluates how she is doing as a new manager she's pleased with how well she has adjusted to her new role. Almost all of the performance indicators in the coffee shop have gone up since she became the manager. Certainly this was due, in part, to her leadership abilities.

At the same time, she's surprised at how poorly the employees have responded to her management style. They seemed so happy when she was first promoted. She never expected them to give her so much grief. She is shocked at how quickly *their* behavior changed after she was promoted. It seemed that the moment she got promoted to management, most of the employees turned into jerks!

How Not to Become a Jerk

Making the transition to management is often difficult no matter how prepared a person believes he or she is for the job. As shown above, the moment a worker is promoted to management, their *perspective* and *goals* change. Without realizing it, and with almost no effort on their part, they start thinking less as an employee and more as a manager. Almost automatically they feel personal *responsibility* to ensure the work gets done. Production and financial performance becomes very important to them.

New managers naturally gravitate in their interpersonal *relationships* toward other managers. They even start to look and sound like them. Some even take up similar recreational activities, such as golf. They dress like managers and talk about the things that are important to managers. Their *language* changes as they use jargon and acronyms that are foreign to most employees.

New managers usually don't notice how quickly their job *satisfaction* shifts away from receiving pleasure while serving customers to being most happy when budget and production goals are met. They subtly change from a people-focus to an emphasis on numbers. Production and the bottom-line become the markers of success.

Finally, not only is dealing with employees less satisfying to the new manager, but he or she quickly realizes the manager's *rewards* usually come not from good employee relations, but from good

productivity scores. A good bottom line can hide a multitude of a manager's employee relations weakness in many organizations. Most managers naturally gravitate to that which gets rewarded, and in most businesses financial performance is the most important indicator of a manager's worth to the company.

Since this transformation is mostly unconscious and occurs naturally with little or no effort on the part of the new manager, the new supervisor may not recognize how obvious the changes appear to the employees. The manager may feel like he or she hasn't changed at all. Invariably, to the new manager it seems the *employees* have changed.

Since most managers are *not* jerks (they just appear to be), they need to be aware of two important characteristics that will help overcome any false perceptions employees may have about them. These qualities are, first, personal [introspection](#); and, second, the ability to be open and honest in their [communication](#) with their employees.

The Ability to Look Within

I believe one of the greatest personal qualities any manager must have, particularly new managers, is the gift of introspection — the ability to look within oneself to honestly assess how he or she is responding to one's supervisory role.

When a worker becomes a manager, this role change impacts them *intellectually*, *emotionally*, and *socially*. It also may affect them *physically* and *spiritually* (one's personal values and guiding principles).

Some new managers believe once they enter management they are supposed to be smarter than their employees. They feel they should know and understand everything that is going on in the organization. They think they are required to know how to do everyone's job. They're supposed to solve any problems that may arise.

When the new manager realizes they don't know all these things, some managers may become emotionally distressed. Some may unconsciously use an authoritarian tone to mask their insecurities. Others may retreat to previously familiar ground that is more comfortable to them. They may try to retain their "friendship" relationship with their former colleagues.

The change in their relationship with their former coworkers often causes stress for many new managers. They don't know how to act. They're afraid if they talk to their former friends, or take them to lunch, it will be viewed as favoritism. So they avoid any contact. This, of course, makes them appear distant or snobbish.

For some new managers, the intellectual, emotional and social conflict of their new role causes physical problems as well. The mental and emotional stress of being a manager may produce anger, fatigue, or even depression. These internal conflicts may also impact their spiritual well-being and challenge long-held values or beliefs. These feelings are difficult to mask and often come out in negative ways as the new manager interacts with the employees.

The Ability to Communicate Openly

New managers can minimize the unwanted effects of their management role by communicating openly with their employees. Through introspection they can become aware of how their role change is affecting them. This will help them understand and, if necessary, challenge their perspectives and beliefs about their role as a manager.

For example, they can challenge the assumption that a manager must be the expert in every situation. They can overcome their fear of fraternizing with employees by being conscious about deep-seeded biases or favoritism. They can become more aware of how they are responding emotionally as they face the many management challenges that arise.

For the most part, employees generally respond well when managers openly talk to them about the struggles they're facing in their new role. Managers who are honest will tell their employees when they don't know something and will solicit the expertise of the workers. Mature managers don't expect to know everything, but, rather, utilize the vast talents of their employees to achieve the goals of their work unit. If the manager is open with his or employees, normally the employees will help the manager determine the best way to interact with them to avoid showing favoritism.

By far the worst thing new managers can do is to become isolated from their employees. Unfortunately, this natural isolation begins when the manager takes on his or her new role. New managers immediately feel different than and apart from their employees. This difference keeps them from talking to the workers and causes a gulf between management and the employees.

Sadly, there is a natural tendency in human beings to move in the opposite direction from that which is right. For example, the time when a married couple is in conflict and their marriage seems to be in jeopardy is when they should move *toward* each other the most. They obviously need to communicate more and spend more time with each other in order to resolve their differences. They need to be more open and listen to each other more.

But instead of getting closer to each other, most struggling couples naturally move away from each other, refuse to talk to one another, and close themselves off in separate rooms. Consequently their marriage fails because they moved in the opposite direction from that which was right.

Likewise, when an employee within a work team is struggling, the other members of the team invariably know about it. But instead of moving toward the employee to offer constructive feedback that might help the struggling worker improve, colleagues often withdraw as far away as possible from the employee. They isolate the employee and refuse to associate with him or her, lest they be guilty by association. Eventually the employee fails because he or she did not receive the support of their fellow workers.

New managers need to fight this natural tendency to withdraw. They need to step *toward* their employees. They need to spend *more* time with them, to talk to them more, to listen to them more, and to value the worker's input more.

New managers who are introspective enough to understand how they and their employees are responding to the manager's new role will know that open and honest communication is the key to their future success. They'll realize that soliciting help from their employees and being receptive to the employees' feedback is one of the best ways to ensure they succeed in their managerial role.

Managers who do this are respected and trusted by their subordinates. These managers are not seen as jerks. They eventually gain the support and commitment of their employees and accomplish the significant results they were expected to achieve when they were promoted. They get the satisfaction and rewards of management without isolating themselves from their employees. §

Innovative Management Group offers pre-supervisory and new-supervisor training programs to help new managers transition successfully into the supervisory role. Through introspective analysis we help people confront their insecurities and driving philosophies to better position themselves for success as a manager. We provide them with powerful tools to communicate with and manager their employees.

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