

Leadership Transitions: Keys for Success

A successful leadership transition requires support for new leaders and their followers, along with a focus on trustworthy communication and clear decision-making processes

By **Marilu Goodyear** and **Cynthia Golden**

Leadership transitions are a fact of our organizational lives. The average length of tenure for a CIO is between four and five years,¹ and we have all seen rapid turnover in IT managers and leaders when the economy is good (as we experienced during the dot-com bubble, for example). The average worker, even in higher education, will probably see numerous leadership transitions during his or her career as people move on.

While times of transition can be exciting and energizing, they often prove difficult both for the leader, who has a new role, and for the followers—the members of the organization—who experience changes in their environment. Leaders work from the start to establish their credibility in their new position. In a sense, all eyes are on the new person, with some followers wishing for success and, in many cases, others pointing out the weaknesses that might portend failure. The new leader feels tremendous pressure to secure early wins.

New leaders have a natural desire to make a unique contribution to the organization and commonly feel the need to set themselves apart from a previous leader. As a result, the new leader often appears to take a critical stance toward current organizational processes and policies. The new leader might, through attempts to demonstrate an ability to contribute, offer a suggestion for every issue that arises. While new leaders obviously need to listen,

it is also very tempting for them to seek to influence the organization's direction immediately.

The followers' experience often begins with a growing realization that changes are afoot. While intellectually we understand that a new person is in charge, often the true impact of the change is slow in coming. Followers have generally developed a stable working relationship with a leader. In transitions, that relationship ends, and a new one must be built in its place. Feelings of insecurity can develop, particularly in those

lacking confidence about their own contributions to the organization. Given these circumstances, followers have a strong need to be heard by the new leader and to know that the leader has listened and understood their perspective whatever the ultimate outcome.

During organizational changes the needs of the new leader and the followers often conflict. The leader seeks to impact the organization immediately, and the followers want a slower pace of change. Successful transitions require understanding both parties' needs and



building communication and trust between them as quickly as possible.

Four areas of interaction between leaders and followers are critical for success during a transition:

- Partnering in decision making
- Focusing on the successful implementation of new directions
- Challenging the new leader as appropriate
- Understanding and providing the unique support that the new leader requires

Decision-Making Partnerships

A typical response to the new leader's ideas for change is the attitude within the organization of *continuous improvement*, a concept that has been in the management lexicon for years and has gone in and out of favor with management experts. The concept in its purest form, however, simply means looking at organizations with the intent to improve them without negative criticism or laying blame for their current state. Employees who are open to new ideas and can communicate honestly about the organization's current strengths and weaknesses often are effective and influential during leadership transitions.

The arrival of a new leader provides an opportunity for looking at issues from a different perspective. Successful leaders appreciate employees' ability to suggest potential solutions along with the issues and problems they raise. The old phrase "never take a problem to your boss without at least one solution; you are being paid to think, not whine"² is directly applicable for organizations in leadership transitions. Given the new leader's need to show quick results, working with followers who can collaborate on solutions is a critical success factor.

The new leader needs to understand the organization. Successful new leaders emphasize listening to followers, drawing out the issues that need to be addressed and the ideas that can potentially improve the organization. Followers can assist the leader throughout this process by bringing to the table not only their own ideas but also facts

and data that inform those opinions. To earn credibility, new leaders must ensure that their decisions are based in fact and backed up with good data about the organization and its customers. Quality analysis of issues fosters significant conversations between the leader and the followers that result in effective decisions.

Successful Implementations

Followers play major roles in implementing organizational products and services. Successful leaders trust followers to implement decisions so that they can focus their own time and effort on defining successful outcomes. It is almost impossible for a leader new to the organization to know enough to be helpful in making implementation decisions. Leaders promoted from within might be tempted to participate in implementation decisions because they have relevant knowledge of the organization. A new leader who does not shift to focus on the *results* the organization is trying to achieve deprives the organization of leadership and signals to followers that they are not trusted to understand defined outcomes and implement them successfully. The level of trust between leaders and followers is a key to success, and it is important that a new leader convey trust in the organization from the beginning, through delegation. Focused discussion between leaders and followers about successful outcomes and accountability mechanisms can result in focused and successful implementations.³

Challenging the Leader

The comfort level of followers in challenging the leader is crucial to a new leader's success. The new leader does not have an exclusive fix on organizational information. The followers' knowledge and ideas are critical in ensuring good decisions and are particularly important at the beginning of a new leader's tenure. New leaders are prone to quick decisions that would yield results for the organization and improve their own credibility. Those first decisions, focused on proving the correctness of the leader's appointment, are danger-

ous territory due to the pressure to produce results. In these situations, followers serve the leader best by having the courage to challenge ideas they believe to be incorrect or impractical.

The courage to challenge the leader is an important element in organizational success. Leaders benefit greatly from listening to employees and encouraging them to respectfully disagree. Honest interaction between leaders and followers can bring the leader new and important information.⁴ Ensuring that the top advisory group includes those who have the courage to challenge the leader is particularly important.

Followers can successfully challenge a leader if they ensure that in delivering their message they focus clearly on the success of the organization. Preparing the leader for feedback and giving feedback with specific examples can also help the leader more easily see another point of view. Being concise and to the point helps, too, as does providing feedback in a timely manner. Followers should not expect that their challenges will always engender an immediate answer or resolution—the leader might need time to synthesize ideas. A follower who feels empowered to challenge the leader, and who does so when appropriate, can help smooth the transition for the organization.

Supporting the Leader and the Followers

Just as followers seek safety in the new leadership environment, leaders might fear failing in their new role. New leaders often have lost their peer support group by moving to a new organization or by surpassing their former colleagues. Both the leader and the followers need support through the transition.

Paying close attention to fear-based behavior in the organization is important. Addressing this behavior quickly and effectively is a hallmark of successful transitions. Encouraging followers to use existing social support mechanisms during this period can help them greatly.

It is important for the new leader to develop support networks of peers who can provide advice and counsel on the

new role. In addition, the new leader needs followers to understand the basic functional needs of leadership. Given how overwhelming the new role might be, just dealing with the daily stream of ideas, demands, e-mail, and so on can challenge the new leader. Followers can assist new leaders by seeking information about their preferred styles of communication, not only how they would like to interact or the preferred means of communication but also what information should be shared with them and when. In addition, a mutual understanding of delegation protocols can assist the new leader in focusing on the new aspects of the job and free followers to work independently on behalf of the leader. Particularly important is discussing escalation of issues so that new leaders are not caught unaware by critical problems.

Conclusion

A leadership transition poses dangers and challenges for both leaders and followers. While each party naturally



focuses on the organization's success, time needs to be spent on how the new relationships will develop and mature into effective working relationships. Focusing on effective decision making and implementation protocols is essential. Hallmarks of successful transitions also include supporting leaders and followers and assisting new leaders by challenging their views. By focusing on the four elements of interaction suggested in this article, leaders and

followers alike can avoid some of the difficulties of transition times and make the period productive and smooth for the entire organization. *e*

Endnotes

1. CIO Decisions Staff, "2006 Salaries and Careers Survey," CIO.com, http://searchcio.techtarget.com/magItem/0,291266,sid19_gci1191283_idx4,00.html.
2. Robert A. Moran, *Never Confuse a Memo with Reality: And Other Business Lessons Too Simple Not to Know* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
3. For more information about defining successful outcomes, see David Allen, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2005).
4. Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995).

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