Top Ten Success Factors and Seven Deadly Sins

for Leaders Transitioning into New Organizations

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Summary

The first 90 days with a new employer, or in a new leadership role, are fraught with challenge and involve significant risk. The cost of failure is high.

This report provides insights into what sets leaders up for success and what gets in the way, during their first 90 days.

The findings are based on my experiences in coaching numerous leaders-in-transition and consulting to a variety of organizations from start-up small businesses to Fortune 500 multi-nationals. I have also included input obtained through in-depth interviews with: senior line executives, human resources leaders, external leadership coaches and recruiters. Further, I have conducted an extensive review of the key research on successful onboarding practices.

I have distilled this information down into the following high level overview of the Top Ten Success Factors and Seven Deadly Sins in this critical timeframe.

Top Ten Success Factors

1. Listen, observe and ask questions:

Overwhelmingly, senior line executives, human resources professionals, external coaches and recruiters alike say that the number one skill to focus on in the first 90-days is "listening, observing and asking questions". It's powerful in its simplicity and yet seemingly difficult for people to accept.

After being wooed in the recruitment process, leaders typically expect to be looked to for their words of wisdom, their wealth of previous experience and their plans for change in their early weeks on the job. Ironically, after all the time spent in the recruitment process focusing on background experience, competencies and whether the leader "has what it takes" to be ready for the role, the best strategy for the leader-in-transition is essentially to become a learner again.

New leaders who use their time well in the initial stages will actively seek opportunities to meet with, listen to and observe as many different people and situations as possible, so that when they do move to action or offer their perspective, it will be grounded in the reality of the new organization.

2. Build relationships:

Building new relationships is also key to success in a new organization.

While there are various relationships that are important to build, the priority focus should be on:

- Boss
- Peers
- Direct Reports

These relationships are critical to establishing the foundation necessary to equip the leader-in-transition for both near-term and longer-term success.

It is particularly important to gain an understanding of the manager's preferred communication style and preferences for being updated. It is also critical to walk the fine line between respecting the boss's time and being pro-active about asking for information and support.

Creating a connection with peers and direct reports at a personal level helps the leader-in-transition get past resistance and enlist the support of others.

3. Respect existing culture:

Often leaders-in-transition will come into a new organization eager to redesign all aspects of the operation. After all, many new leaders are recruited with the explicit message that they have been hired to foster change.

Despite being hired as a change agent, experience suggests that it is critical to first demonstrate interest in and respect for the prevailing culture, company history, business practices, etc. No one wants to hear "at my old company, we did it this way". Leaders joining a new organization who demonstrate that they are well aware that they are now in a new and different culture will create better receptivity for their ideas.

Showing genuine interest in what the new organization does well and giving this feedback to others is a great way of showing respect and provoking thinking about what strengths can be more powerfully leveraged. This approach uses the new leader's fresh perspective to great advantage.

4. Be visible & approach others:

Employees need access to new leaders and opportunities to get to know who they are early in the game. When these opportunities are not provided, people in the organization will make assumptions about the personal values and management style of the leader-in-transition. These assumptions may not be accurate.

Visibility is important at all levels of the organization and all locations, particularly if the operation is geographically dispersed. In reflecting back on their onboarding experiences, executives often express regret at not spending more time informally with people at various levels, so that employees could see their "human side".

5. Get clarity on expectations:

As soon as possible after a new leader joins an organization, it is important to get clarity on:

Expectations of the leader-in-transition
Expectations that the leader-in-transition has of others

Clarifying expectations of the new leader involves having a clear understanding of the mandate of the role, job description, objectives and performance measures. The leader-in-transition may need to be highly proactive to obtain this specificity. The conversations between the new leader and his or her manager should involve essentially contracting for desired outcomes and behaviours. Some helpful questions for clarifying expectations are:

- What does your manager need you to do in the short term and in the medium term?
- What does success in your new role look like to your manager?

- What do you need to accomplish in the position that hasn't been done before?
- What are your internal customers and peers expecting of you?

With direct reports, new leaders need to clarify their own expectations, describe their own leadership style, preferred modes of communication and methods of being updated. There are apt to be many other key stakeholders in the organization who also need to gain an early understanding of what the new leader expects.

6. Be your authentic self; establish who you are:

The pressure of meeting the expectations of a new role, new boss and new organization can lead some new hires to try so hard in their role that they end up "acting a part". This persona can be very difficult to maintain over time and can get in the way of developing strong relationships with others in the new environment.

Today's organizations are demanding "authentic leadership", "leadership from the inside-out", integrity and greater transparency.

Ironically, the research shows that the leaders who are held in highest esteem are those who demonstrate the self-awareness and humility to let others know about areas of weakness or aspects of their role that they find challenging.

The opinions expressed on this theme are so strongly worded that some hiring managers equate "being yourself" with having good ethics. The reverse is also true. People that are perceived to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their values, or who interact with one group of employees one way and another in a different way, are seen as inauthentic and unethical in their behaviour.

