

The Technical Ladder ... remember that?

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Lisa Quast wrote a blog post for the Forbes Magazine that discussed the idea that a career professional should not have to be a people manager to have a successful career. Lisa offered some examples of career paths and jobs where a number of successful individual contributors actually had the traits to become a good people manager.

Believe it or not, many career minded people wish to remain as **individual contributors**, but are often urged by their managers to take on people management responsibilities. This may sound a bit "retro", but during my career there actually were two tracks that I will refer to as "technical" and "management" for simplicity. During my corporate career, we did not want to lose excellent associates by forcing them into roles that they wanted to avoid. Those who chose the technical route realized that at some point their compensation would be limited because of the limited, albeit, appreciated role that they played.

One of Lisa's readers had continuous discussions with her manager about being an individual contributor versus a people manager. She felt that she worked best as a "specialist" because of her skills and ability to influence cross-functionally, without those people reporting to her. Her eventual dilemma will be career growth.

Now, most of us have witnessed or at least known of the situation I am going to describe.

There are innumerable cases of the very successful sales representative, let's call him Steve, who has won salesperson of the year, every year for almost a decade. Senior management pushed Steve to move into a sales management role, even though he didn't want to manage others. The thought process was that Steve would take over managing a team of sales representatives and make all of them as successful as he had been.

You can probably guess how this turned out. Steve had been successful in sales because of the very specific process he followed and the relationships he built with his customers over time. This was a different approach than many of the sales team members had followed, and they felt he was micromanaging them when he tried to change the way they were selling or would step in to close a sale.

As a result, sales declined and the sales team was demoralized. Steve resigned his position and went to work for a competitor. Now that he was again an individual contributor, his previous company not only lost one of its best salespersons, but began to hemorrhage business and long term customers.

Lisa suggests this advice for those who wish to remain an individual contributor:

Speak with your boss. Have a discussion with your manager and tactfully let him or her know how you feel, such as: "I truly enjoy being an individual contributor and find that I work best as a specialist. One of my skills is my ability to influence cross-functionally without those people reporting to me. I'd like to understand how I could continue to grow and develop in my career here by remaining as an individual contributor. What do you see as ways I can accomplish this?" Then listen to their response.

Obtain feedback from HR. Have a similar discussion with your HR representative to obtain feedback on individual contributor roles within the company and ways to continue to develop your career.

Seek out other successful individual contributors. Look for others at your company (or within your industry) who are successful at individual contributor roles and find out what it took for them to get where they are or to convince their managers to allow them to be individual contributors (and continue advancing their careers).



The Training Shelf

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Explore job levels within your organization. Many companies provide employees with the ability to grow into other job levels, without taking on people management responsibilities. For example, in a marketing role, it might be to advance from associate marketing manager to marketing manager to senior marketing manager by taking on additional products, product lines or geographies. In sales it might be advancing from sales associate to sales rep to senior sales rep to account manager to senior account manager, etc. by achieving higher sales levels, taking on additional products/services to sell or expanding your sales territory. If there aren't already, see if there are levels that could be created within your job function that would allow you to continue moving upward.

Research roles within other companies. Look into other companies in your area to see what types of individual contributor roles they offer. You might be able to use this information to create similar roles within your current employer. If you cannot persuade your employer, this outside research might be helpful if you decide to look for a job elsewhere.

Take small steps to see if you might enjoy people management. You may not want to manage others right now, but you just might change your mind in the future. Try taking a few steps to test the waters by asking to lead a small project team. If you enjoy it, you could volunteer for larger projects or even consider the career area of project management. Then, if you ever decide to move into a people management role, you'll already have experienced what it will take to be a successful people manager.

Not everyone aspires to become a people manager. Those who don't should look for ways to create a successful individual contributor career that will keep them challenged and engaged. If you are a manager or employer, take the time to understand the unique career goals of everyone on your team and respect their wishes. Provide opportunities for individual contributors to try out people management responsibilities, but always provide a fallback so if it doesn't work out, you won't lose any valuable employees to your competitors.

