



Supporting talent in transition

Every year, thousands of managers make transitions into new leadership roles. The actions that new leaders take, or indeed fail to take, during their first 90 days will have a major impact on success for the individual as well as on organisational performance and morale. By **Heather Bunney** at Cegos UK

Research has shown that in any given year, half of an organisation's workforce feels the direct effects of leaders undergoing transition and this figure is only going to be greater given the current economic climate.

Let's look at the different stages of transition within an organisation, from managing oneself to an enterprise manager or CEO. Business writer and guru, Ram Charan, defines six transition passages in what he calls 'The Leadership Pipeline' model, as illustrated in *Figure 1 (page 25)*.

Every passage, or promotion, to a new leadership role brings a period of transition, the need for new skills and a set of new expectations, challenges and opportunities – from both a personal and a professional perspective. It is a time to leave the past behind and concentrate on the new job in hand.

Transitions are times when organisations can be reshaped and recharged. But, they are also a time when a new leader is most vulnerable, often because key knowledge about the new role is lacking and new working relationships have yet to be established. What has been a proven model for success in the past for the transitioning leader may not be a guarantee of success in a new role.

So, how can the HR and talent management function help a new leader to make a successful transition? First, it's important to recognise that different transition stages require very different skill sets. HR and the leader's direct manager can both help to upskill the individual and ensure the most appropriate learning and development tools are readily available. Second, of fundamental importance, is ensuring that

the new leader has a clearly defined 90-day plan that pinpoints what the leader needs to be doing in their new role or position to succeed.

The hardest transition to make is the move from managing others to managing managers, because the challenges and skills required are so fundamentally different. Let's take a look at the specific challenges an individual will face for this transition pathway.

Case study: area sales manager

David Jones is a talented area sales manager at a major financial services provider who has been identified as having high potential within his organisation. David has developed a good grounding in core management skills. He has just been promoted to regional sales manager and is due to take up the position shortly.

As regional sales manager, David will be responsible for managing the region's sales force through a team of five area managers and will need to adapt, establish himself and add value to the organisation as rapidly as possible – the average time being 90 days, according to research. While the territory David has been managing has performed relatively well, the other four areas in his region have been underperforming and need to be turned around. David's ability to identify the root causes of poor performance and to manage change will be fundamental to his personal success as well as the future balance sheet of the company. David needs to take a more strategic approach to the business than in his previous role.

Challenges that managers of managers typically face include the need to influence outside of direct hierarchical lines; understanding strategic business direction and interpreting it at the appropriate level; collaborating and communicating effectively with many different stakeholders; and coaching and mentoring appropriately.

Figure 1. The Leadership Pipeline Model



Challenges for managers of managers

The challenges that any manager of managers will face in their new role are also the key enablers of success. Facing these challenges results in greater efficiency and effectiveness for the individual, and ultimately the organisation.

Watkins points to nine key challenges for new leaders which can be summarised as follows:

- Promote yourself – identify your strengths and weaknesses and get insight where you might be vulnerable.
- Accelerate your learning – identify your priorities for learning, invest in the here and now, and build a learning network.
- Match your strategy to your situation – choose an appropriate business strategy and approach.
- Secure early wins – establish your priorities, especially those which will build credibility and help you influence upwards within the organisation.
- Negotiate success – Others may see the business differently to you but your goals and theirs must align if you are to develop an effective working relationship.
- Achieve alignment – Identify the root causes of poor performance and align the business components effectively.
- Build your team – develop the right team for the situation, making sure you balance short- and long-term goals.
- Create coalitions – identify where you need support and where you can find it while making sure you influence across your stakeholders.
- Keep your balance – this is all about realising that work isn't life and personal issues will affect business issues and vice versa.

All of these challenges are interlinked. For example, if David Jones identifies a strategy to turn around the sales areas that are underperforming (and achieves alignment), but he fails to get his team and boss on side (thus failing to negotiate success) and gain credibility (by securing an early win), then his idea could take considerably longer to implement. Worse still, it could fail.

Developing a 90-day plan

The 90-day plan must address all of the key challenges the new leader faces. Typically the plan will include goals, priorities and checkpoints, and will probably include a timescale for learning, establishing credibility, forming good working relationships quickly and securing some early wins. It is too easy to fall into old patterns of working, patterns which made the new leader successful in their previous role, which will provide comfort here but won't make them successful. The 90-day plan should guard against this activity and keep the individual on a path of development and growth into his or her new position. This is where HR and talent management professionals can provide significant support.

Diagnostic tools, such as self-awareness questionnaires, can play a key role in helping the individual understand where they currently are in terms of skills and competencies. This process should be carried out ahead, or at the outset, of commencing a new leadership role. The process will also help the individual to evaluate what the most critical challenges are and what are the most important results that need to be achieved in the first 30, 60 and 90 days. Diagnostic tools help the individual understand what they look like in their new role and most importantly, what 'good' looks like.

The 90-day plan is best divided into three key areas – personal goals, team goals and overall goals for the business. These areas are all integrated, and directly support and impact each other. Against each goal, actions and deliverables can be outlined for month one, month two and month three.

Let's look now at a 90-day plan for David Jones that aligns key objectives to strategic outcomes (see *Figure 2, below*). In the first instance, David must diagnose the business situation appropriately and recognise the approaches that have worked well in the past are no longer working well. So in the first 30 days David will need to invest time in understanding his region and in developing practical solutions to take the business in a new strategic direction that will help achieve long-term success. He will need to ensure he communicates change effectively as many of the sales team will probably not recognise the need for change.

Let's say David's main aspiration for the business as a whole is to open up new markets in order to face-off the competition. David will need to develop a strategy to do this, but at the same time he must ensure that the business continues to retain its core revenue stream. So for example, on an area level, one of David's goals would be to halt decline in the loss of sales revenue across the four ailing territories in his region.

On a more strategic level, David might identify that, in order to open up new markets and drive new revenue streams, the sales force will need to focus on relationship selling. One of the problems facing David is that most of the salespeople in his region only have direct selling experience.

David's 90-day plan must therefore identify a development need for relationship management skills and factor in the need to put in place some appropriate training interventions. The best method in this case might be one-to-one coaching for 'middle performers' – a group David has identified as having the potential to deliver the most value and return on investment for the organisation.

From a personal perspective, one of David's key objectives might be to find a business mentor who can help guide him through these challenging times. David will need support and someone to champion him on his new journey.

Identifying the misplaced manager of managers

With the right support from HR and the business, most new managers of managers will excel in their new role. However, some will unfortunately struggle to cope with the step-changes required to be effective in their new role. Here are the five clear signs of a misplaced manager:

- the new leader finds it difficult to delegate;
- signs of poor performance management are emerging;
- the individual is failing to build strong teams.
- clones are being chosen over contributors;
- the new leader has a single-minded focus on getting the work done so strategic vision and on-the-job coaching of team members has a tendency to fall by the wayside.

Finally, unsurprisingly, the challenges newly promoted leaders face today are going to be tougher as a result of the current economic climate. Business is changing, along with stakeholders and measurements of success. This is having an impact not just on new leaders but on managers who have perhaps been in the same role for a number of years. Essentially these people, too, are in a period of transition and my advice to every manager is to stand back and think about your role in the new landscape and reconsider it with fresh eyes: if you were new to your role now what would you be doing?

There is no doubt that HR and the talent management function has a fundamental role to play in supporting talent in transition in these challenging times. ■

Figure 2. David Jones' 90-day plan

