

**A Human Resources Case Study by Nina L. Smoylar**

# Today's New Managers, Tomorrow's Leaders

*Intentional Development of Supervisors as a Path to Professional and Organizational Success*

**Introduction**

Rosie's Place is a sanctuary for poor and homeless women in Boston, Mass. In the winter of 2015, it promoted four of its young staff members to supervisor and program manager positions for the first time in their careers. The organization was experiencing a period of rapid growth, hiring from outside as well as promoting from within. The group of new managers were now responsible for overseeing relatively new community-based programming and supervising some of their former colleagues and peers.

The success of this cohort and the retention of high-performing staff comprised a crucial component of the continued expansion of Rosie's Place. It was essential as a key to the organization's staffing and growth strategy that these new supervisors develop into superb managers. Rosie's Place worked with TSNE MissionWorks (TSNE) consultant Lyn Freundlich to develop a cohort-based model of professional development and support for these new managers, to intentionally develop their leadership skills as they stretched to take the next professional step in their careers.

This case study explores the purpose, outcomes, and effectiveness of the group. It looks at the cohort-based approach to learning as a way to provide intentional support to new managers, cultivate meaningful relationships among peers, and foster a culture of collaboration across programmatic areas.

**Background**

Rosie's Place is an established and highly regarded Boston nonprofit organization. It began in 1974 as the first women's shelter in the United States and now serves as a sanctuary for poor and homeless women, known as the guests. Rosie's Place offers direct social services and support for the guests to enable them to maintain their well-being and to build security in their lives. More than 70 staff and hundreds of volunteers work to accommodate 12,000 women on an annual basis, providing meals, emergency shelter, health and wellness care, storage and hygiene facilities, arts-based self-empowerment programs, self-advocacy, housing, employment and language assistance, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), advocacy and legal services, and street outreach to disseminate resources and support.

For 12 years, Rosie's Place contracted with TSNE to provide on-site human resources coaching and consulting to its staff around supervision, conflict mediation, and employee relations across the organization. Like other groups of its size, Rosie's Place had no dedicated human resources staff or department, so, in an effort to keep small problems from growing into big issues, the organization looked to an external adviser to provide regular coaching to staff and supervisors. According to Sue Marsh, the executive director of Rosie's Place, the decision to get outside help proved to be one of the organization's best strategies to create and maintain a culture of engaged staff who can offer the best of themselves to their guests.

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## The Approach

“In any organization where there are longtime leaders in senior positions, creating new programs or positions provides the perfect opportunity for developing leadership from within,” Lyn Freundlich explained. Lyn is the senior human resources consultant for TSNE MissionWorks. “Promoting young or less experienced current staff into these positions creates an important opportunity to invest in potential leaders in a manner that develops their skills, fosters a sense of collaboration across the organization, and builds bench strength for the future. This cohort-based approach to learning rather than, or in addition to, providing individual coaching not only deepens their skills as managers and leaders but also builds long-term leadership capacity for the organization overall.”

The transition from front-line staff to supervisor can be a challenging leap for many new managers. It brings new supervisory responsibility and direct accountability for decision making and programmatic success. For first-time managers, intentional support can help them navigate these complex issues. And with a group of new managers acquiring new skills, learning together can be a more powerful and impactful model than one-on-one or individual coaching.

At Rosie’s Place, TSNE’s cohort-based model was a new approach. The executive director and senior staff hoped the model would provide their recently promoted colleagues a space for joint reflection. They viewed it as an opportunity to help upcoming leaders transition from peer to supervisor and to learn how to shift from being a contributing member of a team to being responsible for executing program strategy. They also expected the cohort approach to provide new managers with an opportunity to develop the skills required to supervise and give feedback to their staff.

The four new managers were united in their hopes for the group. They wanted the support they needed to be successful in their new roles. They wanted to become high-performing managers in an organization characterized by high expectations. The new managers envisioned a place where they could troubleshoot problems without feeling self-conscious in the presence of their more experienced peers.

At first, Lyn Freundlich met with each participant to establish a trusting relationship and ask for her participation in designing the cohort’s ongoing agenda, to ensure that the experience was valuable for each individual.

