



Successful Leadership Transition

Why the first managerial assignment holds vital lessons for future transition

BH Tan

In organisations around the world, thousands of young people are promoted into managerial responsibilities for the first time every year. It is an exciting milestone for new managers and at the same time fraught with unknown challenges. People who assume managerial responsibilities generally do not receive formal guidance. Many companies adopt a passive approach: letting them “sink or swim” on their own.

When left to fend for themselves, rookie managers will invariably make their way by trial and error. It is a Darwinian process with serious ramifications for the future of the organisations. The determining factors will be the learning agility of the individuals.

The high-potential

There will be a few individuals with the uncanny aptitude to seek out crucial information and pick up new abilities and perspectives with little guidance. They intuitively adapt themselves quickly by learning, unlearning and relearning. Soon, they become recognised as high-potential managers in their organisation. In the years ahead, they will fast-track up the hierarchy. As they do so, they impact people positively, creating immense value and sharpening the competitive edge of the company.

The survivors

The path ahead isn't that smooth for most new managers. In learning how to manage, they will be exposed to different experiences with a mixture of successes and setbacks. While generally they may pass muster, their development as a leader is patchy. Not every person is able to learn from experience. While some will extract useful lessons and become more competent, there are others who will learn little, or even the wrong things. Such people may develop questionable traits and bad working habits that will be a drag on employee morale and productivity in the long run.

A case in point will be the tendency to micromanage. Rookie managers will

intuitively fall back upon what had made them successful in their previous job as individual contributors. They will focus on the technical aspects of their responsibilities. When team members don't meet their expectation, they will take over their jobs.

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As a first-time manager, one may be a control freak and still achieve results through sheer force of will and diligence. However, as the manager moves further upwards, such a management style will wreak havoc and ruin, stifling the growth of people who work for them. Talented people will leave in droves. Productivity will plummet. Haven't we all met senior managers whose mindset and behaviours suck the life out of their staff? They insist on doing their subordinates' jobs, and don't have a clue about the real value that they should be adding. This is called value destruction. And it is more common than we think.

The derailed

And finally, there will be some first-time managers who will make major missteps. Being emotionally and intellectually ill-prepared, they lurch from one mishap to

another. If these are serious enough, they will get replaced or removed from their position.

The Peter Principle

Why does stepping into managerial responsibilities present such a hurdle? *In any organisation, people tend to rise to their level of incompetence* – *The Peter Principle*.

When Canadian educational psychologist Laurence Peter first suggested this notion in 1968, it was done tongue-in-cheek. Now many decades later, in the world of leadership development, *The Peter Principle* has become a truism. What exactly is this voice from the past warning newly promoted people about? And is there any possible escape?

When people become managers for the first time, they are in effect undergoing a rite of passage. Like adventurers they are about to enter a dark and deep mysterious cave. In both Eastern and Western mythologies, we all know that there are fearsome creatures guarding the various thresholds. Those who are unworthy get eliminated quickly. Only the fittest gain safe passage as they slay one dragon after another. At the end of the journey, our heroes emerge stronger, wiser and more resilient.

Professor Linda Hill of Harvard Business School puts it this way, “The first managerial assignment is a pivotal developmental experience for future executives. It is when an executive's basic philosophy and leadership style is shaped...” She then goes on to stress that a “profound adjustment” is required – a transformation of professional identity, no less.

Adding value appropriate to your level

In the last few decades, I have worked with managers around the world facilitating their transition from one level of management to the next. Lessons learnt and experience have shown that the transitional journey to greater leadership responsibilities involves critical shifts in four areas:

1. Juggling with a broader, more complex and ambiguous set of responsibilities;
2. Constantly reinventing oneself by doing less of what had made one successful previously, and picking up new and unfamiliar skills required for the new responsibilities;
3. Influencing and managing relationship with multiple stakeholders; and
4. Consciously focusing one's attention on delivering value appropriate to respective levels.

The concept of *values appropriate to respective levels* is largely unrecognised and poorly understood in organisations around the world. This is the real acid test. Studies have shown that in some companies, at least 50 percent of people in leadership positions are operating below their assigned levels. This is the legacy of the old "sink or swim" approach.

Leadership Development Programs

Corporations are now asking, "How do we ensure that at every level in our organisation, each manager is a value creator?" To tip the balance in their favour, companies these days are putting their newly promoted managers into transition programs to facilitate their transition.

A key exercise that will help such managers is to have them work through The Leadership Turns Framework (below). A turn is a transition from an old to a new role. In their first attempt, they will find it much easier to complete the portion of the framework pertaining to their previous position. This shouldn't be surprising. It is precisely because they had excelled in their old job that they are tapped for the new role.

But what exactly does the turn entail? Most newly promoted managers will struggle at defining the changes in responsibilities, competencies, stakeholders and value-added. This is where guidance will be crucial. As world-renowned executive coach Marshall Goldsmith puts it: "What got you here will not get you there."

In large corporations, there are roughly six turns in the management hierarchy from individual contributors to enterprise head or CEO. Thus transition programs that are offered will differ in scope, contents and intensity according to the management levels. Examples for the first few levels in management are: Transition to Team

Management (TTM), Transition to Advanced Management (TAM) and Transition to General Management (TGM). Apart from seminar work, executive coaching is usually part of the learning curriculum.

During a recent TTM program that I conducted for a technology firm, the 10 participants, all steeped in technical expertise and now assuming team leadership roles, spent 90 minutes to finalise their Leadership Turns Framework. A copy of their completed Leadership Turns Framework is available in the Resources section of www.aitd.com.au

Enlightened companies are no longer willing to let their high potential employees sink or swim on their own. They know their future depends on leadership. And it all starts with the first managerial assignment.

As Dr Laurence Peter sits among the pantheon of 20th century management greats, he may chuckle with quiet satisfaction that we in the 21st century have finally pried free of *The Peter Principle*. ■

BH Tan is the president of Lead Associates based in Singapore, and a leading executive coach and leadership consultant. He is the author of two books on leadership. This article is based on his book *The First-Time Manager in Asia: Maximizing Your Success by Blending East and West Best Practices*. Contact via bh@leadassociates.com.sg or visit www.leadassociates.com.sg

Leadership Turns Framework

The principle here is that as we move up the organisation, what we do at the higher level is fundamentally different and more challenging from that at the previous position. By doing this analysis, we can see immediately the necessary shifts that must be made in four key areas:

Factors	Previous Position	New Position
Responsibilities: What are the top 4-5 key responsibilities here? These should account for 80% of the requirements of the job at this level.		
Competencies: What new competencies will be needed to succeed? In general, when we move up, we'll have to work through others to get things done.		
Stakeholders: The higher one goes, the more complex is one's relationship with other stakeholders and constituencies. More and more we need to work effectively upwards, sideways, downwards and externally.		
Value-added: What exactly is that value-add that defines your role? Is the value-added in the new role significantly higher than that in the previous role?		