



## A Career Alternative to Management

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When you think about advancing your career, what do you think about? Do you think about climbing the proverbial corporate ladder? For many people, career advancement is based on accepting higher levels of people management responsibility. Organizations often characterize promotions in terms of the number of people being managed. Yet not everyone wants to manage people. Nor should they. Some of an organization's most valuable and influential contributions don't come from people managers. Top contributors are often the masters of a trade rather than managers of people. They are specialists who contribute through their domain skills, knowledge, and wisdom.

It should be no surprise that studies find over 80 percent of the influence in an organization comes from people who are not in management positions. When you consider the world's most influential people who discovered life-changing inventions, they weren't managers. They were masters. There were the inventors and scientists. They were the artists and designers. They were the software developers, engineers, marketing gurus, and economists. They were the experts in their fields.

Domain experts are as valuable to an organization as great leaders are. Employees who are masters in their domain hold the organization's body of knowledge. Masters are the ones who execute strategies and turn goals into realities. They come up with the most innovative new products, services, and processes. They create the organic value that makes an organization valuable.

As a test of who is truly most valuable in your organization, identify the top ten people in your organization who you would want on your team if you were starting a new organization. Is your list mostly managers or masters? If you're like most start-ups, they are masters. Organizations clearly need both, but without the masters, there isn't much of an organization to lead.

When an organization's masters are forced into management to advance their career, their contributions often decline. They no longer stay current in their domain knowledge. They may try, but the demands of management marginalize their domain ability. If they try to continue to exert their influence through their domain skills rather than their leadership skills, they frustrate their employees. Unless masters make a major transformation and develop their leadership ability, no one benefits from forcing them into people management positions.

If you prefer working at a detailed level as a specialist more than being a generalist and leading people, embrace it. It's all right. The world desperately needs you. Pursuing mastery of a domain is as respectable of a career as management is. If managing people isn't for you, don't force it. Deepen your domain knowledge and skill. Become a recognized subject matter expert. Become the one who others come to for advice. You can be as influential and valuable with your domain skill as you can be with your people management skill. Archimedes, Leonardo Da Vinci, Thomas Edison, and Albert Einstein didn't improve the world through their leadership skills but rather through their domain skills.

If you are in management or involved in defining your organization's employee career paths, make mastery an equally attractive path as management. Create titles, levels of responsibility, and compensation plans that accommodate increasing levels of domain skill, just as you do with increasing levels of management responsibility. Allow domain masters to be involved in refining the organizational vision, setting organizational strategy, and solving the organization's challenges. Give the masters a voice in the business just as you do the senior managers. Great masters, like great leaders, are capable of making a sizable impact on organizational performance. Give them the opportunity.



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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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