Why Managers Are the Glue

Idea In Short

A common early mistake for newly promoted managers is continuing to think and talk like an individual contributor, describing their value entirely in terms of what they personally produce rather than how effectively they run a team. Good managers function as the genuine glue of any professional services organization, translating senior direction into organized delivery and freeing more experienced people to focus on higher-value work.

A Common Early Mistake for New Managers

A frequent mistake among newly promoted managers is continuing to describe their own value the same way an individual contributor would, focused almost entirely on personal tasks completed rather than on how effectively they organize and enable an entire team's output. That mindset reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what the managerial role actually requires.

Managers Function as the Glue

Strong managers create genuine leverage and profitability for a professional services organization precisely because they know how to run teams effectively. They take on assignments and distribute the work efficiently to less experienced colleagues, people earning lower wages with more room to grow, who can responsibly execute the details. Managers still contribute directly, but their more important function is running the operation itself.1

A Simple Structural Model

A widely used, if simplified, model describes three broad roles within a typical professional services pyramid. Senior leaders find new work and help scope projects at a high level. Managers develop and execute the actual delivery plan while keeping clients satisfied throughout. More junior staff carry out much of the detailed analysis and production work that turns a plan into a finished deliverable. This structure, while an oversimplification, captures a genuinely useful amount of truth about how most such organizations actually function.

Becoming the Go-To Person

A manager aiming to rise further should focus on becoming the person senior leaders instinctively turn to when a proposal needs finishing or a project needs delivering. That reputation is built through a combination of specific habits: getting smart quickly on unfamiliar topics, taking detailed notes and building thoughtfully on a leader's initial assumptions, converting rough ideas into polished, persuasive materials efficiently, and simply being genuinely pleasant and reliable to work alongside.

Building a Reliable Personal Brand

Every interaction across an organization contributes to a manager's broader professional reputation. With senior leaders, that reputation is built on consistently delivering proposals well and ahead of schedule. With peers, it comes from helping generously, offering fair feedback, and taking the time to genuinely listen. With junior colleagues, it comes from training them on practical skills while also offering honest career guidance. With any internal support functions, it comes from following through reliably on administrative responsibilities like interviews and evaluations, completed on time rather than as an afterthought.

Actively Seeking More Work

Career progression in most professional services environments correlates closely with taking on more work, and more importantly, more impactful work, since that directly translates into greater value delivered to the organization. This is genuinely demanding, especially for anyone already working long hours, which makes deliberate prioritization essential rather than optional.

Two Distinct Paths to Growth

The first path involves migrating toward more difficult, more ambiguous work, shifting focus away from discrete inputs like a single presentation or research task and toward larger outputs like client relationships, business development or overall project profitability. This kind of growth draws on accumulated experience, an expanding professional network, market conditions, mentorship, and a fair amount of good timing, all combining to build genuine specialization and expertise over time.

Multiplying Capacity Through Leverage

The second path involves simply taking on a greater volume of work by building genuine leverage: volunteering for more proposals, developing a network of junior colleagues willing to contribute extra effort when needed, reusing and adapting existing content rather than starting from scratch each time, and structuring analysis efficiently around clear hypotheses rather than open-ended exploration, saving an entire team significant time in the process.2 A well-known saying captures the underlying logic well: if something genuinely needs to get done, hand it to someone who is already busy. Becoming that reliably busy, capable person, willing and able to absorb more difficult work, is ultimately what expands both a manager's own value and the profitability of the broader organization around them.

Why This Shift Feels Uncomfortable at First

Moving from measuring success by personal output to measuring it by team output requires a genuine mindset shift, and it rarely feels natural right away. Managers who cling too long to individual-contributor habits often struggle to delegate effectively, either because they doubt junior colleagues can match their own standards or because they simply enjoy the individual work too much to let it go. Recognizing that discomfort early, and pushing through it deliberately, tends to separate managers who advance quickly from those who plateau.3

- 1Middle management
- 2Hypothesis-driven problem solving
- 3Delegation

Summary

Good managers function as the glue holding a professional services organization together, translating senior direction into organized delivery rather than simply producing individual output themselves. Becoming a genuinely indispensable manager means building a reliable personal brand, actively seeking more difficult and more abundant work, and consistently making everyone around you more effective.