7. Ask for help; establish support systems:

When leaders join a new organization, typically they leave behind the established support systems that they been relying on for help. They once felt very secure in knowing who they could trust and depend upon. Now they need to essentially start from scratch.

It is crucial for leaders-in-transition to develop relationships with new work colleagues to provide insight into the real workings of the company, to help get things done efficiently, and to simply be a sounding board when the going gets tough.

Leaders who effectively leverage resources around them and are proactive about seeking help are those who are able best able to maximize their impact.

In addition to new work colleagues, many leaders rely heavily on trusted family members or life partners, particularly for emotional support during a stressful time. Others draw on the services of an external professional coach or consultant. Some leaders-in-transition rely on journaling and self-reflection as a means of ensuring that they optimize their own learning during this challenging time.

8. Make early decisions on small, quick fixes:

Some new hires put an inordinate amount of pressure on themselves to try to figure out "what's the most dramatic improvement I can make in my first 3 months, so that I can demonstrate my worth?"

Yet, my research suggests that the best way to create early wins is to generate some relatively easy, quick fixes that provide relief for others and create tangible results. Successful new leaders address small issues that have frustrated others for some time, yet no one has gotten around to dealing with them. Eliminating a barrier that is getting in the way of direct reports' accomplishments has a resounding impact. Making early decisions on small, quick fixes allows the new leader to demonstrate good judgment, while minimizing risk.

Effective leaders-in-transition will take the necessary time to develop a plan for tackling a big win, so that their solutions will not only be "on the mark", but perceived to be as well. Other employees need to believe that the new leader truly understands the organization first before the big wins can be fully embraced.

9. Assess and build your team:

Great managers know that their success is heavily dependent on the talent of their direct reports and the strength of the team that they create. Well-regarded new leaders will listen and take into account the input provided by the organization and then make their own decisions about talent. Taking ownership for decisions around people is absolutely critical.

Leaders-in-transition will also spend time up-front getting to know each of their direct reports as individuals, holding meetings to discuss their roles, their strengths, their accomplishments, their passions and future career interests.

They also spend time determining how the group of individuals reporting to them are performing as a team. Then, they establish a plan to leverage areas of strength and to develop areas of weakness.

10. Build the vision; establish the plan collaboratively:

Many leaders feel pressured to arrive at a new company with their Vision already established or at a minimum they feel that they need to announce their Vision to their team within the first few weeks of joining.

However; my research indicates that it is far better for leaders to enter a new organization focusing simply on conveying who they are and what they represent. It is also helpful to play back to the organization what they are noticing in their early days, without coming to conclusions or making significant recommendations for change. Then, then over the first 3 months, effective leaders will obtain the involvement they need to establish a collaborative Vision. This Vision should reflect the input of team members, key stakeholders and even customers.

It takes a good deal of time and a thorough process of obtaining buy-in to establish a Vision that truly excites and engages others.

Seven Deadly Sins

During the first 90-days after a leader joins an organization or is promoted to a significantly more responsible position, the spotlight is turned on them with full wattage. In speaking with senior executives about transition experiences, time and again the situations that stand out most for people are the horror stories about what went wrong for their direct reports and peers.

In this section of the report, I have outlined the 7 most common pitfalls. Most of them can be recovered from in the long-run, but I have found in my experiences with a broad range of organizations that being able to earn credibility, trust and the support of others after committing one or more of these "sins" is an uphill battle indeed! Effective ramp-up time is significantly reduced when these pitfalls are avoided.

1. Arrogance

"Displaying arrogance" is identified as the behaviour that most commonly steers newly-hired leaders towards the proverbial ditch when trying to integrate into new organizations.

Leaders-in-transition who act as if they have all the answers and have been hired to save the day end up finding others folding their arms and saying "so, prove it". That is, if other employees don't outright sabotage the new leader's efforts!

2. Ignoring what's different

This behaviour can result from arrogance or it can come from not paying close enough attention to what's unique about a new leader's new environment. One of the phrases that people dread hearing from new employees is "at my old company".

It is human nature that we try to replicate our past successes by trying out what has worked before. Generally, this is a good strategy. However, ignoring what is different about the specific set of circumstances in your new environment will lead to inappropriate business decisions and poor relationship building. It is extremely short-sighted to ignore questions such as the following: What's special about this industry? Where is this company with respect to its maturation curve? What's different about this company's customers? How is this executive team unlike the one in your previous company?

3. Inauthenticity; lack of ethics

Increasingly, organizations have a zero tolerance approach to concerns regarding business ethics. These issues are the ones that are most apt to lead to a decision to terminate employment within the first three months. In interviews I conducted, senior executives gave examples of expense statements that were not handled appropriately, sexual and racial harassment and ill-treatment of customers or other employees, all which led to termination of employment.

