

Leadership Fracture or Positive Transition? The Five Things You Simply Must Do

By Jennifer Selby Long

As 2010 launches with projections of growth in most businesses, seasoned leaders who put retirement plans on hold are looking to the future again, and this means that starting this year, many mid-career leaders will be stepping in as their successors.

Likewise, bright careers that stalled during the recession will take off again as more opportunities become available.

The result: far more leadership transitions than last year. This will prove to be the first of several big waves of leadership transition, triggered by the retirement of the Boomer generation in the developed economies and the economic upswing in many parts of the globe.

So let the transitions begin! The success of leadership transitions will influence everything from customer retention to your employees' morale and confidence in you. The transitions are going to happen anyway, so take the bull by horns and do them well.

your life. If you're a retiring executive, the many reasons for this are obvious. If you're the successor, it's essential to have support from the most important people in your life. The transition itself is going to take a fair amount of your time away from friends and family, and yet, you'll need their support more than ever.

That level of need won't change for quite some time. Immediately after the transition into your bigger role, you will find yourself stretched and likely spending more time at work for a while, and it is very difficult to predict exactly how long "a while" will be in any given situation.

Throughout this process, you'll not only be managing the business, but managing others through a significant change, and this takes a level of time, effort, and skill that most leaders grossly underestimate. You'll likely need a higher level of support from your personal support system.

2. Discuss the goals of the transitioning leader and of the successor. This is not one conversation, but several. The purpose is to set up the transition for success by understanding one another's goals rather than working on potentially false assumptions about each other.

So many transitions have ended up as explosions or no transition at all, due to false, unspoken assumptions about goals. I am reminded of one of my late relatives, George, who hired a young man to groom into his successor, since he thought he should think about retirement "in a few years." Thirty years later, the successor retired, while George continued to run the business! He ultimately didn't retire until well into his 80's.

While this is a comically extreme example, it does illustrate the importance of moving from more general visions ("I'd like to move on in the next few years" or "I'd like to step up soon") to creating real, live goals.

This is too important to crank out in one sitting. You need time to reflect. You may find that simply hearing the other leader's goals gives you another perspective, and influences your own goals more than you had imagined.

Unless the change has been triggered by an emergency, give yourselves the time you need for this step. You may find that you create a slightly different role for the successor than the current leader has had, or a massively different role, for that matter. You may find that you keep the role approximately the same. The only way to know is to talk through it. A successful transition will meet the needs of each person. A fair-to-middling one leaves one person's goals unattained, and this often creeps into the business performance.

3. For the senior leader, privately share your successor's name with each of your direct reports before communicating to the rest of the organization -- and be prepared to have a delicate conversation about your choice. A few years ago, the Harvard Business Review wrote an article on challenges in succession planning. One of the findings that stuck with me was how many people live under the illusion that they personally are the chosen successor when in fact they have never been considered for promotion at any point in time.

In some cases, the senior leader did manipulate conversations, which is just plain wrong and a bad, bad idea. However, in many cases, the senior leader's words carried so much weight, and the individual wanted a promotion so badly, he or she read meaning into statements that simply wasn't there.

Once you know who your successor is, and the two of you have had your conversations, do your direct reports the courtesy of sharing your decision privately. No matter how long you've worked together, don't assume you already know who will be disappointed. Many leaders have read these tea leaves wrong.

4. Create and communicate a shared vision for the organization, one that will be realized after the transition. Leadership transitions can be nerve-wracking for everyone involved. Remember the first time Steve Jobs tried to leave Apple? Complete disaster.

People remember these events from the news and often from their own bad experiences, so they have every reason to be nervous if you create no vision beyond the time when the current senior leader is in charge. It will feel like the organization is just going to fall off of a cliff once he or she leaves.

A solid vision, combined with a good plan, will help inspire faith, and faith goes a long way to inspire performance.

5. Determine the path forward. This is a poetic way of saying, "Make a plan and work the plan." Treat it as a project that's every bit as important as your biggest customer projects.

Unless the transition is prompted by a sudden event or emergency, ensure that the successor assumes more of the senior leader's responsibilities every 3 – 6 months, with genuine transition of decision-making accountability and authority, too.

Put dates on your plan, and target how often you will revisit the plan to check progress and make adjustments. It's not unusual for these plans to have a few adjustments along the way, so don't let that bother you.

And a free bonus tip: if you can afford to slow down the pace of other changes during this time without negatively impacting the business, do it. For example, it is unwise for the current senior leader to hire new team members unless this can't be avoided. The incoming leader needs the opportunity to build his or her own team, and employees generally do not respect leaders who hire them under the guise that they'll be reporting to one person, only to be told a few months later that they're now working for someone else who had been the planned successor all along.

For more information on managing a key leadership transition, contact us at lighten@selbygroup.com.

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