



# How Managers Transition Into Leaders

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## Introduction

Succession planning in organizations often involves managers transitioning to leaders. It makes good business sense because managers represent an investment in the future. They are trusted assets and they know the organization and the players.

Organizations have a responsibility to place well-prepared leaders who have the stage set for their success. It wouldn't be succession planning if the candidates, investors, employees and stakeholders' interests were not at the forefront.

For the would-be leader this is a critical time for personal development, skill development and professional growth.

Managers often trip on their way up. For the organization, it's vitally important to get this right. Senior leaders can mitigate stumbling with an aggressive two-pronged approach beginning with selecting a well-prepared incumbent.

## **Leader Candidates**

Developing leaders out of managers should start long before the transition switch is flipped. Preferably, early on candidates will gain broad, cross-functional experience by (even for the short term) managing projects and program areas. Exposure and experience in business acumen including product knowledge, marketing procedures, sales functions and budget processes are essential for a leaders' "helicopter view" of the organization. Leadership and executive training programs prior to transition open the potential leader to the world of organizational development and organizational change and expand business capabilities. These experiences culminate with a view and an understanding of the "leadership landscape."

We are obligated to do the best we can to prepare the transitioning manager. The best we can hope is they will develop the capability to lead from any chair.

## **Change**

New leaders must change. The change is deep, wide and all encompassing. They must embrace this period of transition, all the while, changing their thinking from production to outcomes. The new leaders' view must change from specialist to visionary. They must shift from managing one to leading all, from solving problems to seeing problems and from worker to learner.

## Transition

Managers typically earn promotions for being good at what they are currently doing not what they will be doing after the promotion. It is presumed that the manager will function with the same effectiveness at higher levels. Examples exist on either side and outcomes are difficult to predict. Rather than trying to predict senior leaders should put into place a two-pronged approach for leader development. The first prong is to place the right candidate. The second is to select the best environment or opportunity to serve individual and the organization's success.

The old cliché applies. *"Hire for attitude. We can train for ability but we can't change attitude."* Once you believe you have the incumbent that is worth the investment, begin to identify situations that fit. This is less precise. Ideally a new, transitioning leader is placed in an office that is thriving, with good support staff and associates that will cultivate productivity and learning.

However, this is not always possible. You wouldn't want to deliberately place a new leader into a problem-filled situation, but the organizational reality is, toxic and volatile leadership situations exist and strong leaders are needed. If this is the case out of necessity, support must be in place. A network of colleagues that

know the situation along with careful monitoring, mentors and coaches will serve as the big catalyst to get over the “dysfunction hump.” This is the all-necessary challenge/support system that organizations employ to facilitate productive transition while growing new leaders.

New leaders can feel uneasy and left in the cold as they step out of their current (manager) comfort into unknown areas where they are called upon to lead while learning to be a leader. Senior leadership can provide the modeling, comfort and assurance that foster learning to lead in the often difficult “leadership climate” of ambiguity, polarity and paradoxes.

### **Production to Outcomes**

The immediate challenge for managers is to shift their thinking and operating from a “making widgets” mindset to an influencing outcomes mindset. It is inherent in the leadership process—which involves situations, leaders, followers and context, that the leader influences the outcome. As the new leader begins working with department heads and stakeholders such as partners, investors, clients, lawmakers and the media, they should not be attempting to lead from “the floor” where they used to manage from. They need to be operating from a new perspective, a long-term view with potential for short-term, stepping stone implementation. The role

of the leader is to influence the long-term with organizational strategy in mind.

Rather than making and counting widgets, a new leader must have both eyes toward efficiencies now and necessary adaptations in the future. He must free himself of the details and allow space for high-level strategy and planning.

He may find himself one day at the table with a competitor determining the best way forward so both organizations can thrive.

### **Specialist to Visionary**

Managers thrive as specialists. They know their department, their people, and their function. That's not enough for a leader. New leaders must know the language of all departments. They must be able to translate information, patterns and trends from departments into the language of efficiencies, profit and direction. The vision of the organization is up to the leadership. No one else will take the reins here. Leaders must harness what is known now with the trends in the telescope and provide direction. Vision can be complex and multifaceted but nothing can beat everyone pulling in the same direction. This is one competitive advantage that is difficult for others to duplicate.

New leaders have a pre-cultivated connection with associates and team members. This closeness to employees on the floor is a leverage point where new leaders can apply the strength of their

previous work toward the vision process. Whereas a manager focuses on employee engagement, a leader has a focus of *workforce* engagement.

### **From One to All**

Managers have the responsibility to manage the day-to-day on the floor. They are embedded with the staff. Leaders don't manage things as much as they lead direction. This is a difficult transition for a new leader to see. They may have "departmental biases" that show up as baggage that slows meetings and other processes down. The classic mistake is for new leaders to over manage and under lead, especially their previous function. Colleagues need to give the new leader their patience while he cultivates an open-minded shift from managing one department to leading all departments in the organization.

New leaders must be open to feedback. Areas of learning and growth are often hidden as they tightly focus on the shift from managing one section to serving as a leader for all.

### **Solve Problems to Seeing Problems**

Strictly speaking managers and leaders solve problems but one of the finer points of leadership—and where leaders earn their keep is seeing problems before they happen. If a leader can identify a decline in earnings as a trend and put things in place to avoid the dreaded "workforce planning" this seeing can save everyone.

## **Worker to Learner**

Leadership is not about knowing it's about learning. New leaders typify the shift from a working manager to a learning leader right from the start. As they work to cultivate an open mind and flexibility, they must also demonstrate a commitment to relentless self-improvement—that means applying continuous learning toward competency, excellence and greatness. The value that is added by this effort is palpable and the ROI has exponential reach.

When developing leaders are hand selected and afforded the organizational backing necessary for success, they not only hear the claim that employees are the most valued asset, they experience it. That is the ultimate cultivation message, leaders leading leaders. This too is difficult for competitors to duplicate.

## **What is Possible for New Leaders?**

With your antenna fully extended, your followers will lead you to identify problems before their time. The organizational culture will show you and the market will signal to you. People, culture, budgets and balance sheets will tell a story and you will engage your leadership mind to pore over and analyze the story.

Be grateful and appreciate the story, the substrate of problems, mistakes, ambiguity and the like. This is the arena of development

and contribution. Where leaders get to become more valuable while practicing their craft.

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