“Lyn asked us to do things individually, like write down our expectations and write down what’s important to us. Doing these activities helped build what the new managers’ group was all about,” said one member of the cohort. “Once we became comfortable, knowing that we wanted the same thing, especially around confidentiality, we started to talk to each other.”

Lyn facilitated six meetings over the course of six months with the cohort. During these meetings, the members worked on a number of different introspection and communication exercises that helped them build trust in one another. She also cultivated their ability to coach each other and work through problems together, rather than look to her exclusively as the “expert consultant.” Lyn’s coaching guided, rather than directed, the group. She gave feedback, suggestions, and a bird’s-eye perspective while encouraging direct exchanges among the new managers.

“I did share my experience along with frameworks and models with them,” Lyn said. “But they each brought the real wisdom and knowledge about what is required to be successful at Rosie’s Place. Encouraging them to share that wisdom helped them develop their confidence.”

Together, the group reflected on a number of topics:

- ▶ learning to assess what staff needed from them and how and when to use different supervisory styles;
- ▶ understanding and working with the distinction between intent and impact for conflict resolution and relationship building;
- ▶ framing clear feedback related to expectations and performance management;
- ▶ soliciting honest feedback from staff;
- ▶ articulating, establishing, and maintaining boundaries in a supervisory relationship;
- ▶ sharing different time management tools to stay organized and keep on task with multiple parts of their work.

At the end of the six months, the cohort model had equipped the group of first-time managers with tools and techniques they could rely on to become good supervisors, build relationships, and work together. It was up to the group to apply them to their tasks at Rosie’s Place to meet the senior managers’ expectations.





## Key Learning: Reflections from the New Managers' Perspective

At the time of this report, one of the four managers has left the organization for personal reasons. The remaining three said that despite initial reservations and mild skepticism about the group, they had a tremendously positive experience. They credited Lyn's facilitation of the first two meetings for building the trust and establishing the parameters of confidentiality that led to personal connections among group members.

The new managers reported that before long, they felt comfortable sharing sensitive and confidential information with the group and receiving feedback. They were taken aback by how quickly they developed trust in one another and also by how productive and valuable the group had become for each of them. They affirmed a deep appreciation of the sense of community and belonging at work, of the inspiration that comes from realizing you are not alone when facing what may feel like unique challenges.

"It was surprising to be able to trust and share and have a safe space to talk and be supported," said a cohort member. "Just having this space makes me more of a professional in dealing with any issues I may have."

The group members were all first-time managers of relatively new and undefined programs at a high-performing organization. As they began to work through the struggles and challenges that were part and parcel of such responsibilities, their meetings became a treasured source of emotional and professional support. The participants reported great value in collaborative problem solving. Sharing experiences, ideas, and approaches to a problem enabled the new managers to receive assistance themselves. These collaborative exercises afforded the group members the opportunity to appreciate their own capacity to contribute to the resolution of their colleagues' challenges. During this process, self-confidence developed. The participants reported feeling

more self-assured in their roles as managers and in their ability to make an impact. This outcome was perceived and confirmed by the senior manager who supervised three of the four new managers in the group.

Furthermore, the new managers reported that collaborating on programmatic matters was "natural and easy" because of the mutually respectful and trusting relationships they had established with each other. Two of the managers partnered to offer a successful self-defense series for women; the classes were held at the site of one manager's program and were sponsored out of the budget of the other's. This example of innovation in programming is one of a number of similar efforts that directly benefit the organization and exemplifies the return on investment in professional development.

As a result of the meetings, the new managers described feeling more comfortable in their supervisory roles, in setting expectations and having conversations about accountability with their staff. In addition, they could recognize and assert the appropriate level of authority demanded by the situation. They also noticed a change in the perceptions of the older and more established managers, who began to respect them as managers, as equals meant to be taken seriously.

In a specific instance, two particular cohort members benefited from each other's different approaches to time and task management. One manager was more detail-oriented, tracking and planning tasks extensively. The group helped her recognize that she would be more effective in growing the program by stepping back, delegating the tasks more broadly and supporting her staff to do their best in executing them. The other manager appreciated the time management tools and strategies the first manager shared, and she implemented them to organize and streamline her own work.

On the whole, the new managers rated the experience as excellent and highly beneficial. It also set the stage for the cohort to continue beyond the scope of Lyn's work.

