

Managing Your Transition into Leadership

PETER BARRAKET

One of the most common challenges in making a successful transition to leadership roles is the shift in focus from a highly technical and task focused mindset to a ‘results through others’ and ‘forward-thinking’ mindset. For supervisors and managers looking to move into more senior roles, this can be a difficult shift. Also required is a shift in focus from IQ to EQ. This is important because IQ is a ‘threshold capability’, one that is obviously important to leaders but contributes less than 20% to their effectiveness. EQ on the other-hand contributes 36% to leadership effectiveness.

Understand yourself

The most important anchor point in your executive leadership transition is you. Take the time to learn more about your thinking preferences, skills and behaviours or style so that you can then compare them to what is required in your new leadership role. An honest and objective assessment can help identify areas for development or focus. You can make use of validated assessment approaches to gain insight into your leadership preferences. It may be helpful at this point to consider the type of leader you are required to be in your new role. Are you required to be a:

- *Strategic leader* - one who is highly visible and responsible for driving the execution of the organisational strategy
- *Operational leader* - one who is a leader of other leaders such as a functional, business unit or department head and who balances short-term day to day concerns with longer-term needs
- *People leader* – one who is focused on day-to-day achievements and getting results through others

Next, ask yourself: What skills, knowledge and behaviours do I require to be successful in my new role and how do I best bridge any gaps?

Understand the organisation

Once you have a clear understanding of yourself and the requirements of your new role, it is also important to understand the environment, culture or psychology of the organisation. Here are four broad business situations that new leaders may have to experience:



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1. *New enterprise* - described as ‘excited confusion’ - requiring clarity and focus
2. *Turnaround* - described as ‘in despair’ - requiring a positive image of near term success
3. *Realignment* - described as ‘in denial’ - requiring awareness that reinvention is necessary
4. *Sustaining* - described as ‘complacent’ - requiring a new direction for the organisation and for all concerned

Next, ask yourself: What am I walking into and how is it different to my previous role/organisation?

What effective leaders do

In *‘Leaders in Transition: Stepping Up, Not Off’*, DDI found that to be successful, 86.7% of leaders said it required a shift in thinking, especially in critical areas like planning and building a team as well as how you communicate during the processes. This is supported by Michael Watkins in his Harvard Business Review article on *‘How Managers Become Leaders’*, where he tells us that to become a group or business leader, it requires new skills and mindsets, described as the **‘The Seven Seismic Shifts’**. The shifts are:

- Specialist to Generalist
- Analyst to Integrator
- Tactician to Strategist
- Bricklayer to Architect
- Problem Solver to Agenda Setter
- Warrior to Diplomat
- Supporting Cast Member to Lead Role

DDI also found the following:

- Managing internal politics is a significant challenge for all leadership levels.
- Leaders need support during transitions and find it in different sources.
- Leaders needed to be careful not to lose sight of the positives of being promoted, like empowerment to make things happen, recognition from peers and increased self-esteem.
- Leaders sought clarity and to know what it takes to succeed in the role – they wanted a success profile and an understanding of performance expectations.

At this point, you may ask yourself some of the following questions:

- What will it take for me to make a necessary shift?
- What support do I need in making the shift?
- How do I make the transition to my new role?
- How do I need to be announced to different audiences in my new role?
- What is my leadership style and what do others know of it?
- How can I gain credibility as a new leader?
- Where do I need to spend my time? How is this different from the previous role?
- What pending decisions, problems or commitments do I need to act on?
- What does success look like personally, to the team, to the organisation?
- Who do I need to build relationships with?



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Transition stages

In the throes of change and dealing with fears and uncertainties that most leaders have, it is sometimes difficult to have a sense for how well you are progressing in your new role. Which is why it is important to have clear expectations and a plan. To help with this, here is an example of a time line adapted from ‘*Assimilating New Leaders: The Key to Executive Retention*’ (Downey et al., 2001) as well as a process by Michael Watkins. This timeline represents entering a new organisation. If you are entering a new role from within your existing organisation then the ‘adding value’ expectation may be at 6 months.



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Tips on making a successful transition to leadership roles

At this point, it is important to think about what you ought to ‘move-away from’ and what you ought to ‘move towards and build’ as you move into a leadership role. These have been adapted from DDI and McKinsey as well as from our work with hundreds of leaders who successfully transitioned into leadership roles.

Move away from:	Move towards and build:
Developing your own technical expertise	Developing knowledge of new functional areas beyond your area of expertise
Short term, functional thinking and tactics - “we can do it”	Longer term, enterprise wide thinking and strategies - “we can grow”
Hands-on and directive problem solving and managing short term crisis	Trusting and coaching others through problems and decisions. Motivating, inspiring and asking questions
Competitive attitudes toward peer functions and ‘silo’ mindsets	Appreciating and contributing to each area of the business - leveraging differences and harnessing the collective intelligence of the organisation for better outcomes
Minimising conflict within the team; emphasising harmony and consensus	Valuing diversity in the organisation; develop new skills to discuss different perspectives and manage tension, encouraging candor, constructive conflict and debate
Spending time at HQ	Spending time with customers and other areas of your business
Being behind your desk checking emails, voicemails and social media (Contributes 7% to effective communication)	Face time with stakeholders in meetings and/or real time video (Contributes 93% to effective communication)

Build a leadership transition plan

To increase the likelihood that you will be successful in your new role, start putting in place the building blocks of leadership right now. The idea is that you ‘hit-the-ground-running’ in your new role and start adding value earlier than expected. To do this, consider which of the following initiatives you can commence now.



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- ✓ Ensure the business has a coherent strategy in conjunction with others
- ✓ Ensure the strategy is communicated clearly to management and the entire organisation and they in turn can clearly articulate how to execute the strategy
- ✓ Spend time asking and answering the question, “what’s next?”
- ✓ Recruit the right people for the right roles that complement rather than compete
- ✓ Clear obstacles for the team so they can succeed in doing their own work
- ✓ Ensure there is enough capital, funding and other resources to get work done
- ✓ Reflect regularly and honestly on your own performance
- ✓ Relinquish some control - delegate more and don’t solve every problem
- ✓ Let team members lend a hand and contribute their own ideas to increase ownership
- ✓ Discover what the constraints or point of constraint is in your business and spend a significant amount of your time on that problem
- ✓ Indirectly influence employees, (rather than use the authority of your position) by frequent and informal interactions to check the pulse of the organisation
- ✓ Build a learning organisation that has distributed leadership and become a persuasive role model by empowering and supporting others
- ✓ Push for a leadership development program that includes useful areas for your own development like coaching skills, powerful communication skills, emotional intelligence and strategic thinking
- ✓ Write a formal plan to transfer vital knowledge (to you and from you) to preserve organisational memory

After reflecting on your current position, your new position and the environment that you will be leading in, you will be better placed to develop a firm plan to make your transition successful and to be a more effective and confident leader.



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