

## Two Ways Out of the Technical Leader, People Problem Conundrum

By Maya Townsend

Squirrels are great at foraging for nuts, building nests, and finding ways into my [“squirrel-proof” birdfeeder](#) (not my personal birdfeeder, but close to it). But they’re never going to be great swimmers. Similarly, some leaders are never going to be great at managing people. So what do we do?

### Good-Bye Manager, Hello Individual Contributor

The most obvious answer is to shift poor people managers into individual contributor roles. With this solution, people aren’t forced to do something they can’t do well. At the same time, the company doesn’t lose their knowledge and experience.

There are two problems, however. The first has to do with ego. For some managers, being shifted to an individual contributor role feels like a demotion. It’s hard to stay engaged if you feel like you’re being slapped in the face. If this is the problem in your organization, skip down to “It’s the Project, Not the Position” [link to subhead] to learn what you can do.

The second problem is that, despite a lack of people skills, some managers are so good at parts of their jobs that it’s hard to shift them. A manager who’s hopeless at

team leadership might have built such strong customer relationships that customers would be furious if she were to move. Or someone who can’t develop people might be great at managing workflow across departments. If this is your problem, skip to “Let Managers Do What They Do Best.”

### It’s the Project, Not the Position

One way to get around the ego issue is to build what’s called an “assignment-based organization.” In these organizations, prestige is associated with the projects people are chosen for, not the roles they play. Rather than proceed up a hierarchical ladder, people move from project to project and gain greater experience, adaptability, and value to the organization.

This approach is a great benefit to companies that need more innovation, adaptability, and collaboration. Rotations help employees build important skills such as adaptability, flexibility, critical thinking, and problem solving, which were rated among the highest needs in [“Critical Needs and Resources for the Changing Workforce,”](#) a SHRM / Wall Street Journal report. By rotating projects, people are forced to continuously learn, adapt, and

collaborate in new ways. It's a benefit for them and a benefit for the organization.

### **Let Managers Do What They Do Best**

In some organizations, managers can't be moved for good reasons: they're simply too good in their positions to sacrifice despite their people problems.

An alternative is to take a page from the business process reengineering (BPR) handbook. BPR introduced the concept of [embedded coaches](#) into organizations.

Their job is to work alongside the manager and focus on increasing human capability while the manager makes sure the end-to-end process is humming.

Today, I see more practice center leaders than coaches in organizations. The practice leader role combines the best of the coach role while also overseeing the growth and development of the profession across the organization. Project management, business analysis, and software development are some of the areas that can thrive under a practice leader who sees to their growth—while their technical managers see to their effectiveness.

Have you seen an assignment-based organization or a practice center structure work? How did they work?

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