



EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP ACHIEVING INITIAL SUCCESS

You've likely worked hard to achieve your new leadership opportunity, so you'll want to make sure your entry goes smoothly. As is often the case for a new CEO, President, or other senior executive, all eyes are on you as people in and around you will be focusing on and interpreting your every move. A good start in your new role will set the right tone, and increase your credibility and personal influence; a rocky entry experience can create negative perceptions and history that could remain a constant for years to come. In fact, the seeds of derailment can be set in the early days of a new leadership role – whether a promotion from within, or entry into a new leadership role from outside the organization. And you will be judged, like it or not, on your performance over your first three to four months. So, in the spirit of wanting you to get off to a good start, this brief paper is meant as a “thought starter” as

it assists and supports senior executive leaders as they enter into new roles in organizations.

This paper is divided into five sections that will assist you in achieving success in your new role:

- *Conduct a Self-Assessment* reminds you how important it is to understand your own personal strengths and shortcomings as you move forward in your new role.
- *Pay Attention To Your Entry* suggests that you pay careful attention to how you go about entering your new role, whether from within or outside of the company.
- *Assess the Situation* provides a framework for thinking about organizations so you can organize your observations and conduct an initial assessment.
- *Put Your Team In Place* speaks to the importance of having the right membership on your team to support the strategic direction of the enterprise and/or your business unit.
- *Create and Implement Your Plan* discusses the importance of using your assessment information to develop a go forward plan for success.

All of the thoughts shared in this paper are the result of cumulative experience consulting to senior executive leaders in a variety of roles and a review of relevant literature. Feel free to make them work for you as you see fit and as you work towards success.



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Conduct a Self-Assessment

One of the more important things you can do, if possible prior to stepping into your new role, is step back and understand your own professional and personal strengths and shortcomings. In your new leadership role, people will look to you to be a strong leader who will appropriately guide and navigate the organization or your area of responsibility. Their expectations are high as everyone will be “waiting” from your first moment for the ROI on you as a new executive. This requires a level of “centeredness” so the pressures accompanying the role don’t throw you.

People will look for you to be genuine and forthcoming, and able to understand their problems and experiences in ways that lead to a felt personal connectedness. Thinking about past feedback you’ve received in other roles is a helpful way to identify potential personal challenges you may encounter. One executive shared that he had received feedback over the years that while his decisiveness was a strength, he sometimes moved too quickly to decisions, failing to either seek input or share the logic behind his decisions with those around him. Doing this in his new role could lead others to perceive him as perhaps disinterested in gaining input, or not an effective communicator. He used his self-assessment to reflect on this, and planned ways in which he could ensure others perceived him as decisive, yet interested in their views and effective at communicating his decisions. Consider a number of questions as you complete your self-assessment:

- What values have informed your leadership approach to date? In what ways have these values contributed to your leadership effectiveness? For example, are you someone for whom honesty and integrity are an important value? If so, have these values enabled you to have honest conversations with others and avoid political pitfalls, or have they contributed to your leadership effectiveness in other ways?
- What personal characteristics have enabled you to reach this point in your career path? Are you reserved or outspoken, data driven and/or process oriented, someone who listens well and asks questions, other? Consider making a list and asking yourself how your personal characteristics have contributed to your success.
- What have others noted as your strengths or shortcomings? How have these strengths and shortcomings helped or hindered you in the past? What do you need to do to leverage the strengths and address the shortcomings as you enter your new role? Consider the earlier example of the executive who was decisive – a perceived strength – yet had to address how this would impact the perception of his openness to others. Are there similar examples for you?
- What have others seen that you may have missed? Most of us have blind spots that are difficult to recognize. These are often the characteristics others tell us about that don’t seem to “fit” our self perception. Most of the time, this is the feedback you’ve received on several occasions that you may ignore or not attend to. And, these can often be the source of early derailment.
- What are your tendencies when under pressure? Let’s face it, each of us has a way in which we handle stress or pressure. For example, some become more action oriented and may be less concerned about others’ input, while others get more contemplative and seemingly disengaged. If you think about watching a movie of yourself under pressure, what would you likely view on the screen?
- What are your personal “triggers” and responses? Equally important to knowing how you react under pressure, is to know your personal triggers and how you respond to these. What “pushes your buttons” and what do you find intolerable? And, how do you react

when these occur? Are you someone who doesn't like surprises and will respond angrily when one occurs? Or are you someone who has high expectations and react in an overly disappointed way when these are not met?

- Are you able to laugh at yourself at the “right” moments? Having a sense of humor is one of the more important aspects of effective leadership. The ability to laugh at yourself can be very disarming to others, and demonstrates a sense of humility. Are you someone who tends to joke about himself or herself, or do you get defensive along the way?

Pay Attention To Your Entry

Think about it, if you are a “newcomer” to the organization, you're likely a relative unknown. While many may be aware of your successes in the company you came from, establishing your credibility early on will be important. Depending on your role, employees, investors, other stakeholders, and perhaps competitors will watch you closely to see what you do and say, and how you do and say it. They'll then form their own judgments about the kind of leader you are and will be. As you reach out to get to know key people, others will watch and make attributions about everything you do.

