



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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# LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR NEWLY APPOINTED LEADERS

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Julie M. Johnson

Congratulations! You've just been promoted. While you envision exciting challenges and expanded responsibilities, your new boss delights in your enthusiasm. Hopes are high. Unfortunately, no one is talking about defining goals or setting benchmarks, because everyone is basking in a kind of glow. In an environment in which executives can afford only the briefest of honeymoon periods, however, you'll need a well-planned strategy for taking charge of your new position.

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### **The Pressure to Measure Up**

Whether you are a newly appointed chief executive officer or sales manager, you are expected to get up to speed fast. As an executive coach, I am frequently called in to help leaders manage their job transitions. Quality initiatives and the current "lean-and-mean" climate have produced a demand for strong, measurable results in short time frames. The pressure is greatest at the top. Shareholders and boards are subjecting the performance of CEOs to closer quantitative scrutiny than ever before. No wonder many newly appointed leaders fall short and fail fast.

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## The High Rate and Cost of Failure

When someone assumes a new or different leadership role today, he or she has about a forty percent chance of demonstrating disappointing performance, voluntarily leaving the position, or being terminated within twelve to eighteen months (Betof and Harrison, 1996). In addition, an American Management Association study revealed that nearly twenty-two percent of employers surveyed had, in the past two years, fired a professional or manager after he or she was in the position for less than three months (Betof and Harrison, 1996). Failure is costly both to the executive and to the organization. The more senior the executive, the higher the cost. A recent survey of why newly appointed leaders fail (Manchester Consulting, 1997) shows that executives often derail because they don't manage relationships well:

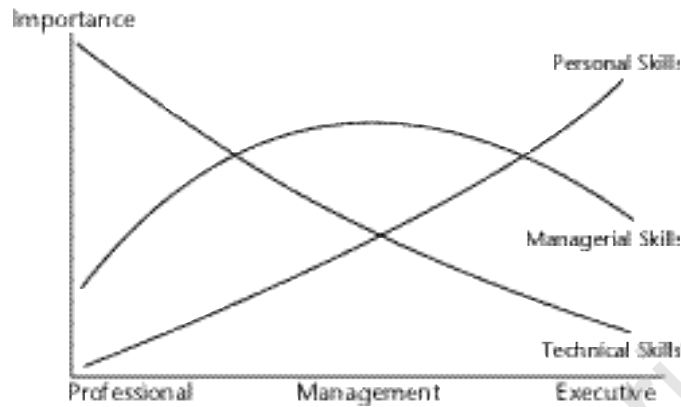
- eighty-two percent fail to build partnerships and teamwork with subordinates and peers;
- fifty-eight percent are confused or unclear about what is expected of them; and
- fifty percent lack the required internal political savvy.

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## Mastering the Soft Skills

What gets you into a new position won't necessarily keep you there. As shown in Figure 18.1, although technical skills may have accounted in large part for your past achievements, they may not be the key to your success going forward from a professional to an executive position. The higher your position in an organization, the more important the personal skills, such as listening and empathy.

As part of his inquiry into the qualities that make a strong leader, Daniel Goleman (1998) analyzed competency models from 188 companies. He found that emotional intelligence played an "increasingly important role at the highest levels in a company, where differences in technical skills are of negligible importance." When he compared "star performers with average ones in senior leadership positions, nearly ninety percent of the difference in

**FIGURE 18.1. CHANGING REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS**

Reprinted from *Preventing Derailment: What to Do Before It's Too Late* by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger. Copyright © 1989 Center for Creative Leadership.

their profiles was attributable to emotional intelligence factors.” The five components of emotional intelligence, as defined by Goleman, are *self-awareness*, *self-regulation*, *motivation*, *empathy*, and *social skill* (Goleman, 1998, p. 95).

Take the case of the young derivatives trader who has experienced a meteoric rise through the ranks of a blue-chip Wall Street firm. This “Master of the Universe” had successfully managed a small, close-knit group of traders. Thanks to his stellar financial results and keen understanding of financial markets, he has just been promoted. In his new role, he has cross-functional responsibility for three hundred traders and salespeople. To succeed in the weeks and months ahead, he must shift away from his analytical and technical skill base. Winning the full support of his direct reports and other key stakeholders will demand softer skills (for example, the ability to build relationships and leverage influence across the organization).

