

Technical Writing Management & Leadership

At some point in your technical writing career, you may find yourself in a position where you are responsible not only for your own output, but also the output of other writers under you. In other words, you've become a manager. Some typical scenarios where you find yourself in the role of supervisor or manager:



- **You work in a large company with a reasonably sized technical writing team.** At some point you may be promoted to senior technical writer, or technical learning lead, with the responsibility of training new junior writers, starting on the path to Learning & Development Manager in charge of an entire department.

- **You're the lone technical writer in a smaller company.** You need to convince the company to temporarily or permanently bring in another writer to help manage the content, and you'll need to manage his output.

Regardless of how this occurs, now you need to manage the output of others, and your focus is going to change to at least some degree. You'll need to acquire an additional awareness of the overall technical writing process in the company and how it is impacted by company politics, as well as advanced knowledge of the other departments', or of the client's, personnel and processes. Of course, you'll need to do this while continuing to deliver the documentation yesterday!!

Simply put, you have to figure out whether you are a leader or a manager and come up with a method for managing the writers under you. Your choice is greatly influenced by your personality, and the personalities of the people you interact with. A lot has been written about leader vs. manager, but in essence:

- Managers administer, leaders innovate
- Managers worry about the day to day operations, leaders project a vision for the future
- Managers asks how and when, leaders also consider the why
- Managers obsess over delivering on time, leaders commit to delivering better
- Managers focus on the details, leaders paint the larger picture
- In technical communication, managers require their writers to deliver, leaders inspire them to deliver.

Technical Writing **Manager**

Successful technical writing groups do not depend on a question of leadership versus management, but rather leadership **and** management. Management is a basic requirement for any technical writing team. Content needs to be delivered on time to customers, and while there is always room for improvement, the actual process needs to be administered on a daily basis. In some companies with large documentation departments it is possible to have both managers and also leaders, but it is impossible to get by on leadership alone. Technical writers need the 'how, what and when' questions answered. The why is an added bonus.

When you find yourself managing a documentation department, ask yourself the following questions:

What has to be done? What is the documentation that your company needs to create? What are the impending deadlines? Which SMEs need to be interviewed? Which managers do I need to talk to? What content needs to be reviewed?

When must things be done? Every what requires a when. Create a task chart, or a Gantt. Being aware of what needs to be done and how everything is progressing will help you keep a handle on all the tasks, and also demonstrate it to management. Keep an open line of communication with your writers, they need to know tasks and deadlines, and you need to know whether to adjust the schedule, so it won't be at the last minute.

Who must get things done? Once you know what needs to be done and when it is due, you will be able to calculate how many people you need for the task, and what skills are needed. A well-thought case for additional staff will help you convince reluctant management to provide you with the help you need. When recruiting for technical writing staff, emphasize skills and the ability to learn quickly since content requirements may change, and you'll not be able to hire a new person for every new task that comes along, such as tutorial videos or instructional design.

How will you get things done? Which software tools are required? Do you need special hardware? How are your outputs going to be delivered? Do you need a CMS (Content Management System)? What processes do you need for creation, review and production of content? Your company likely has existing software that you are going to be expected to use (MS-Office), but to do the job effectively, your team may need more sophisticated tools like PPM+. The choice of tools should be determined according to both the content requirements, as well as your writers' abilities. Tools can be learned, and good writers are hard to replace so keep both considerations in mind.

How will the technical writing department's place in the organisation help me get things done? You will need to interact with other teams or departments to accomplish your tasks, such as conducting SME interviews. But you also need the help of other departments, such as engineering, training, support, or even marketing, to gather information and develop content.

Whether your department is integrated with other departments or not, where you are positioned determines who you can interact with. It's important to understand the chain of command in the organisation.



These questions are relevant for managers of large departments and small teams. You need to be aware of all the details and the overall process in order to effectively manage tasks and writers. You also need to figure out how you are going to interact with people. As a manager you are going to be interacting not only with the writers under you, but also with the managers above you and other departments – all of

which have distinct personalities, agenda, and places in the organisational hierarchy. That means you have to adopt different management styles to successfully accommodate situations you encounter.

Here's a quick summary of five management styles, and when they are appropriate:

Hands on: If your writers need micro-managing and hand holding, especially when first joining a team. While some writers don't need close supervision or eventually grow out of it, others will always need to be told in detail what needs to be done. If you have writers needing micromanagement, always make sure to set aside time to check on them and require daily or weekly reports.

Hands off: At the other end of the spectrum are writers who hate being interrupted and value their independence. They need a hands-off approach, and to prove they deserve it will have amazing metrics. Independent writers generally need a nudge to keep them on task and for you stay on top of the department's output. Otherwise stay out of their way, and so they'll deliver their content on or ahead of schedule.