At the same time, being a “newcomer” provides you with a unique window to ask questions, for example, about assumptions that have been part of the organization since it was founded. Some will give you a very brief “honeymoon” period to gain understanding about the organization. Others will use this time to attempt to sway your thinking to the way they think about issues and people.

If you are entering your new role from inside the organization, you have the advantage of more knowledge about the company, you likely know the culture and many of the people, and you understand more about how you fit the culture. People will be looking for you to put it to immediate use. This can make some of the decisions you will need to make – especially the people ones – more difficult.

In addition, since you've been a part of the organization, people have grown to know what to expect from you and there are an existing set of perceptions about you that transfer with you to your new role. These perceptions are about how you will lead and the ways you will likely work with others. It may prove more difficult to take some radically different approaches or make the more difficult decisions due to pressures to act in ways people are more accustomed to seeing and experiencing.

Whether you are a “newcomer” or are transitioning into your new role from within the company, you might also be inheriting a team you didn't select. Some may have wondered why they were not selected for the role you will occupy, and have residual unresolved feelings. That being said, the initial political behavior and jockeying will likely be heightened during your initial days in your new role.

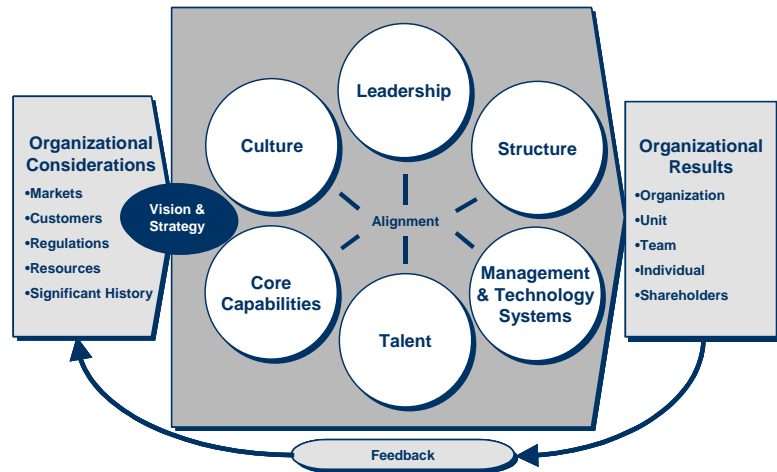
Reflect on your prior experiences entering new roles, either as an outsider or from within. Ask yourself what worked, and what didn't and why. Pay close attention to your experiences of others and focus time on establishing relationships with key people who can assist in creating and supporting the types of changes you will need to make. One newly appointed executive worked to develop an initial stakeholder map where she identified critical relationships and a set of actions to engage the people and establish effective relationships. She was then able to execute on her plan, and the result was she learned a lot about the company, and had good peer relationships early on. Another reflected by keeping a journal of his experiences and

interactions so that he could look back and identify people who might be of assistance as he moved forward with the organization changes that he would eventually implement.

Assess the Situation

Before taking any major action, it's important to assess the company or your business unit using a framework that's comfortable for you. You'll want to understand the organization's or business unit's capabilities so you can use this information as you develop your strategy and plan of action. Figure 1 provides a framework I've developed that clients have found useful to assess the alignment of six important areas:

Figure 1: Organizing For Results – A Systems Framework



- **Core Capabilities** – It's important to understand, given the strategy and planned next phase of growth, what critical areas the organization or business unit has to excel at to ensure its strategic success and business results.
- **Culture** – An organization's culture is critical to its overall success. Identify the cultural attributes you note within the organization. Ask yourself and others what is valued/not valued. Determine what, if any, distinct subcultures exist within various business units. Identify how the current culture and subcultures help or hinder strategic success.
- **Leadership** – Get to know each member of your leadership team. Understand each member's perspective on the organization and its strategy, and observe and evaluate each of their individual capabilities. This will help you with the eventual decisions you'll need to make as you shape the kind of team needed to guide your organization or business unit.
- **Structure** – Assess the capabilities of the current structure. As you develop your strategy going forward, structure can be used as a key lever for changing other aspects of the organization or business unit.
- **Management Systems** – Determine early on if your management systems are aligned to the organization's strategic needs, its culture and core capabilities. Ask yourself if you have the needed management reporting systems in place so you can have "real time" data on the state of the business. Determine if the organization has the needed human resource practices in place to retain critical talent and ensure high levels of performance. Assess the effectiveness of your strategy development process, how it gets linked to operational plans, and how it gets deployed in the organization. These are just some of the areas you'll likely want to assess.
- **Talent** – Critical to success in your new role is having the right talent in place. This starts with your team, and includes the next levels of leadership/management and all areas of the organization or business unit. One of the things that made General Electric such a

success was its attention to selection, talent development and planning. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins emphasizes the importance of getting the “right people on the bus.”