## A Proactive Approach to Effective Relationships

Because you cannot count on your organization to guide you in your new role, you must proactively manage your own transition. That means creating strategies for managing your expectations, as well as those of your

boss and your team. By initiating open dialogues about the issues of greatest importance to key stakeholders in your success (for example, peers, internal clients, and boards of directors), you will strengthen the relationships that are vital to achieving your objectives.

Imagine a newly appointed CEO, selected because of his outstanding financial advisory skills. Having enjoyed a long, successful career consulting with clients and making sound recommendations, he assumes that his financial abilities will carry him through this new position. Unfortunately, this person fails to recognize the importance of building relationships with his staff, as well as with the board of directors. Uncomfortable at board meetings, he falls back on technical strengths—speaking in numbers. The staff feels micro-managed, and the board members have trouble following him. This person is on the fast track to derailment. In order to better understand the expectations of the board and staff, he should have invested time up front in building relationships, managing expectations, and learning how to delegate at the executive level.

In the remainder of this chapter, you'll find learning tools to get anyone who is newly promoted off to a running start in the right direction. They are designed for the following purposes:

- To help you move more effectively into your new leadership role;
- To provide a systematic framework for taking charge, getting information, and setting expectations;
- To illuminate the type of situation you are entering (startup, turnaround, and so forth); and
- To force you, your boss, and your team to be more thoughtful about business and transitional issues.

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## Managing Up

You may think your new boss is going to spell out for you the goals and business issues critical to your success, but that isn't necessarily the case. There can be many reasons for this lack of clarity. Often the most important information is not surfaced soon enough, so don't be afraid to push for defi-

dition and to establish your own benchmarks for your performance and progress.

Consider the operations executive who has been promoted into a much larger position. A highly capable project manager with strong technical skills, she really “knows her stuff.” Yet, she is about to face some unanticipated challenges. Her boss, for example, does not understand or appreciate her technical competency and talent for detail. In a culture that values style over substance, he is primarily concerned that she demonstrate visible enthusiasm. To satisfy her boss and succeed in the culture, she will have to delegate more and shift her skill set. It’s a big stretch, but possible with the tools below.

### *Learning Tools: Your Boss’s Expectations*

- Identify your key clients, customers, and stakeholders.
- Define what you are held accountable for in your new role in terms of:
  - People
  - Financial Resources
  - Results
- Understand what your boss really wants from you. For example, he or she may say: “I want you to implement change,” but the underlying meaning is: “I want you to cut the dead weight in the organization.”
- Know the expectations of the board (if you are a CEO).
- Determine a timetable and methodology for getting feedback from your boss. For example, schedule meetings with your boss to evaluate your progress in three months and six months.

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## **Building Your Team**

To streamline the assimilation of newly appointed leaders, major corporations such as Ford Motor Company, Exxon, Citibank, GE, and J. P. Morgan are using a highly interactive approach originally developed by the U.S. Army. One company calls this process “Jump Start.” According to Bill Hunt, program manager, Organization and Staffing, GE Power Systems, this intensive getting-to-know-you program “reduces by three to six months the time it normally takes to build an effective team. It’s the best

way to iron out rumors, to confront the issues that arise with a new manager, and to create a climate of openness” (*Fast Company*, 1998).

As a result, valuable time is not wasted speculating about who you are and how to work with you most effectively. Everyone quickly gets information that might otherwise take six months or a year to come to light or that might not surface at all. You’ll learn what people are wondering about, in terms of everything from revenue targets to organizational rumors about you. The process of getting acquainted is systematically condensed into six to eight hours of meetings.

Imagine an investment banker with an impressive track record. He has a strong reputation as a fix-it, turnaround expert in various parts of the organization. As a result of the CEO’s trust in him and confidence in his ability to manage people, he is appointed head of the private banking division. In this new position, he is faced with learning a new business and managing a team that doesn’t know him. To make matters even more difficult, many of his reports feel they should have been considered for his position. The perception is that he is an outsider and one of the CEO’s favorites. In order to tackle this new role, he must first clear the air and dispel false perceptions. Armed with the right tools, listed below, he can do just that.

### *Learning Tools: Your Team’s Expectations*

- Work with an outside facilitator to create a framework for you to develop relationships with your entire team.
- Ask your team to get together as a group with a facilitator to generate questions for you, to provide information about themselves, and to outline the key business challenges you’ll face together. The questions might include:
  - What do we already know about the manager?
  - What do we not know about the manager, but would like to know?
  - What do we want most from the manager?
  - What does the manager need to know about us as a team?
  - What are the major business issues the manager will face in the next six to twelve months?
  - What are your specific suggestions for addressing these issues?