Even issues that are not as clear-cut can greatly impact the new leader's ability to make a positive impression. Being "inauthentic" may not lead directly to being shown the door, but mistrust develops when others don't see the new leader as someone who "walks their own talk", treats others consistently and is true to their word.

A lot of mistakes will be forgiven in the early months, but issues related to authenticity and ethics leave lasting scars.

4. Charging in too fast; treating everything as broken

A misjudgement many leaders joining a new organization make is acting as if they have been hired to rescue the entire company. They charge in too quickly with the "fix-it" plan and start applying band aids before they have identified the real needs. Effective leaders-in-transition will make a thorough and objective assessment of whether they are in fact dealing with the need for a full turnaround.

Instead, some leaders will find that they are joining an organization where the best strategy is to sustain the company's success and uncover new ways of maintaining the level of success the company has already experienced. Or, they might be joining an organization in which they are being asked to realign direction or priorities…which is not the same thing as saying everything must be overhauled. In such situations, picking the right spots is the key to effectiveness.

5. Hiding out with your work

Another frequent mistake that new leaders make is throwing themselves into their work with such vigour that they miss out on valuable opportunities. Granted, it is important to demonstrate a strong results-focus, yet a review of the previous top 10 success factors reveals that most of them have to do with interactions with others, rather than output. Leaders-in-transition who demonstrate an attitude of “I’ll be nose to the grindstone for the next 3 months” will not be able to effectively listen and observe, build relationships, show who they are, be visible and approachable, demonstrate authenticity, or ask for help.

6. Not looking after yourself

The first three to six months after joining a new organization is an intensive timeframe of learning. There is an exceptional amount of knowledge to acquire. New hires often put in long hours trying to ramp up the learning curve to provide a return to the organization. Some leaders also need to relocate their homes to be closer to their new position, which usually involves significant personal disruption and considerable stress.

With all of this stress, a classic mistake that leaders make during such transitions is to set regular routines aside. Exercise is foregone. Proper meals and nutritional eating are replaced by rushed trips to the fast food counter. Sleep is dramatically reduced. Unwinding with friends is put on-hold and time spent with the family is curtailed.

The result? I meet many clients in my coaching practice that are suffering from extreme overwhelm and burn-out. Treating the transition timeframe as a sprint, rather than a marathon, does not result in the optimum use of energy.

7. Ignoring the home front:

The transition timeframe can be so all-consuming that a common pitfall for many leaders is to focus exclusively on work challenges and to disengage from family and close friends. As proud as they are, family members may end up resenting this job change. For family, the job change may mean they have less time with a spouse or parent. They may have to change their own routines in significant ways, relocate communities, change their own jobs or schools, lose friends, etc.

A common pitfall for the leader-in-transition is not recognizing that their family members are also going through their own transition experience. Based on the experiences I have witnessed, when the family is negatively impacted by the job transition, this eventually takes a toll on the leader’s own performance and availability at work.

About the Author

Susan Edwards is President of Development by Design. She has 26 years of experience as a trained, professional business coach, management consultant and human resources manager with a number of leading organizations. Sue has also been a successful entrepreneur since 1996 and previously worked for Mercer Human Resources Consulting, Campbell Soup Company, Bayer and Imperial Oil.

Over her career, Ms. Edwards has enhanced organization, team and individual performance through initiatives in organization change and coaching leaders and management teams.

She is a graduate of Corporate Coach U and has received her Professional Certified Coach (PCC) accreditation from the International Coach Federation (ICF). She is a member of the ICF, the ICF-GTA Chapter and the Company of Women. She has also achieved her Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) designation. Sue is qualified to administer numerous assessments, including: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, Thomas International (DISC) Personal Profile™, HPTI-High Performance Trait Indicator, EQi 2.O and TEIQue- (Emotional Intelligence assessments), Cultural Orientations Framework Assessment, Profile XT™and Benchmarks®.

Sue Edwards has worked with coaching clients throughout North America within various industries including: construction, technology, manufacturing, consumer-packaged goods, advertising & marketing, academia, consulting and other services, including not-for-profit.

Sue Edwards has particular expertise in coaching leaders moving into new roles and new organizations. She developed the proprietary Clearing the 90-Day Hurdle™ process and created the materials used in this coaching-plus-consulting approach.

Sue has been interviewed on CTV's Canada AM, Canada's most-watched morning program, and profiled in the National Post and West of the City magazine. Sue is the author of the self-coaching workbook, Wow Them In Your New Job! (and reduce your overhelm) It's Easier Than You'd Expect, and is a contributing author to Awakening the Workplace 2 and Leadership Gurus Speak Out, Chapter title: "You Gotta' Flip it on its Head! 4 Key Strategies for Leadership Success. She is a contributing author to The Best of Company, 2016, by Anne Day, Kim Duke, Sue Edwards, Peggy Grall and Anne Peace. Sue is an international conference speaker. Sue's clients value her integrity, pragmatism, willingness to challenge and her sense of fun!

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