



Improving Leadership Transitions

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

It should come as no surprise that organizations take on the personality of their leaders. After all, the leader sets the tone for everything that happens in an organization. It depends on management style how much the culture evolves toward the style of the leader. In some cases, a particularly hands-off leader will allow a culture to define itself, but those situations are rare exceptions. This article gives two examples of how the culture shifts when a new manager takes over and provides some tips about how a new leader can efficiently define the culture after taking over from a predecessor.

Probably the most-watched transition of CEOs in decades was the transition at Apple from Steve Jobs to Tim Cook. Steve Jobs' style was so different from Tim Cook's that the entire culture of the company had to adjust. Jobs was abrasive, demanding, no compromise, micromanaging, and secretive. Cook is more methodical, thoughtful, consensus loving, and transparent. The organization is still trying to adapt to the different leadership style while at the same time keeping up the blistering pace of innovation that was the hallmark during the Jobs era. By most counts, things have slowed down a bit. The embarrassment of the Apple Maps fiasco was an unwelcome speed bump for the new CEO. (Note that Apple Maps was actually engineered during the Jobs era, but it was introduced as a product after his death). Things are settling out now, but few people believe the mature corporate giant will ever get back to the cocky, scrappy, bold innovation pioneer it was a decade ago.

Another famous transition occurred at GE in 2001 when Jeff Immelt took over from the powerful icon, Jack Welch. Jeff's style was more collaborative than the combative style of Welch. Jack liked to solve problems analytically by getting information and making very edgy choices. He would berate leaders in public if they did not measure up to his standards. Jeff was more approachable and liked to work out issues by getting everyone involved. Welch created a combative atmosphere where the winners survived and the losers were out. Immelt tried to bring the best in everyone to the workplace every day. Both leaders were successful in their time and both struggled with situations

as they worked through the inevitable challenges of running a huge multinational organization.

These two examples are from mega corporations, but the same phenomenon takes place in smaller organizations, not-for-profits, government, and even volunteer organizations. Whenever a new leader replaces an incumbent, you will see a rapid change in the culture that is reflective of the change in styles between the two leaders. The transition from old to new is fascinating to watch, and there are ways to do it well. There are also potential major mistakes that will hurt the chances for the new administration.

When a new leader takes over an organization, what happens in the first few days, or even the first few hours is important to do with great care. A weak opening gets the new culture off to a waffling start, yet parachuting in with combat boots can lead to fear and rejection. Here are some tips for a new leader to consider during the critical first few days on a new assignment.

Introduce yourself consciously

Do not make the mistake of thinking that people will get to know the "real you" in due time. Be more proactive, and set up a meeting where you can share your values, style, expectations, biases, and idiosyncrasies. Make sure to set the stage where people feel encouraged to ask questions and take the time to answer every question thoughtfully. Be as engaging as possible without being insincere or condescending. Let people get to know the best side of you first. If time allows, these meetings are better if done in small family groups than a mega Town Hall format.

Walk around a lot during the first few days and shake people's hands. Act and truly be interested in their personal lives. Try to find one common bond with each person you meet, so you can ask her about her sick dog or new house at a later date. Specifically focus on remembering names.

Listen a lot at the start

Unless you are taking over for a field commander who has just been killed (or the equivalent), it is a good idea to understand how the current organization works before barking out orders on how you expect to run the place. It is so tempting to impress your ideas on the group as a leader right from the start, but you will pay a heavy price if you are too overbearing. Some experts recommend an immediate "take charge" approach for a new leader. I admit there are some circumstances when that urgency of command is called for, but in most cases I favor a more metered approach.

A wise move is to heed the words of Stephen R. Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* when he wrote "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." By establishing yourself as a good listener first, you will gain much more cooperation, trust, and respect.

Refrain from talking about your prior organization

New leaders often make the mistake of referring to the great things done in their prior organization too often. Too much emphasis on a past success will turn people off when a new leader takes over. If you keep saying, "Well, in the XYZ organization, we used to have a daily briefing to keep people on board," people will eventually roll their eyes when you walk into the room.

When I would promote or move a manager, I would ask him or her to refer to the prior job only one time in public. Once that chit was played, I suggested the new leader refrain from other references for at least 2 months. This gave the new leader the opportunity to appreciate the good things that were being done in the new area before giving a lot of suggestions for them to be more like his old area. The people never knew the difference; they just seemed to like the new leader quite a lot.

Ask for feedback and advice

A wise leader has the Emotional Intelligence to ask for frequent feedback, especially at the start of his tenure. Asking how things are going and how people are reacting during the first several days signals a kind of humility that is cherished by people who report to the leader. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins and his team found two common denominators for what they called level five leaders (the best). They were, 1) passion for the organization, mission, and vision, and 2) humility. The reason being a bit humble at the start is that you will be approachable and coachable, so you have the highest potential for trust to kindle.

If the advice you get is not what you wanted to hear, be sure to be truly grateful for it anyway. Often constructive comments on how things could be done better are the most helpful. When you reinforce people who tell you what they really think, you go a long way toward building trusting relationships.

Suppress your ego

You have been given an opportunity to start with a new group. Do not get a swelled head over it. Make sure people view you as grateful for the opportunity to join their team instead of inheriting all of them onto your team. The ability to establish a helpful mindset before exercising command will put people on your side, and the benefits will

accrue throughout your tenure. If you establish yourself as a narcissist from day one, you will never fully win the hearts of those who report to you.

These five tips may seem like common sense, but I see them violated quite frequently by leaders taking over a new situation. If you follow these ideas, you will be off to a great start that will pay big dividends for your organization and ensure you will be viewed as an elite leader by everyone.

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