

Leader Rotation

By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP

Leaders who stay in the same job too long get stale and lose their edge. If you have been in the same leadership position more than 10 years, chances are you would benefit from a change.

When developing leaders, rotating positions is an effective method of keeping things fresh for the organization and giving leaders a chance to grow. The topic of this article is when and how to rotate leaders for maximum benefit to the organization and themselves. I am coming at the topic from the vantage point of a senior leader seeking to create a group of excellent leaders who are moving into and out of the organization.

The first question is how often leaders should be rotated. My own bias is to avoid moving a leader more often than every three years. The reason is that it takes roughly three years to get the maximum benefit out of a leadership assignment.

The first year is spent getting to know the existing systems and people. It is a mistake for a new leader to parachute in with combat boots on and start moving people and systems too soon. People get confused, and critical mistakes are made by simply trying to be disruptive. I asked new leaders to spend at least a few months observing what is happening and understanding it well before getting out the hammer and saw. That does not mean being disengaged, just avoid being too directive at the start.

There is an exception to the rule of moving slowly at first. Sometimes the new leader is inheriting a crisis situation where emergency actions are needed immediately to save the ship. Picture a battle where a military general has just been killed in a war that is a nearly hopeless situation. The replacement general needs to take command immediately and direct activities from day one.

In the first year of an assignment, the new leader begins to formulate a plan for how to use the resources and talents to obtain the maximum performance of the unit. Good leaders listen well and make the strategic moves with high collaboration of the people, but the leader is intimately involved and committed to the directions chosen, as are the rest of the people in the unit.

The second year is spent implementing the plan and dealing with any issues that arise from miscalculations or unanticipated setbacks. The second year is a time for doing and observing the results of the actions invented during the first year.

The third year is a critical time because the leader retools the strategy and policies in a process of learning. If leaders are rotated out to another job before this phase is completed, the learning will be minimal and growth will be blunted. After the third year, the process becomes redundant as the leader seeks to refine what has already been accomplished. As more years are spent on the same job, less and less learning is happening because the leader has been there and done that.

It is not essential that all leaders move after the third year, but as a general rule, it is better to leave them in place for at least that duration.

The next question is what kind of assignments to look for when rotating a leader. Avoid assignments that are parallel in nature, like moving from one production department to another one in the same area. The major benefit of rotating leaders is that the individual grows by being stretched and forced to operate out of his or her comfort zone. Consider a new assignment in a different country or in a completely different function from the prior assignment.

It is a good idea to have a long term game plan for development of each leader. This requires a lot of planning and dialog. It is a collaborative process that needs attention. A side benefit of this planning is that the leader being developed has a sense that somebody is watching out for the trajectory of his or her career. Discussions of personal desires and potential opportunities are beneficial because they let the leader know he or she is valued and has the potential to grow.

As you develop a cast of leaders, make sure there is some flow into your organization and some flow out. Try to view leadership development as a flow of talent that is unselfish. Do not hang on to the best resources just because they are performing well. Give them a chance to move to other areas. If you do, then you will build a reputation of one who grows leaders, which is for sure a positive reflection of your own leadership abilities.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*, and *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*.