Scout leader: If there is only one of you, and many groups of products that require your attention, delegate to other writers and have them attend meetings. Making these writers scouts enables them to be aware not only of their own work, but also the work of others. This kind of sharing is key, because decisions one writer makes usually affect others, and they can become more proactive about what goes on outside their desk.

Patron: As a manager, you need to represent your department to other managers (clients or client representatives) who tell their employees how to interact with your writers. Not only will you need to represent your department's interests, but also smooth the way for your writers, such as spotlighting a writer to demonstrate accomplishments, and encourage increased cooperation. This approach can also make it easier to support your team members when they need it.

Air Traffic Controller: Large organisations often have complex projects and multiple writers. Some writers will attempt to do everything on their own, even as other writers have spare time on their hands. As a manager, you are going to be responsible for assigning tasks to

schedules and bringing in other writers when things get hectic. You need to communicate and coordinate with your writers to make sure that everything is getting done on time.

Keep in mind that these management approaches are not the same thing as leadership. If you are a good manager, you'll get your writer to produce the required content, using whichever approach best suits the person and situation. If you are a good leader, you'll get them to want to produce the content and even enjoy the task.

Technical Writing **Leader**

A leader can get the best performance out of their writers, despite obstacles such as ever-increasing workloads. Becoming a leader, requires a conscious decision to do so, and involves careful thought on your own goals and willingness to change. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How well do I understand the role of technical writing in helping the company meet its larger goals?
- Can I summarize the group's mission in one sentence?
- Can I articulate the kind of environment in which I want to work, and share that vision with my team?
- Am I willing to argue against superiors to protect the integrity of my team's work, and will the organisation tolerate such challenges?
- How well can I identify the strengths and weaknesses of the people with whom I work, and can I channel these into positive tasks?
- Am I willing to delegate assignments and provide the information others need to complete those assignments well?
- Am I willing to make mistakes, accept others mistakes, and use these as opportunities for improvement?
- Am I willing to empower others to make decisions and foster creative thinking?
- Do I believe I can make a difference?

Answers to these questions don't always provide a clear direction or specific goals, but they help reaffirm the decision to take on a leadership role. These answers lead to the awareness of improvements you need to make in your approach, or alternatively, that you're in the wrong role or in the wrong organisation. And they lay the groundwork for creating a vision.

To lead effectively, you need to create a vision and communicate it to the team. The vision answers the "why" of your department's existence and leads to the how. The Vision drives everything else.

Defining a vision is mostly based on known organisational objectives and your superiors' expectations, but there is usually room in a departmental vision to add your own touch. For



example, a technical writing department may be expected to manage documentation and is necessary for process control, but you can add commitment to best-in-class performance, which communicates significance, to your writers and others. Establishing this vision, helps define goals for the group and helps create a sense of personal ownership, especially if the team collaborates to shape the vision.

In a vision-building effort with your team, you should first define the core values of your organisation, the common ideals that everyone understands, such as integrity, creativity, innovation, service, and accuracy. Review with your team these values and mission statements and decide whether the team's performance has adhered to them. The next step is to examine what your team aspires to become, and the long-term goals needed to reach this aspirational state. One good technique involves stating what the team does and why it is important, and then asking what the company would lose if your department ceased to exist tomorrow. Repeat the question to open a free-wheeling discussion on contributions, and the value of technical writing to the company as a whole.

After you create the vision, you must communicate it – using both subtle and obvious methods. Connect events to the vision to emphasize its relevance. Bring it up in internal memos, presentations, and posters. Incorporate it into performance review standards and interdepartmental projects. Constant communication of the vision helps energize your team, and also advertise your efforts to upper management.

Developing a vision makes your life as a manager easier, because it helps build a stronger team who feel more involved and committed, and thus able to demonstrate more initiative. As a leader with vision, you establish a purpose for yourself and your team, and technical writing becomes more than just a job, even as you yourself become better prepared to handle the challenges of the future.

Technical Writing Management **Today**

Today technical writers are more than just paper pushers and documentation managers. Technical writing has evolved beyond creating individual documents, to become managing content and information. Users today are accessing traditional documentation less and less, while using their smartphones to search Google and YouTube, and to ask friends on Facebook and Twitter for the knowledge they need. The interaction between a technical writer and his target audience is now much more direct, and information is considerably more mobile.

In addition to moving up the career ladder, technical writers have the option of moving beyond documentation management, to content and knowledge management, and understanding the larger role of content within the organization – how it is used and who consumes it. See where the trends are going, and be ready to adapt as necessary, while keeping your ego in check – whether you are a manager, a leader or both.