- Have the facilitator brief you on the collective input from your team.
- Meet with your team and the facilitator to respond to the questions and information they provided. For example, your reports may have heard rumors that you fire people indiscriminately. This format gives you the opportunity to address their concerns in a group setting, so no one is confronting you alone.
- Right after that meeting, review with the facilitator the commitments made and actions to be taken.
- Six months later, ask your team to provide the facilitator with an assessment of its functioning as a group, how you're fitting in, what you're doing best, what the team would like you to do more of (and less of), and what you're not doing that you should be doing. Then meet with your team and the facilitator to respond to that feedback.

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## Knowing Thyself

Self-awareness and self-regulation can be invaluable assets to the newly promoted leader. According to Goleman (1998), people who are self-aware “have a firm grasp of their capabilities and are less likely to set themselves up to fail. They know, too, when to ask for help.”

People capable of self-regulation have “a propensity for reflection and thoughtfulness; comfort with ambiguity and change; and integrity—an ability to say no to impulsive urges” (Goleman, 1998, p. 99).

Take the case of the newly appointed general counsel, promoted from the ranks of the legal department. She quickly recognizes that managing an entire group requires skills that were not necessary when she managed a small team of legal specialists. In addition, her peer group has changed. It now consists of other business unit heads and the staff officers of the corporation. How can she gain a clearer understanding of her own strengths and weaknesses, foster trusting relationships with new peers, and develop a realistic picture of her radically different role and context? Here are some tools that can help.

### *Learning Tools: Your Own Expectations*

- Meet with the departing manager to explore key learnings and lessons of experience, to gain insight into the power structure and informal networks, and to identify sources of information/data that can be most useful to you. Spend your first few weeks developing trusting relationships.
- Exchange information with peers and colleagues. Information is power. Be generous with information that isn't necessarily going to benefit you, so that when you need information from someone else, he or she won't assume it's self-serving. Share not only technical information, but the organizational information that helps build trust with other people.
- Watch out for your natural human tendency to fall back on the technical skill that may have won you the promotion.
- Recognize the significance and importance of the fact that people who were once your peers are now direct reports.
- Realize that you are in a new role. Reflect on your strengths and developmental needs in terms of your past and current roles. Consider what might derail your career moving forward.
- *Seek feedback!*

The simple tools and approaches I've outlined here can assist you in avoiding the pitfalls that derail many newly appointed leaders. Invest some time and effort up front in managing your new boss, building your new team, and taking an honest look at yourself in your new context. Understand that the softer skills become more important as you move up; use them to build the inner qualities and organization-wide relationships crucial to your success.

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## About the Contributor

**Julie M. Johnson** is a senior executive coach who helps companies improve business results by maximizing the performance of key individuals. Focusing on leadership, management style, and organizational change, she

consults on management succession, high-potential and leadership needs assessments, management of executive transitions into new leadership positions, and resolution of interpersonal business-related conflicts.

Julie brings twenty years of human resource management expertise to each assignment. Her experience encompasses industries as diverse as investment banking, brokerage, cable television, consumer products, construction, retailing, and chemicals, as well as major law firms. A partial client list includes Aetna, Ann Taylor, BASF, Bayer, Bristol-Myers-Squibb, Chase Manhattan Bank, CitiGroup, Ernst and Young, Fleet Bank, Ford Motor Company, Hearst Corporation, International *Herald Tribune*, Lucent Technologies, J.P. Morgan, the *New York Times*, Pitney-Bowes, Rockefeller & Company, The Rockefeller Foundation, Shearman & Sterling, State Street Bank, Union Camp, and Union Carbide.

Julie is a founder of the Reid Group in Fairfield, CT; prior to that she spent four years as practice head of executive coaching at The Strickland Group, she was vice president of executive development at Merrill Lynch, vice president of executive education at the Merrill Lynch Executive Institute, manager of human resource planning at General Foods, and manager, management development, at Warner Amex.

Julie began her career as placement director at Stanford Law School. She then spent three years at the Vinson & Elkins law firm, where she created a system for recruiting, staffing, and organizing attorney offices that became a standard for law firms across the country.

Recently, Julie published a case commentary in the *Harvard Business Review*, "When a New Manager Stumbles, Who Is at Fault?" She holds a B.A. in liberal arts from Carnegie Mellon University, an M.A. in social psychology and counseling from Southern Methodist University, and an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School.

