From Peer to Manager:  
4 Steps to a Successful Transition  
-- We’re still friends, right??

By D. Kevin Berchelmann  
Triangle Performance, LLC  
www.triangleperformance.com

So, you’re the “new kid on the ‘boss’ block,” eh? It’s somewhere between being crowned ‘king’ and being branded as a traitor.

Talk about confusing emotions, right? Such are the joys of first-time leadership.

You’ve always thought about being in charge; about being in a position to make some necessary changes, right some wrongs, and do things smarter. Now, you’ve got the opportunity.

Holy smokes… Now what?

Clearly, there’s no simple “user’s manual for modern supervision.” Sure, there are lots of books, articles, seminars and consultants on leadership; but do they really understand what you’re facing? Do all of those glossy, $30 hardback wannabes really know how difficult it is to make this transition?

I won’t trivialize it by saying “relax,” though I will say, “don’t worry.” Though it may seem insurmountable, you aren’t the first person to make this move.

And this ain’t my first rodeo. In working with corporate executives and managers for many years – big companies and small – I can tell you with all certainty that you’ll face much of this same anxiety each time you take a step “up” the organizational food chain.

That’s right, think about it: Your CEO, when promoted to Grand Poobah, faced many of the exact same issues you face today in making the transition.

Starting now (or Monday, or next week, or whenever), you’ll find out how it feels to be bossing your friends. And they’ll discover how they feel about you bossing them. The same people you shared drinks and lunch with yesterday are now relying on you to make fair, reasonable
decisions that effect their livelihood and personal success.

Shoulders getting heavy yet?

One or more of your prior co-workers may actually feel like they deserved your promotion more than you... can you imagine that?? Some may feel simply betrayed, since you’ve now “left the club.”

Yesterday, you were “one of us,” today, you’re “one of them.”

So, what to do now? Well first thing to realize is there are two HUGE facts about leadership that “they” forgot to tell you:

1. You aren’t prepared for it. News flash – being a super-operator is not the same thing as being a supervisor. Doesn’t matter if you were the best thing since sliced bread as a regular worker. Leading is different.

2. It isn’t all that hard, and most importantly, Good News! It can be learned. That’s right; like riding a bike, swinging a golf club or shooting a gun... leadership is learned skill.

Now, let’s look at this transition – this “change of command” in military parlance – as simply a process. Don’t over-think it; it doesn’t have to be difficult. It does, however, require some thought.

To help with your thinking – and to give you a process with which to start, here are 4 steps for you to make your leadership transition as successful – and painless – as possible:

(A note: these principles apply whether for a brand new leader or someone still trying to get accustomed to those new leadership responsibilities)

1. It’s not just a business card; you really are different. And introductions are in order. Don’t cheapen your role, or confuse the issue, by roaming around telling all your prior co-workers to “not worry,” and that “you won’t change.”

Better, tell them you plan on taking your new role seriously, and that you’ll need their help in making sure you do the right things. Remind them of all the ideas “we” had prior to the big move. Above all, this is the time for them to “meet” you as a manager, not simply a co-worker or friend.

2. You can still be friendly, though probably not friends. And yes, Virginia, there is a difference. ‘Friendly’ is good, and the compassion you have and show now will shine through in your success as a new leader.

That friendliness, however, will need to be tempered, or balanced, with boundaries. You aren’t the same “Mike” or “Wendy” that you were yesterday. At least not in an organizational sense.
You have entirely different responsibilities, and will now be measured – as a success or failure – on how others do, not just your own tasks. You will, now or in the foreseeable future, need to make some hard decisions; to do that, you’ll need to maintain a degree of distance; a visible separation that makes clear your newfound responsibilities.

It’s not being aloof, it’s ensuring fair treatment for all, and that you’ll have both the ability and wherewithal to make some of those hard decisions when the need arises.

And that need will arise. You can count on it.

Really, nobody wants to see you play favorites to your friends. They want to know that you’ll rise above those prior relationships, and give all involved an equal opportunity to succeed.

One last thing here: get “out of the loop.” Previously, you were in on regular gossip, discussions about management, and maybe even some venting and/or complaints about the company. That must stop completely now. Avoid the gossip. Stay clear of coffee pot gatherings and most after-work happy hours.

This is a difference others can – and will – see, and it’s important.

3. Ask. Shut up. Listen. It really is that simple. Don’t you remember how often you and your friends would say things like, “if they would just ask us,” or “we told them, they just didn’t listen,” or even the favorite, “I told you so…?”

Ask your prior co-workers what they do, specifically, what you can do to make their job better (easier, faster, more productive), and to let you know when they have any suggestions at all about how better to run the railroad.

Then, the hard part: shut up and listen. Don’t speak for a while; give them the chance to talk – this is their first opportunity to address their “new” boss; make it something memorable for them. Take notes. Don’t commit unless you’re sure of your authority, but certainly say “that sounds reasonable to me” if appropriate.

Listen. If you nail this down right, it’s a skill that will prove invaluable to you as a leader in the future. Not many really “get it.”

4. Leverage your relationships. Instead of worrying about what someone is now going to think about you, or how you’ll look to your prior co-workers now that you’ve ‘got the washroom key,’ use those prior relationships to make success all around.

Go to prior friends and ask them do some of the things they may have proposed, or to be the ‘point-person’ because of their known skills in influencing co-workers and others. Maybe you can get them to remind you of some of the process you both may have discussed earlier.
You don’t need to entirely jettison those prior relationships; put them to good use going forward.

I often remind others that leadership — truly effective, successful leadership — is not necessarily difficult, though we sometimes make it that way. It’s simple principles, common sense, and the ability to trust our learned instincts.

*It is a skill*, and one that is as critical at this first juncture as it is for a Fortune 100 CEO. Yesterday, you may have talked about your boss. Today, they may be talking about you. Making the leap from co-worker to leader does not have to be difficult, but it absolutely *must* be a change from how you behaved before.

Simply decide you want to succeed, plot the appropriate course, and start taking those steps.