

Becoming a Successful Manager of SAS® Programmers from an Ex-Programmer's Perspective

ABSTRACT

Have you ever wondered how to take that next step from programmer to manager of programmers? Or even if you want to take that step? What are the challenges? What are the rewards? What are some techniques you can carry with you from your programming days to make you a more effective manager? Which do you need to scrap? Here is a look at all of these questions and answers from someone who has been there and successfully done that.

INTRODUCTION

We all reach a point in our career where we have to make a tough decision: do we keep on a technical track and strive for new heights in our programming skills, or do we take what we know and transition into a management role? Some of us ask this question many times, and each time we come to our answer with different insights and experiences. For myself, when I started my career as a programmer, the last thing I wanted to do was manage people – an introvert? Spending that much time interacting with other people? Dealing with other people's problems that could not be solved with an absolute correct answer? No way! And it took me 17 years before I was ready to change my mind. When I did, it was with the attitude of "Why not? If I hate it, I can always go back". Luckily for me, I had the advantage of having an excellent manager and mentor who guided me through the transition, helped me see all of the great parts of management, and taught me how to get through the awful parts. I took off from there, and never looked back!

HOW? AND DO YOU EVEN WANT TO?

So how do you know it is time to make the switch, and even if you want to? Think about what you do every day. Is it frustrating running up against the same policies that don't make sense from your perspective? Being asked to do too much work in too short an amount of time? Some people can roll with these frustrations, and not be too bothered by them, but to others, they are not so easily swallowed. It is certainly true that it is easiest to affect change from within; sometimes this means infiltrating the ranks of management to make the voice of the programmer heard.

Some people are driven by the desire to perform more tasks outside of their trial work. Do you have a secret desire to run meetings or think up kitschy ways to build team camaraderie? Don't be embarrassed, it happens to the best of us. A management position is a great platform from which to fulfill these goals. Maybe you are interested in seeing your job within the bigger picture of your department or even the company; management is a great place to start. Perhaps it is the allure of driving change that excites you; this, too, is easier from the management world.

Now that a large part of the work force has become home based, there are some programmers who feel removed and wish to feel a better sense of connection with their fellow coders.

So the other half of the question: how? It begins with being aware of your surroundings. Keep an open mind towards the opportunities around you, within your own company. Maybe your manager is moving up. Maybe your team, or even another team, has experienced a rapid growth spurt, and needs more management oversight. Great! These are avenues to explore. If not, it is not the end of the road. Ask your current manager if there are tasks you can take over from them; I can assure you that there are always tasks that managers would like to delegate. And your manager will remember you for your willingness to help and dedication to going above the parameters of your job.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES? WHAT ARE THE REWARDS?

I think one of the biggest challenges as a new manager is to remember that developing and managing people is very different than developing and managing programming code. For starters, there are very

rarely purely “right” and “wrong” answers to problems. Associates ask you for advice and insight just as often (or more often) as they ask for code suggestions, and you have to be sensitive to that. And I do not just mean sensitive in the “Go to HR and take the Acceptable Behavior training” way; in these circumstances, your ears are your greatest asset. In most instances, associates just want to be heard and do not expect you to come up with solutions for all of their life’s problems.

It can be frustrating sometimes to feel as if you have worked a long day, and not accomplished anything “concrete”, like a program that runs and puts out the perfect output. Some days are filled with meetings and progress on larger initiatives: all the things that are necessary to completing a task. You need to learn to feel accomplishment in the small steps, and in realizing that every day you are working towards a larger goal.

Another manager challenge is that what works for one person or situation does not always work for another. In SAS®, a DO loop will always give consistent results, no matter what the surrounding code; with people this is not so true. Anything from a difficult home situation to a missed cup of coffee in the morning can lead your associates to act and respond differently at any given time point.

