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TOMORROW'S CHALLENGES

TRANSITION TRAPS

BEWARE OF THE PITFALLS OF NEW LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

By IMD Professor Michael Watkins

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

Every year, thousands of managers enter new leadership positions. Their actions during the first few months on the job can determine their success or failure, yet little first-rate advice is available on how to take charge in a new leadership role. Transitions are pivotal, in part, because everyone is expecting change. But they also are periods of great vulnerability for new leaders who lack established working relationships and detailed knowledge of their roles. Those who fail to build momentum during their transition face an uphill battle. Here are seven common traps:

No. 1: Not connecting

An over-reliance on reports and analysis rather than devoting time to meet and talk with new colleagues can isolate new leaders. The need to "know" an organization before venturing into it is often the root of this problem. Isolation inhibits the leader's ability to develop important relationships and cultivate sources of "soft" information. If this practice goes on too long, the newcomer is inevitably labeled as remote and unapproachable.

New leaders must get out and about in their organizations quickly. Written assessments, although informative, are more valuable to people in the organization who understand the stories behind them. Impressions, ideas and strong feelings about how to deal with issues often are more important than formal analysis in making crucial early decisions.

No. 2: Coming in with "the answer"

Too many arrive on the scene with "The Answer"—a preordained fix for the organization's problems—or they reach conclusions too early in their tenure. Many fall into this trap through arrogance or insecurity. Others believe they must appear decisive and establish a directive tone. Staff become cynical if they think their leaders deal with deep problems superficially, making it difficult to rally support for change. Employees who believe their leaders' minds are made up are reticent to share information, impeding a newcomer's ability to learn the true nature of a situation.

New leaders must embrace and project a spirit of inquiry, even if they are confident they understand the organization's problems and the best approaches to dealing with them. This means giving primacy, early on, to learning over doing. Time spent carefully diagnosing the organization's strengths and weaknesses seldom is wasted. The key is to be systematic and efficient at learning, establishing and refining an agenda, and adopting methods for gaining insight.

No. 3: Staying too long with the existing team

Many, especially those with a collegial style, believe that the subordinates they inherit deserve a chance to prove themselves. Some see it as an issue of fairness; for others, it springs from arrogance, or hubris – the belief that their leadership will turn things around. Whatever the source of the impulse, it's not advisable to retain team members with a record of mediocre performance. Leaders are brought in to improve performance by imparting new ideas, making tough decisions and instilling a can-do spirit of achievement. Frequently they encounter direct reports that are too inflexible to change.

New leaders generally are not held responsible for an inherited team's performance during the early days. But after a few months, that team becomes the leader's responsibility. Retaining direct reports who are not up to the task squanders precious time and energy. This is not to say that new leaders should be unfair, expect miracles, or seek to terminate people summarily. They should impose a time limit—three to six months, depending on the severity of the problem—for deciding who should be on the playing field. Personnel changes may be difficult to achieve, especially if there are cultural constraints, but the effort usually is worth it.

No. 4: Attempting too much

Some try to do too many things at once. The theory goes, “If I get enough things going, something is bound to click.” Such leaders are trying to send the message that winners are active and able to handle diverse challenges simultaneously. This approach can render an organization confused and overwhelmed. Given the many demands confronting business leaders, the risk of overload is great. The roots of this pitfall often lie in lack of prioritizing, poor planning, or worry that early decisions about focus won’t work out. Early on in their transitions, leaders must identify the vital few top priorities for the first year. Then they must discipline themselves and their organizations to focus on those priorities.

No. 5: Being captured by the wrong people

The arrival of a new leader inevitably precipitates jockeying for positions in the new regime by those who had influence in the old organization. Among the many people vying for the new leader’s attention will be those who are incapable, well-meaning but out of touch, intent on misleading, or in search of power for power’s sake. New leaders must exercise great care in deciding who listen to and to what degree. Advisers who don’t represent a broad constituency, have skewed or limited information, or use their proximity to the leader to advance partisan agendas alienate others and close off valuable input.

Whether they come from outside or are promoted from within, new leaders must keep lines of communication open to balance that internal influence. Just as one is known by the company one keeps, judgments about new leaders are based on perceptions of who influences them.

No. 6: Setting unrealistic expectations

Managing expectations starts the moment a new leader arrives on the job. For those hired from the outside, it begins even sooner, during job interviews. It’s easy to set unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished during transitions. New leaders want to impress, and new bosses too often expect miracles. Performance expectations typically are negotiated early, before new leaders have a thorough understanding of the situation.

New leaders should never presume that their initial mandate will or should remain unchanged. They should devote considerable effort to dialogue with their superiors and other key constituencies to clarify their mandate and set expectations.

No. 7: Failing to build relationships with peers

Many devote too much time during transitions to the vertical dimension of influence—upward to bosses and downward to direct reports—and not enough to the horizontal dimension of peers and key external constituencies. This is understandable, since leaders naturally gravitate to the people they report to and who report to them. But sooner or later (probably sooner), new leaders need the support of people who aren’t under their authority.

Building coalitions is especially critical for leaders in the public sector who have to manage in a political environment. This means identifying who influences key decisions and what they care about, mapping networks to figure out who influences the influencers, and crafting a plan to reach out and build support.

Avoiding these pitfalls depends on how well new leaders prepare for and manage their transitions. This means carefully diagnosing situations, identifying personal vulnerabilities, accelerating their learning, negotiating success, building coalitions, and securing early wins.

Michael D. Watkins is Professor of Leadership and Organizational Change at IMD. He directs the First 90 Days, for leaders in transition. He co-directs Transition to Business Leadership (TBL), a program designed for experienced functional managers who either have recently transitioned or will soon transition into a business leadership position.