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INSIGHT

Moving from Engineer to FM Manager



Introduction

Many of the best facilities managers started with a toolbag. Engineers, technicians and maintenance supervisors know how buildings actually work, and that knowledge is hard to teach. When a plant room alarm goes off at two in the morning, there is a lot to be said for a manager who knows what they are looking at.

But the move from engineering into FM management is not a promotion of the same job. It is a change of job. The engineer is judged on whether the system works. The manager is judged on whether the service works, which includes the system, the people, the contractors, the budget, the client and the paperwork. Some excellent engineers find the shift energising. Others find they miss the satisfaction of fixing things and the clarity of a problem that either is or is not solved.

This guide is for engineers and technical staff who are considering the step, or have just taken it. It is direct about what changes, honest about the gaps that catch people out, and practical about how to move. It covers the mindset shift, what you already bring, the skills to build, learning routes, sensible first roles, delegation, commercial awareness, and how to present yourself on paper and at interview.

The aim is not to talk you into leaving engineering. It is to help you decide with open eyes, and, if you go, to arrive as a manager people trust rather than an engineer in a bigger office.

What actually changes when you become a manager

The headline change is that your output stops being your own work. As an engineer, you can point to a repaired chiller or a commissioned system. As a manager, your output is the performance of a team and a service, and much of it is invisible when it goes well.

Four shifts catch most people out.

- From problem solver to problem owner: you are accountable for issues you did not cause and cannot personally fix.
- From depth to breadth: you need working knowledge of many disciplines, not mastery of one.
- From doing to enabling: success means removing blockers for others, not being the fastest pair of hands.
- From technical authority to influence: you will persuade clients, finance and contractors who do not report to you.

A quick test. Think about your last bad day at work. If it was bad because a system failed, you are used to the engineering kind of pressure. If you would find it harder to have a difficult conversation with a poorly performing contractor, or to explain a budget overspend to a director, those are the muscles to start building now.

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Your next role should stretch you



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What you already bring that others lack

Do not undersell your background. Many managers arrive in FM through administration, hospitality or project roles, and they spend years trying to learn what you already know. Technical credibility gives you advantages that are hard to fake.

Be clear about what these are, because you will need to explain them on your CV and at interview.

- Authority with technical teams: engineers and contractors respect a manager who understands the work and cannot be easily fobbed off.
- Better risk judgement: you can tell the difference between an alarming noise and a dangerous one, and between a quote that is fair and one that is padded.
- Compliance instincts: statutory testing, permits to work and safe systems of work are probably second nature.
- Credibility with auditors and regulators: you speak their language and can show a genuine understanding of the evidence.
- Cost insight: you know what things actually involve, which helps in scrutinising contractor claims.

The risk is overplaying it. Technical knowledge can tempt you to micromanage, to correct your team's work, or to dive into the plant room when you should be in a client meeting. Use your credibility to ask better questions, not to give every answer.

When you describe your management ambitions to others, say what kind of manager you want to be, not only what title you want. Employers listen for a view on leadership, and having one distinguishes you from candidates who simply want to climb.

The gaps that catch engineers out

Be honest with yourself about what you have not yet done. Most engineers moving into management share a similar list of gaps, and employers will probe them.

The good news is that each can be closed, and being able to name them yourself is a sign of maturity.

- People management: appraisals, performance conversations, absence, grievance and recruitment may be new territory.
- Budgets and commercial awareness: forecasting, variance reporting and business cases are often the biggest shift.
- Contract and supplier management: service level agreements, key performance indicators, remedies and negotiation are different from commissioning a repair.
- Client relationships: understanding what the client values, which is often not what you think matters.
- Soft services and the wider mix: cleaning, security, catering, helpdesk and workplace experience may sit under you, and none are engineering.

Write each gap on a page, with a plan for closing it. For example: shadow a budget review, volunteer to run a contractor performance meeting, or ask your manager to let you lead the next recruitment. Employers will not expect you to have everything. They will expect you to know where the holes are.

