

You've Been Promoted! Strategies for Successful Leadership Transition

Tracy Spears*

Being asked to take over a new area of responsibility is a fantastic opportunity for a leader. The situation allows you, possibly for the first time in a long time, to look at things with fresh eyes. Takeover leaders get the kind of objectivity and clear-mindedness that may have been missing in their previous roles. Everyone gets a clean slate—the people on the team and the leader himself or herself. It's a situation built for growth and meaningful improvement. This article discusses why it is that so many leadership transitions fail to meet expectations and offers strategies to ensure success with leadership transitions.

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*Exceptional Leaders Lab, 1646 S. Denver Ave., Tulsa OK 74119; phone: 918-779-7744; E-mail: tracy@tracyspears.com.
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Why is it that so many leadership transitions fail to meet expectations?

- Is it because people on the team (department, division, etc.) were already working at their peak level before the new leader arrived?
- Is it because the new leader thought that performance would improve just because he or she showed up?
- Is it because too little thought was put into what everyone was trying to accomplish with the leadership transition?
- Or . . . is it because the leader was promoted for a specific set of skills that are NOT even the ones needed in the new job?

The answer can be any of these or a combination of a couple of them. Leadership transitions are a high-stakes game. Typically the new leader has been removed from a team that was performing at a high level (that is how these decisions are usually made), so most transitions involve two teams: the one the takeover leader is leaving behind and the one he or she is being introduced to. Of course, there's a lot of risk in this, and many business leadership transitions are failures in retrospect. They fail for all of the reasons listed above, often spectacularly.

Any management consultant will tell you the rate of leadership transition failures is one of the best-kept secrets in business. And due to the current rate of change of most businesses, we're all moving too fast to do formal transition reviews, succession planning, or even take the time to just look back and see if things worked.

What do we do instead? We make another change. This new era of leadership churn is one of the most negative outcomes of our current technology- and competition-fueled business environment. Almost nobody is looking to see how these transitions have worked, and most businesses are not gathering the lessons to be gleaned from both failing and successful leadership transitions. The upside? The absence of oversight and review creates a real opportunity for you to do things right. In your leadership transition, you will have an opportunity actually to plan your successful transition, execute your plans, review your success, and make sure people understand why it worked.

PREPARING TO LEAD A NEW TEAM

Step 1: Clear your mind of any current judgments, biases, and prejudices you already have about the new team. The biggest gift you can give your new team is a clean slate because the non-performers will get a fresh start and the performers will have to keep performing to impress you.

Step 2: Make sure you understand the expectations for this transition. Why is the change being made? Why you? What do you want to happen going forward? How will the success of this transition be judged? You need to know the answers to all these questions.

Step 3: Make sure that your previous team is being cared for. What will be happening to them? Is it in their best interest? Have you made sure you have publicized their success adequately? Should someone on your former

team be considered to take over for you? Have you said your “thank you’s”? Is there something you could do to make sure their transition is successful? Remember, it was your team that got you promoted, not your boss.

Here is what you need to identify, understand, and leverage during your transition.

This is the big question: where is my upside? Look for:

- Raw talent;
- Offices, departments, or divisions trending poorly;
- Market opportunities;
- People who may be in the wrong role; and
- Specialists who know how to train and coach.

These are your most obvious areas for growth. This is the low-hanging fruit.

Next question: Who on your team will be brand new to you? Is this a team you’re familiar with, or are you going to be working with strangers? Brand-new people are a great opportunity for you. Your priorities, communications, and overall leadership style will be fresh with these people, and it will be easier to make an impact. This is another opportunity for you.

Next question: Who are the six to 10 people who will determine whether this transition succeeds? And what’s in it for them if the transition fails or succeeds? Ignore titles, tenure, and previous performance. There will be a small group of individuals who will be the reason your new team succeeds or fails. It may not be immediately obvious to you who they are. You absolutely need to figure it out before you start making any big plans.

Here are six important considerations to help you think fresh thoughts about your new leadership opportunity:

1. **How are you going to raise expectations for your new team?** Doing things in a way your predecessor did not? Fresh approaches. New ideas. New delegations. New ways of thinking about the business you are in. Clear expectations.
2. **Choose your numbers carefully.** There are only three or four crucial measures for any business. It does not matter whether we’re talking about a single department or a multinational corporation. There will always be just three or four metrics that will tell what is working and what is not. What are the metrics for you?
3. **What previous traditions or expectations should you eliminate?** These are the things that run on their own inertia. This is the “way we have always done it around here” stuff. It could be reports, meetings, rankings, or social expectations. Some of these things worked at one point, but have pooped out. Some of these things never worked. The easiest way to say that a forward

view is more important than history is to cut these things out liberally.

4. **Where are you going to get your growth?** This is the hardest part of the planning. There’s the hidden upside in your new area of responsibility. Your predecessor could not see it, but it’s there. The team members know where the growth opportunities are, so interviewing them will give you some instant clarity. Giving them a platform and asking their opinions will also help you earn “buy in” from your new team. After that, you will need to dig into the numbers and see what they tell you. Inevitably, your growth opportunities will surface.
5. **Where will you be firm and where will you be flexible?** This is a way of asking what’s important to you. Every leader expects to have to show her teeth occasionally, but you have to pick your moments carefully. There will be a few no-compromise areas, but it cannot be every area or you will lose leverage and credibility.
6. **Go where the response is.** This five-word recommendation, “Go where the response is,” can save you years of work if you really understand it. Leaders succeed and fail based on their ability to direct people’s energy and attention. Team members will not always agree on that direction. When they don’t, the leader will not get the energy and attention he or she needs to succeed in the project, the initiative, or the business. So go where the response is: Pay attention to who is engaged and “on board” with what you’re saying and doing. Trying to change people’s minds can be a losing proposition; it puts too much attention on the areas that are not working. Instead, focus your attention, recognition, and resources to succeed. The others will catch on or they won’t, but they will not be the deciding factor in the enterprise.

Being a leader in a takeover role can be a high-wire act.

Being a leader in a takeover role can be a high-wire act. You must premeditate every move. You will be under scrutiny from above and below, so you need to make sure the decisions you’re making are an accurate reflection of your priorities and values as a leader. Leverage these recommendations to ensure your success in your new opportunity. ■■

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