## Key Learning: Reflections from the Senior Managers' Perspective

Overall, senior managers were quite pleased that the facilitated group process resonated with the members. Some commented that they wish this sort of experience had been available to them when they made their own transition from front-line staff to manager. They noted that advancing a level can be isolating, because boundaries with former peers need to be established that were not necessary before. At the same time, it can feel intimidating and difficult to connect to current managers who have been in their positions and roles for many years. Therefore, forming a new managers' group, where the members can

nurture their own peer group to help meet the new and common challenges that come bundled with the transition, is perceived as extremely beneficial to the managers and to the organization.

As positive as they were about the new leaders' progress, the senior managers did caution that the cohort approach can't address every professional development need. Some lessons are most fully learned through experience, and in some cases only time will allow the new leaders to see the bigger picture and to fully envision growth for their programs.

## Continuous Learning and Collaboration

Although not originally intended for continuation, the group decided to keep meeting once the TSNE consulting engagement was complete and the consultant was no longer facilitating. It became natural for the new managers to incorporate the group meeting into their busy schedules. They believed the benefits they received were well worth the effort. At the time of this report, the group has met quarterly for a year. These meetings have been essentially problem-solving clinics, where the members took turns voicing concerns and receiving support and ideas for resolution from the group.

Without Lyn's facilitation and direction, the group experimented and expanded. Understanding that it would strengthen the whole organization, the original members chose to include others who were becoming new managers.

"We learned together that by being good managers, we're setting our staff up to be the best they can be with the guests," said a member of the group. "We're not always with the guests, so figuring out how to shift our view of success to setting our staff up to carry out our mission—that was a mind shift. All four of us care so much about the guests, we get stuck when we forget it's actually our job to step back and have our staff do it as opposed to jumping in and doing it ourselves. Before I would do it myself—now I help my staff do it."

The group has grown. Following Lyn's departure, the original cohort invited another first-time manager to join. She has attended four sessions, and her experience of the emotional and problem-solving support mirrors that of the longer-tenured members. Like the others, she expressed that the group has helped her grow as a person and relax into the role of manager at Rosie's Place. A few others who were invited have attended one or two meetings so far. Each time a new person is added, the group revisits and emphasizes parameters around confidentiality.

Prompted by the interviews conducted for this report, questions arose for the executive director and for the members of the group about how to conduct the group going forward. The executive director suggested that if it continues, the group should become formalized with the purpose articulated and the membership process clarified, without losing its social and community-building elements. Rosie's Place has recently hired a human resources manager. Whether she will have a role in the group remains to be seen.

The group was originally facilitated with trust and community building at the forefront, followed by encouragement and reinforcement of self-reliance for problem solving. With that model as their foundation, the group's original members are well-positioned to replicate the process. They can continue the practice of providing intentional support and professional development for newer "new" managers while simultaneously furthering their own skills in facilitation and leadership. Already, the group has confronted the challenge of concerns about confidentiality, because two of the newly invited members have a supervisory relationship: a new manager who supervises a new assistant manager. After brainstorming among themselves and inviting and receiving feedback from the executive director, one of the original new managers recommended incorporating breakout discussions, each attended by one of the two new managers affected.

"It really helps to have space to remind each other constantly why we're here. We could have a rough day for whatever reason, situations with guests or staff. Hearing each other's feedback and opinions puts us on the same page, lets our minds consider another point of view on how to handle a situation," said a member of the cohort. "The group opens up other windows to thinking in different ways."

## Conclusion

Rosie's Place is an organization that believes professional development is a crucial element of its success. While the full impact of the new managers' group may not be as immediately apparent to senior staff as it is to the members going through it, the benefits to Rosie's Place will continue to accrue. Thanks to the group, these new managers gained the confidence, poise, and critical-thinking skills necessary to approach problems and design solutions earlier in their tenure than they would have without it.

With TSNE's help and Lyn Freundlich's facilitation of the new managers' cohort, the group provided grounding and uplift for its members, and it was considered remarkably worthwhile for them in terms of growth and development of their capability as managers and leaders for the long term. These benefits in turn translate to a stronger bench and a higher quality of collaborations sure to help Rosie's Place deliver on its mission.

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