And of course, maybe the elephant in the room: what to do when someone is not performing up to expectations. This is never an easy conversation, but often a necessary one. I like to think I learned something from my father; he always taught me that there is a time for bun-burger-bun communications, where you put the important part in between some less important stuff, and a time for the strictly burger communications – straight to the point with no fluff. Believe it or not, getting directly to the point is appreciated because it is not like you are trying to hide anything or even soften the blow; it conveys a certain respect that you can both handle the situation like professionals. And it gets easier, believe me!

So now that I have convinced you that management is not worth the hassle, let me fill you in on some of the rewards. For me, the greatest reward is when my associates grow and progress in their career. To me, that means that I have provided them with opportunities and helped them along the way when they needed it. It means I have provided feedback, both positive and constructive, at various points. It means I have allowed them to develop their own strategies for handling difficult situations.

It is also great to be able to affect change at a higher level. Maybe this means revising programming time estimates to be a bit more reasonable; after all, any programmer knows that it takes more than two hours to program an efficacy table! Or advocating for rewards for programmers who work late nights or weekends.

It can also give you an outlet for all of those secret desires I mentioned earlier, like leading meetings or thinking up kitschy ways to build team camaraderie. Be creative! And find an atmosphere that recognizes and values your creativity. Meetings don’t have to be boring; for example, at my last quarterly department meeting, I put a small picture of a giraffe on one slide, and at the end of the presentation I asked a series of questions for which I gave prizes, including “Which slide had the picture of the giraffe?” My associates found it amusing, and you had better believe that next meeting they will all be paying more attention, even if it is only to find the giraffe!

But don’t get me wrong; when your associates tell you that you are the “best manager ever”, that feels pretty good, too!

WHAT TECHNIQUES CAN YOU CARRY FORWARD? WHICH ONES NEED TO BE REVAMPED OR DEVELOPED?

One of the best techniques you can carry forward is organization. A programmer organizes their code every day; the order of operations is important, as is the organization of the programs you write. At first as a new manager, the amount of work, in many varied forms, can be quite overwhelming. Set up file folders on your computer, use organizational software, have a notebook on your desk for writing reminders and to do tasks: find something that works for you.

Laser focus: being present in the moment and fully engaged in what you are doing is key. People can tell when you are multitasking while talking to them on the phone. You certainly would not read your e-mail while having a conversation with someone sitting in your office; don’t do it when you are having a conversation on the phone. Approach each task with your full attention. Just like when you are writing that

program that involves four treatment arms and 16 patient reported outcomes, requiring p-values and confidence intervals.

One technique that you need to leave behind in your programming days is answering every question that you are asked in a direct manner. You need to learn to answer questions with other questions: "What do you think?" or "What are your ideas for getting around this obstacle?" are responses you need to practice, for while it feels good to solve problems, you need to also encourage your associates to find their own solutions. Does this mean you always evade direct answers? Definitely not! But make sure you find ways to help grow your staff in knowledge and confidence by having them determine their own answers. I know I am doing a good job as a manager when my people come to me with a challenge, and a few possible ways to solve it.

So I am a self-declared introvert. How do I spend so much time interacting with people? How do I make small talk on the phone with my associates, asking about their lives, their interests, their aspirations? How do I speak up at meetings with upper management with confidence? The answer is that it is a developed skill, just like many things in our lives, like, for example, programming; you learned that, you can learn this. Yes, there are days where I do not want to interact with anyone; we all have days like that. But I do find that now that I am firmly entrenched in the management world, even when I do not feel like talking, once I start it gets easier. Having a great manager and great associates truly helps. Being focused solely on the conversations also helps. And yes, it sounds cheesy, but approach everything, especially conversations, with a smile. It has been shown that just the act of smiling raises our spirits, and the spirits of those we are engaging.

CONCLUSION

Always be honest.

Always do what you say.

Always be an advocate for your associates.

Don't be afraid to give management a try – it is true that you can always go back if you are not happy. And if you are happy, that's great! Just remember to never let that little programmer voice in the back of your head fade away.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Christine Young
Chiltern International LTD
614-636-6340
Christine.Young@Chiltern.com

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