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Leading as a First-Time, First-Generation Manager

By Kela Lester | Harvard Business Review

While there's extensive research on the glass ceiling and how to break it, there's less talk about its close relative, the "concrete wall" — a set of obstacles that keep Black, Indigenous and people of color, especially women, from securing high-level positions.

The concrete wall, as described by Ella L.J. Bell Smith, a professor of management sciences at the Tuck School of Business, "limits your capacity to learn and understand what's [happening] on the other side — the culture, the behavior, the expectations, the rules. If you don't know what's on the other side, and nobody's telling you what the rules are — or if somebody keeps changing the rules without your knowing it — you can't play the game."

What happens when you finally chip away at the wall and move into a managerial position for the first time? What should you do if you're the first person in your family to navigate this new opportunity? Here are three baseline lessons I've learned in my few years as a first-time and first-generation manager.

— **START FROM WITHIN:** Confidence is a cornerstone of leadership. Whenever you feel unsure of yourself as a new leader, take a moment to remember your unique upbringing and point of view that helped you get to where you are today. Use your strengths to build a foundation of confidence. Then, add to it. One way you can do this is by emulating the leadership styles of mentors or managers you admire. Observe them, ask for advice and take on the traits that resonate with you most. Depending on your approach, these may be emotional intelligence, humility, kindness, creativity, integrity, courage or the ability to persuade others.

— **LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE:** Get comfortable relinquishing control of details and ask for help when needed, which may be challenging if you're used to doing it all.

When assigning projects to your direct reports, avoid the urge to micromanage. Give employees a goal, a deadline and clear expectations. Then let them figure out how to achieve that goal, reach that deadline and meet those expectations. This will free up space for you to observe.

Now that you've finally arrived in a new position, this is your chance to make an impact on the bigger picture and allow your team members to grow.

— **CULTIVATE A COMMUNITY:** Building rapport goes beyond knowing your teammates' professional goals. It's about creating a psychologically safe environment. Schedule weekly one-on-one meetings with each of your direct reports and use a part of this time to understand how their personal lives affect how they show up to work. The advice here is not to spend half an hour discussing your social life, but

to check in with people professionally and personally. Make people feel seen, appreciated and heard as humans, not just as employees.

Even as diversity in industry grows, underrepresented talent remains stuck in the middle, with fewer growth opportunities or senior executive pathways. In breaking the “concrete wall,” you’ve made it through an immense systemic challenge passed down from the generations before us.

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