A new CEO of a high technology company realized through his initial assessment that the culture of the organization could not support the needed turnaround of the business, and that many other aspects of the organization supported the existing culture. He used the initial assessment he had conducted to help others in the company and members of his Board of Directors understand how the company would not be able to succeed if it continued some of its current practices. He also made a number of highly leveraged changes that enabled him to reset the values behind the culture and establish a new foundation for moving forward with the business.

Put Your Team In Place

Once you have completed your assessment, you will want to move quickly to put in place your leadership team – the team that will help you lead your organization or business unit and execute on the strategy you will put in place. The sooner you are able to make decisions about your team, the easier it will be to engage them in developing strategy. Delaying these difficult decisions not only hurts you, but is also hurts the organization and people who will depend on you to lead.

Changes to your team, if necessary, may need to occur in stages in order to maintain some level of continuity within the organization or business unit. The CEO who conducted the assessment noted in the prior section moved very quickly to make changes in his Senior Leadership Team. He was concerned that the Team would continue to reinforce the culture that he felt needed to change, and that if he didn't move quickly, he would lose important momentum and leverage. During discussions, he reflected on the need to also maintain continuity and organization learning given the size of the company and assessed leadership capabilities below the Senior Leadership Team. However, after weighing all of the pros and cons regarding the different approaches to changing the membership of his team, he decided to move quickly and make the changes at essentially the same time given his felt urgency. It was only later that he indicated having perhaps moved too fast – that staging the changes to his team may have worked better in the long run. He learned that it's important to strike a balance between the need to move quickly to make changes within the Senior Leadership Team and maintain a level of continuity in the business. At the same time, he is credited with assessing the capabilities within his team, and taking action to bring in capable leadership that was able to influence the culture and turn the company around.

Once the “right” team is in place, move quickly to set expectations for the goals of the team, how it will work together, and how the team will measure its success. Also set expectations for how you expect leaders to lead and manage individually and together as a team, and for their relationship with you. Don't take lightly the importance of your setting expectations with your team. One executive with whom I worked conducted an offsite meeting to do some initial team startup work. As part of the meeting, he shared his expectations of leaders in his organization and answered questions they had of him. The result was the team got off to an excellent start because expectations were clear early on and missteps were avoided.

It will be important for your team to dialogue and debate about issues in its meetings as it gets aligned, and then act aligned outside of these meetings. Starting out this way can set norms for team behavior, and build the trust level in the team. In this way, messages about your strategy and changes you will be making will be clear as these are communicated outside the team.

At the same time, remember that your entry has likely made the members of your team wonder if they will remain as valued executives. While some level of initial discomfort can be healthy, you'll want to make sure it does not paralyze effectiveness. Do what is needed to reassure those who you want to keep that their retention is important. At the same time, be careful about what early "promises" you make as you may find later that they need to be broken. And similarly, pay attention to the next levels of leadership so that you don't find yourself addressing an untimely exodus early on.

Create and Implement Your Plan

After you've assessed the situation you'll likely have a better idea of what short-term steps you'll need to take to guide your initial efforts and align with your longer-term strategy. This will help create a sense of focus on the vital initiatives that will have the highest likelihood of achieving business results. What's nice is that you'll have the assessment information as "data" in support of your plan – key initiatives, outcomes, actions sequenced for maximum effectiveness, measures, and a timeline with responsibilities. Certainly, this is a plan to involve your leadership team in developing and implementing. You'll also want to hold them accountable for supporting the plan and accomplishing its objectives.

At the same time, remember that implementation will involve the need to pay attention to aspects of change management, including heightened communications by you and members of your team. Watch for consistency of messages – from you and others on your team – so others in the organization or business unit "get it" and can feel like they are contributing. Involve others as much as possible in creating, and owning, solutions to difficult organizational issues. As you move forward, make sure other constituencies beyond your team are appropriately engaged.

Your employees will want to hear from you as their new leader. They'll want to see that you are "in charge" and providing the necessary leadership for ongoing success. They'll also be wondering about your vision and strategy for the organization or business unit, and how you will go about implementation.

Another newly appointed CEO met with his team to share his assessment and involve them in developing a strategy and plan. As they were completing this work, the team discussed the operating agreements they had made and the importance of these for leading the implementation of the plan. They also developed a number of communication principles to guide aspects of implementation and rollout of the plan. These principles, along with critical messages, became the basis of a robust communication plan, and were effective elements of change management.

As you proceed with implementation, make sure you measure your progress along the way, and watch for and address early on any challenges that can throw you off course. Continually reinforce the direction you are taking in your communications and actions.

Summary

As you move into your new leadership role, the opportunities and potential to achieve extraordinary results are the exciting parts. It's also a time that others will be watching you more closely than in the past. It's important to "go slow to go fast" by understanding your own capabilities and areas that will require you to stretch, as well as the strengths and shortcomings of your team, and the organization or business unit. Once you have a good understanding of the situation, you can ensure the right team is in place and build and execute your vision, strategy and change "roadmap" for the future. If properly used, the time you spend on your initial entry can lay the foundation for you to capitalize on numerous opportunities going forward.