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Qualifications and learning routes

Formal learning helps, but it is not a substitute for evidence in the job. The best approach combines a credential with proof that you have applied it.

There are three kinds of learning to consider, and you rarely need all three at once.

- Safety qualifications: recognised health and safety certificates from bodies such as IOSH or NEBOSH are widely valued in FM and are often asked for. Check which level suits the roles you want.
- Facilities management qualifications: the Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management offers recognised qualifications and membership routes that signal a commitment to the profession.
- Management training: a general management or leadership course covers appraisals, coaching and difficult conversations.

Look at advertised roles for the job you want and note which qualifications are asked for. That is a better guide than any generic list. Also ask your current employer whether they will fund training, and whether they will let you take on management tasks as part of your development.

A caution: do not collect certificates as a way of avoiding the step. If you have done three courses and still have not led a team or managed a budget, an employer will notice. Learning and practice need to run side by side.

If you cannot attend a formal course soon, start with reading and conversation. Ask managers you respect what they read, which meetings taught them most, and what they would do differently. Those answers are free and often more useful than a syllabus.

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Know your worth, know your market



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Choosing a sensible first management role

The move is easiest when you build on your strengths and stretch only one thing at a time. A jump from a technician post to a senior FM role across many sites is possible, but it stacks every gap together.

Consider these stepping stones, and choose the one that matches your confidence.

- Engineering supervisor or team leader: you stay in familiar technical territory while learning to lead people and manage a rota.
- Technical or maintenance manager: you take on planned preventive maintenance, compliance and contractor oversight, with a few reports.
- Single-site facilities manager: a contained building lets you learn budgets, client management and soft services without the complexity of a portfolio.
- Contract engineering manager with a service provider: you learn commercial management and client expectations inside a structured organisation.
- Building manager: ideal for people who want to run a whole building day to day.

A decision test: choose the role where you would be uncomfortable about no more than two things. If you are uncomfortable about five, the learning curve may feel like failing. If you are uncomfortable about none, you are not stretching enough.

Letting go of the spanner

Delegation is the hardest practical skill for a technically strong new manager. You are probably better at some tasks than the people who now do them. Doing the job yourself feels faster, and it often is, in the short term.

It is also the quickest way to burn out and to stunt your team. If you are still the best engineer on site six months into your management role, something has gone wrong.

- Decide which jobs only you can do: client conversations, budgets, difficult people decisions and strategic planning.
- Hand over the rest with a clear outcome, a deadline and a way to check progress.
- Accept that the work will be done differently, and sometimes worse, at first. Coach rather than redo.
- Set a rule for emergencies: when you step in to help, say why, and hand it back as soon as it is safe.
- Ask your team what they need from you, and listen to the answer.

A useful check at the end of each week: how many hours did I spend on work someone else could have done? If it is more than a few, look at what is stopping you. Is it trust, time, training or habit?

One practical habit helps. Before you intervene in a task, ask yourself whether you are stepping in because it needs you or because it is comfortable. Comfort is a poor reason to take the work back, and your team will notice if you do it often.

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Great leaders make it look simple



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Getting comfortable with budgets and contracts

For many engineers, the commercial side is the steepest part of the climb, and also the part that creates the most value. A manager who understands the numbers can protect the service, make a case for investment and spot waste.

Start with the budget you are closest to. Ask to see the full cost picture of your team and building: staff, planned maintenance, reactive repairs, utilities, contractor charges and project spend.

- Learn the difference between operating costs and capital spend, and how your organisation treats each.
- Understand how reactive work compares with planned work, because the balance tells you how healthy the building is.
- Read your main contracts: scope, service levels, price mechanisms, termination and what counts as extra.
- Build a business case for one improvement, even a small one, with cost, benefit, risk and payback.
- Sit in on a contractor performance meeting and note how the best managers hold people to account without souring the relationship.

You do not need to become an accountant. You do need to be able to explain, in plain English, why a figure has moved, what you will do about it, and what you need from finance. That single skill separates managers who are trusted with more from those who stay in the plant room.

