

## From Geek to Boss: Choosing Tech Leaders

By Minda Zetlin

Businesses too often promote the IT employees who are most skilled at technology to be the leaders of teams or departments. This can be a recipe for disaster, since tech know-how doesn't always translate into people skills.

Two or three years ago, an IT employee at [PrintingForLess.com](http://PrintingForLess.com) started reading up on virtualization. The company wasn't using that technology, so there was no immediate need for him to learn about it. But, looking ahead, he saw an opportunity. "The next time it looked like we would have to buy new servers, he told us he thought this might be an alternative," recalls Dan Rice, vice president of corporate affairs. "He told us exactly how much he thought we could save, and asked us to hold off while he investigated further."

This, Rice knew, was someone who would make a good manager. "He was thinking beyond what he did on a day-to-day basis," he says. "That's a sure indicator."

For many small businesses, choosing the right leaders from within a technology group can be a real challenge. A lot of them get it wrong.

### **Making a tech person into a boss**

"The biggest mistake I see is that they take the smartest technology person and make him or her the boss, on the assumption that someone who knows how to deliver technically will also make a good manager," says Paul Glen, principle of C2Consulting and author of *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead the People Who Deliver Technology* (Jossey-Bass 2002). Frequently, he says, technology experts put in this position go through a rough time while making the transition. Many can't make it at all. When selecting technology managers, he says, "You need people who find satisfaction in making others productive, rather than in being productive themselves."

Sounds like good advice. But how do you identify such people? Instead of the best technical experts, try looking for:

#### **1. Innovators**

"You have to look for innovation in this field, and that doesn't require you to be a technologist," he says. "Our CEO comes up with as many new ideas for our technology group as they do themselves." This is mostly because he reads a wide range of business publications, and is constantly looking out for ideas that can help PrintingForLess, Rice explains.

## 2. Influencers

“One part of leadership is being able to influence your own technology group,” notes John Bostick, CEO of [dbaDirect, Inc.](#), which provides database infrastructure management. “In business, you must influence a broader circle that includes finance, marketing and operations, and most importantly, your company’s customer base.”

Influencing others, he adds, accounts for 85 percent of the success of a project, while only 15 percent of the success comes from the solution itself. Not surprisingly, he’s found this idea gets a lot of resistance from some technology people. “A lot of them think I have it backwards, that 85 percent is the solution itself,” he says. “They’re quite evangelical about it.” Whether or not they accept the notion, those with the strongest social and communication skills are likely to be the most effective managers.

## 3. Responsibility seekers

Rice also advises looking for people who take the initiative. “The best potential managers are the people who look for new responsibilities,” he says. “They look for more than their daily duties, and they look to be accountable for more than what’s been assigned to them.”

### **Make sure they really *want* to manage**

“My top technology employee came to me and said, ‘I’d really like to be the leader of this group,’” Rice recalls. “So over a course of six months, I involved him in the management of several projects so he could see what being a group leader was really like. At the end of that time, he came back and said, ‘I’ve decided this isn’t really what I want to do.’”

Why do employees ask for management positions they don’t really want? “People who haven’t been managers don’t always know what managing entails,” Rice says. “If you’re leading a group and motivating them, you have to have a genuine interest in helping them in their careers. Not everyone wants to do that.”

Also, many technology people believe heading into management is the one way to advance their own careers. “Often, that’s their only motivation for asking for a management position.”

In fact, becoming a manager can be a setback for a skilled technologist, because it’s impossible to keep up with the constant changes in, say, programming languages if you’re spending your time overseeing others rather than writing code yourself. “Their skills can become obsolete over time,” Rice says. “That can make moving to management a very tough decision.”

It’s the question the employee who suggested virtualization is wrestling with right now, Rice says. “I’ve asked him if he’s interested in a leadership track. Now he’s trying to decide if that’s the direction he wants for his career.”