To succeed you need to be able to deliver and to do that you need to build a great team.

(Cathryn Riley, UK Commercial Director, Aviva)

Start as you mean to go on. Be overly convincing. If you are leading the meeting, go into the meeting leading.

(Monique Dumas, Investor Relations and Corporate Communications Partner, Electra Partners)

Leading a small team is often the first step up the career ladder and for many women it represents a big step from being a sole contributor to delivering through others. With increasing levels of seniority, people management moves from managing people in relatively stable environments to managing them through particular challenges such as organizational change and crises. While acknowledged repeatedly by the interviewees as being core to their success, people management was only mentioned as a critical job assignment in two cases. In all other situations, it emerged as a secondary feature to other critical job assignments such as running a large manufacturing plant abroad, executing large-scale organizational change or turning round a failing operation. This is not surprising, as senior managers are expected to deliver results by harnessing the energies of the team they are leading. People management presents its own challenges, but once mastered, the team should act as a source of support rather than as the main challenge to be tackled. Since effective people management is so crucial to being able to deal with almost all of the other critical job assignments in this book, I have decided to devote a separate chapter to the topic even though it did not emerge as a stand-alone critical job assignment during the interviews.
Charan and colleagues highlight the transition from sole contributor to manager, and then again from manager to become the manager of managers, as being among the most critical transition points along a leader’s path and one that often leads to problems if the transition is not made successfully.1 The first transition, from sole contributor to team manager, is often not taken easily as new managers continue to do the work of their teams rather than focusing solely on managing the team; they have yet to learn to deliver through others. If they continue to do what they were good at as a sole contributor they will frustrate their team with their over-involvement and are unlikely to have enough time to focus on planning the team’s work and on developing the team. Building a high-performance team is an important skill for any woman and will help her to master the various critical job assignments she will encounter as she progresses in her career.

With a manager’s increasing seniority, the size of her team also tends to get bigger, and she will become a manager of managers, which adds further complexity to people management. What constitutes a large team depends on whether a woman is in a functional role, where a team of 100 is considered large, or in an operational role, where a team of 300–400 people or more is the norm. This is an important distinction, as managing large teams of hundreds, if not thousands, of people is often regarded as one of the credentials that allows a woman to demonstrate her leadership potential. Interestingly, though, a number of the interviewees, including those with a general management background, indicated that large-scale people management may not be as vital as is sometimes stated provided other types of challenges, such as dealing with crises or other forms of complexity, have been mastered: ‘If you have credibility then you can skip a few steps – large-scale people management is one of them’ (Senior manager, FTSE 100 company).

Nevertheless, large-scale people management experience is clearly a formative experience and brings its own challenges. When a manager is responsible for a large number of people, she is often in charge of delivering the products and services of an organization directly, hence the success of her management skills will have a direct impact on the organization’s success. The change from a team leader to a manager of managers completes the transition from technical expertise to management; while team managers assess their team with regard to technical knowledge and technical delivery, managers of managers assess their direct team with regard to how they manage their people.