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Honest advice for candidates and clients



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Reframing your CV for management

A technician's CV usually lists systems, equipment and tasks. A manager's CV lists scope, outcomes, people and money. The facts may be the same. The emphasis is different.

Rewrite each role by asking four questions: what did I own, who did I influence, what changed because of me, and what risk did I reduce.

- Lead with scope: sites, building types, services covered, size of team, contractors managed and budgets you influenced, where you can state them accurately.
- Show outcomes: improved compliance records, reduced reactive callouts, smoother handovers, successful audits.
- Include informal leadership: training an apprentice, covering for a supervisor, leading a project or an incident response.
- Keep technical detail relevant: name the systems that matter for the role you want, and do not bury the reader in a list of every tool you have used.
- Put your learning in: courses, memberships and any management training.

Avoid inventing or inflating. A stretched claim about managing a team will unravel at interview. A true account of leading by example, supervised by someone senior, is more credible and gives you something real to talk about.

Interviewing as a technical person aiming for management

Interviewers will be asking one question beneath all the others: can this person lead? They already believe you can fix things. Your job is to show you can run things.

Prepare stories rather than lists. A good management story has a situation, your decision, how you brought others with you, and what happened.

- A time you led others through a problem: describe how you set direction, not just how you solved it.
- A time you disagreed with a contractor or colleague: show fairness, firmness and the outcome.
- A time you managed a cost or made a trade-off: show you understand money and priorities.
- A time you developed someone: show that you care about a team's growth.
- A time you got it wrong: show honest reflection and what you changed.

Be ready for the direct question: why do you want to leave hands-on work? Give a positive answer about impact and responsibility rather than a negative one about the job you are leaving. Also be ready to say what you will miss, because it shows self-awareness, and what you plan to do about the gaps.

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Good questions show real experience



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The pay conversation and the first year

Moving into management does not always mean a big pay rise at first. Skilled engineers, especially those with specialist or on-call allowances, can be well paid, and a first management post sometimes pays similarly once overtime and allowances are removed. Look at the total package over a year, not just the basic salary, and ask what the progression looks like.

Think about the longer game. Management opens paths to head of facilities, regional and director roles that stay closed to those who remain purely technical. The question is not only what the first role pays, but where it takes you in three to five years.

- Ask how the employer measures success in the first year, and what support they provide.
- Agree a learning plan in writing, including any training they will fund.
- Find a mentor who has made the same move, inside or outside the organisation.
- Review at six months: what is going well, what do I find hard, and what do I need to change?

Expect a dip in confidence. Almost everyone feels a stretch of doubt after leaving the work they were best at. It usually passes within months, as the new skills settle and the results start to show.

Your engineer-to-manager checklist

- [ ] Decide honestly what you want from the move: impact, progression, variety or pay.
- [ ] List your management gaps and write a short plan for closing each one.
- [ ] Ask your current manager for a management task you can take on this quarter.
- [ ] Check advertised roles to see which safety and FM qualifications they ask for.
- [ ] Shadow a budget review and ask for sight of the cost picture of your building.
- [ ] Read your main service contract and note scope, service levels and exclusions.
- [ ] Rewrite your CV around scope, outcomes, people and money rather than equipment lists.
- [ ] Prepare five interview stories covering leading, disagreeing, cost, development and a mistake.
- [ ] Choose a first management role where no more than two things feel uncomfortable.
- [ ] Find one mentor who has made the same move and arrange a first conversation.

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Judgement beats keyword matching



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Next steps

Engineers who move into FM management well keep their technical credibility and add the ability to lead people, manage money and work with clients. Those who struggle usually cling to the old role. Decide what you are moving towards, be honest about the gaps, and take the step in a form you can handle.

A practical next step: write a one-page plan with three management skills to build over the next six months, and share it with someone whose judgement you trust. Maxwell Stephens is a specialist Facilities Management recruitment consultancy, and a candid conversation about which first role suits your background can help you choose well.

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