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How Transition Coaching Accelerates Leadership Success

By Ronald Bossert

It is easy to understand that when it's time for a new business leader to come into a new position, everyone in an organization holds its collective breath – looking for major, positive changes. Senior management, of course, expects increased ROI. Colleagues want to see a team player. Employees are hoping for a strong leader.

Transitions are periods of vulnerability for the entire organization. Expectations are high within the company and new leaders are eager to hit the ground running and make a great impression. The fact is, however, while newly appointed leaders bring a unique style to the table, they often do not have the necessary information, tools or a plan to make them successful in their new role. Chances are they were given very short notice before being placed in a new position and lack a common framework that will assist them as they manage the intense demands of the first few months on the job. In many cases, they don't know the members of the existing team and don't have detailed knowledge of their new role. It's like playing a game without the instructions!

As a result, instead of the anticipated productivity gains one might expect with a management change, without the proper transition plan in place, a business might, at least initially, experience poor financial results, decreased employee morale and costly turnovers. On the other hand, if organizations' transitioning leaders use the right success strategies, they will not only prevent failure but will also create additional value by accelerating the new leader's effectiveness -- thus having a more immediate positive impact on the business.

The actions new leaders take during the first few months in a new organization can have a significant impact on their own success. And, try as they might, newly appointed leaders who fail to build momentum from the start face an uphill battle as they attempt to grow the business and their own professional careers.

Every leadership change has many corresponding costs- costs related to recruiting a new manager and, the very real costs associated with a new leader underperforming. This creates a business risk because the business is also likely to under perform unless the new leader's transition is accelerated. In a typical large company, 25 percent of the entire management changes each year. Further, it's estimated that it takes an average of about six months for a new leader to make a net contribution to a new organization. The challenge is to accelerate the transition process by institutionalizing a common framework, which in turn results in leaders making a more rapid and informed contribution to the business. These contributions can include decisions impacting product development, growing the business and cutting costs as well as actions that impact the effectiveness of peers, subordinates and bosses.

When newly appointed leaders do not work out, priceless business-critical knowledge can leave the organization (perhaps going to the competition) and the recruiting process (and related costs) start all over again. Indeed, the largest cost associated with bringing on a new leader is the cost of failure. The failure rate for newly appointed leaders is high. Studies report that more than 40 to 50 percent of senior outside hires fail to achieve desired results. The estimate of the direct and indirect costs to an organization of a failed executive-level hire can be as high as \$2.7 million.

Managing the transition is the key to success. Newly appointed leaders must have guidance on how to take charge in their new roles. They must accept that the way they move into their new position will have a major impact on their ability to succeed. He or she must fully grasp the fact that an ineffective transition at an executive level has a ripple effect that can cause a weakness in the leadership pipeline – and, indeed, down the ranks of the entire employee chain.

Many companies provide orientation programs, but these are often one or two day meetings, which focus on basic information sharing about the company, including the business, structure, policies and procedures. Little attention is paid to developing a transition plan that can make a major difference in the way a new leader performs in the new assignment.

Enter Transition Leadership Coaching -- a proven, integrated and systematic process that demonstrates significant return on investment and positive economic impact for organizations as they work to engage new leaders in their corporate strategy and culture to accelerate productivity.

Transition Leadership Coaching helps a new leader rapidly gain a strong understanding of the company's strategic focus and corporate culture, and the ability to immediately offer positive economic value to the company. The process prevents mistakes that can lead to failure and harm the business.

How does Transition Leadership Coaching work? It's a process, a plan, and a roadmap that offers the new leader the ability to navigate his or her way through the challenges of the transition. It defines critical actions that must happen during the first 120 days to establish credibility, secure early wins and position that leader and team for long-term success. It arms them with the ability to adapt their own styles to the infrastructure of people and strategies already in place.

Having in place the framework and strategies to effectively transition new executives – whether first entering the organization or moving from another position within the company – is critical to the overall health of any business. But once a company decides to engage in Transition Leadership Coaching, it can be assured that the newly appointed leader will be provided with the tools he or she needs to take over the responsibilities and challenges of the new position. Transition coaches help leaders assess their own skills and support them in creating and implementing a well thought-out transition plan. And, Transition Leadership Coaching has a positive economic impact on the organization.

When a transition coach works with a new leader, they must consider the existing corporate structure, strategy and culture of the company. But equally important, the new leader's own personality traits, management style and professional skills must be assessed.

The coach acts as a sounding board to assist the executive in diagnosing the new situation as it applies to the new leader's specific vulnerabilities. The coach also assists the new leader in assessing and building the team and achieving alignment with not only the boss, but, just as important, with the strategy, structure and systems of the larger organization.

Next, it's time to put the plan into action. The transition coach provides the newly appointed leader with an organizational process and language for taking charge while staying focused on the most critical transition priorities from a personal and business standpoint. Through tutorials, skills practice role-plays, on-the-job actions, and continuous feedback, the new leader receives one-on-one support from a transition coach.

Understanding that there can be behavioral issues involved, the coach is trained to work with the manager's strengths and weaknesses; it's a teaching process that gives the new manager the tools he or she needs to navigate obstacles specific to their new environment and to help them make changes quickly to accelerate their transition. Executives learn the importance of making informed

decisions quickly and how to grasp a new culture, corporate politics and “the players” that will touch their new role.

After six to eight weeks, early impressions of the new leader are formed. The transition coach takes a pulse check of the key players including the boss, direct reports, peers and other stakeholders to gather these early impressions so that the new leader can make an early course correction if needed.

The entire process allows the person to take charge of the new situation, get the information they need to properly set high expectations for the future, and move the business forward.

Considering all the very real reasons to engage in Transition Leadership Coaching, one might wonder why, to date, few companies are willing to make the investment in supporting newly appointed leaders in this way. Many believe leaders come to the table with past experience that will see them through the transition period. After all, they are the executive – if they can’t jump in and make it work, who can? In this scenario, the typical “sink or swim” approach is the way it’s always been done and the belief that “Learning by doing” will get the job done.

This is a risky game to play and more and more companies are recognizing that the price tag attached to a “bad swimmer” isn’t worth the lack of proper planning. Once a decision is made to appoint a new leader, it is incumbent upon the company to do everything it can to assist the new executive in making the transition well – for the good of the individual and company.

By incorporating Transition Leadership Coaching into the offering, a company makes a bold statement to its employees, customers and competition. The company’s decision to accelerate the transition of new leaders with a proven integrated and systematic approach will not only drive improved business results but also allow the company to meet customer needs and win competitive challenges in the marketplace.

The bottom line is that Transition Leadership is critical to the overall health of a company and works for people whether they are first entering an organization or moving from another position within the company. It helps leaders to identify critical dilemmas in their new roles and to develop a targeted, actionable plan to overcome challenges. Plus, in the long run, it diminishes the probability of failed transitions, which can include turnover, poor financial results, negative employee morale and decreased customer satisfaction.