



Taking Transitions Seriously

In all walks of life career transitions are difficult and often unsuccessful, if research is to be believed. Indeed, studies highlight between 40% and 50% of leaders moving into new roles fail to perform to desired levels. Transitioning leaders also affect their colleagues and customers and so the entire organisation feels the impact.

The capacity of leaders to adopt new and different approaches, from those successfully used in their previous roles, is often a major factor behind these failures. One executive who departed early from a new company explained that it was difficult to accept the cultural norm where others expected her to simply observe and not comment in meetings, having previously taken a consultative approach to resolve issues and challenge the status quo.

Enlightened companies recognise this and choose not to risk the significant costs - as high as three times the executive's annual salary - of early departures or lacklustre performance, by investing resources early to help leaders transition. The best organisations put in place transitioning and onboarding strategies that provide well thought out structured support to accelerate leaders' integration and shorten what Dr Michael Watkins, HBR author and leading expert on accelerating transitions, calls the 'break-even' point. This is the point at which a person switches to contributing more value than they consume in their organisation - typically taking around six months to achieve.

Estimates that 4% of employees leave after the first day and 22% of turnover occurs in the first 45 days¹ strengthen the case for good, early onboarding as a valuable opportunity to influence staying decisions. Indeed, a senior executive who received no onboarding support said, "I knew within two months that it was not the right move for me but spent a further month trying to make it work."

Accelerated transitions

MDV Consulting, through its transition management client interventions, sees first-hand the emotional and practical challenges faced by executives changing roles.

We recognise that companies successful at onboarding are those which enhance an individual's learning in order to build networks, understand the organisation, its culture and their role within it and to prioritise key activities for the first six months.

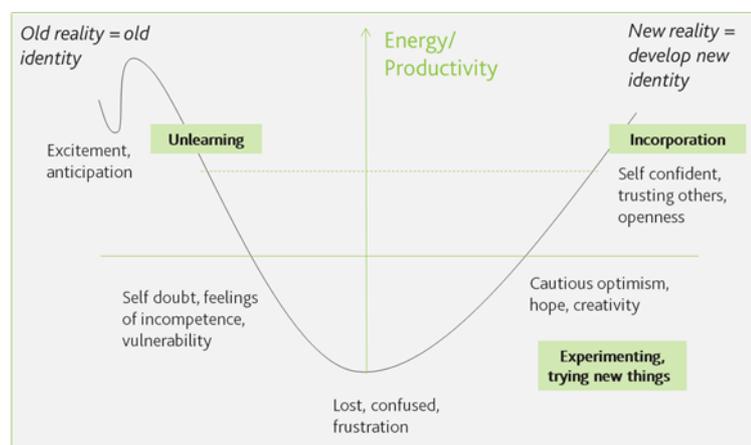
Using a blend of hard science, intellectual rigour and a commercial approach, we support executives going through transition to begin at the end, by considering what success would look like, to take account of the emotional journey, and reflect on the identity and strengths they need to develop for their new role.

The emotional journey

Leaders experiencing transition generally follow a well-documented journey known as the Emotional Cycle of Change. If the organisation and the individual are well supported through the various stages of this journey, the likelihood of successful integration is much improved.

Individuals often embark on the journey feeling excitement and anticipation about their new challenge. However, this can change to self-doubt and feelings of incompetence as they start to understand that their expectations don't match the reality and methods previously used may not work in the new situation. During this time, they begin to realise the need to 'unlearn' or let go of their previous identity.

Emotional Cycle of Change



Adapted from Hawkins & Smith, 2006 and drawn from Kubler-Ross's 1991 work on transition curve

At their lowest ebb, individuals in transition experience frustration and confusion as they accept the reality of the situation and that they need to change. Frustration can occur as they feel unsure how to reinvent themselves, how to develop new behaviours or remove the blockages in order to progress. This is the moment when they realise they have "lost sight of the big picture". A recent executive promotee confided, *"at about 3 months the shine of the first few weeks had gone and I hit a wall – and hit it hard."*

If the individual can use different and creative approaches to build their capabilities, their certainty, optimism and energy levels all begin to return as they start to climb upwards on the transition curve. This energy and optimism continues to increase as their new way of working starts to feel more like the norm.

Each person's journey along the curve will vary but our experience supports the view that productivity improves more quickly if an individual is equipped to follow these guiding principles².

Seek to secure quick wins

The benefit of securing quick wins early in a transition to bolster self-belief and build credibility can be demonstrated by the experience of many a Premier League football manager. An initial losing streak (even if just a few lost matches) can result in enormous pressure, resulting in self-belief, as well as the faith of the players and fans, starting to irreversibly crumble.

Learn about the business

Transitions bring steep learning curves but the value of systematically learning about the business cannot be underestimated. One newly appointed executive, who followed unspecific instructions to "spend time meeting people" explains, *"When you don't even know what you don't know, this unstructured approach to learning about the business took longer than it needed to"*.

Build the team to achieve top priorities

Understanding team strengths, managing conflict and showing the capability to rally staff or bring in new members to deliver clear actions plans, can make or break the leader's transition. However, this often is not the case. The situation experienced by a senior leader new to her company is all too common: *"Quick wins we had identified could only be delivered with the co-operation of one individual in my team, but he consistently undermined my authority and excluded me from meetings"*.

Garner support across the organisation

Having mentors in place and proactively connecting with the right stakeholders helps a leader verify whether their action plans are realistic and meet business objectives. Very often asking for support can be seen, erroneously in our view, as a sign of weakness. *"Surely someone elevated to that position should be able to simply get on with it"* might have been a refrain in years gone by. Just as an elite athlete works with a sports coach, MDV Consulting encourages executives to map out supportive and influential relationships and plan how to develop and sustain these networks.

Picking the right transition strategy

Dr Michael Watkins suggests that to successfully transition, leaders should evaluate what is the right transition strategy by understanding the business situation they are faced with and adapting their approach accordingly². Paula Nickold's downfall as Managing Director of John Lewis after starting as a graduate trainee and experiencing a long, successful managerial career there, can be attributed to not evaluating the right transition strategy by underestimating the extent of John Lewis's woes.

Misjudging the impact on John Lewis of escalating wage costs and a rapid sales slump from changes to consumer behaviour and deep discounting at competitors, Ms Nickold's reign did not seem to introduce the innovation, faster decision-making and bolder steps required to compete in such a competitive market.

Transitions are never going to be easy. But in the same way as an organ transplant patient, if the organisation and the individual recognise that a well-managed transition takes time and needs specialised support for the patient and entire system, it can be achieved with less pain and a far quicker recovery period.

A well-managed transition takes time and needs specialised support for the patient as well as the entire system.

References:

1. The Wynhurst Group. SHRM Presentation, 2007.
2. Watkins, M. Picking the Right Transition Strategy. Harvard Business Review, January 2009.

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