

ARLTM News

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ABOUT TRANSITIONS

Alan L. closed his office door and walked to the window. Gazing at the cherry tree that was just beginning to blossom, he marveled at the ease of changes in Nature. A tree adapts to the change in environment, to the new season--and does it simply, with no apparent conflict. How do spring and the tree find such effortless harmony? Why is transition so problematical in organizations?

Alan was feeling really overwhelmed this afternoon. His career at D Inc. had seen significant professional growth. Although he never viewed himself as a "born" leader, he worked easily with his direct reports, and had contributed to their professional development. His success had led to his being assigned responsibility for a large project where he had to design new structures, select a new team, clarify roles and responsibilities, and establish the knowledge and skills required for the different roles. Step by careful step, with each member of the new team, he built good relationships, and the resulting excellent performance received compliments from members of the Board.

Now he wondered if this success was not the reason for his current problems!

The fine performance of his department had, he learned, inspired the Board to acquire Forche, a leading competitor, and to place it in Alan's business unit. The rationale for the acquisition was to increase productivity, market share, and to create synergy among the units.

The difficulties were acute. Alan had to add eight new members from the Forche product team to his team of fourteen, and in the process had had the unpleasant task of telling several members from the acquired company that they would not be needed in the new configuration. Finally, the selection phase was over and he hoped that once the new team had moved into their new offices, they could begin their work without much disruption. What a naive thought, he mused, gazing at the cherry blossoms. Why had no-one ever warned him about the complexity of transitions?

He had immediately sensed tensions in his team. The 'old' team members seemed to resent the 'new'

members. The latter were anxious, they met in the hallways, and fell silent when he walked by. Important documents were lost, and deadlines were missed. The team seemed to lack focus, their energy appeared dispersed. Alan didn't worry, feeling that all would be well after the move to the new offices on April 15.

His optimism was short-lived. Summoned to headquarters, he learned he was being promoted to President, and his current superior was also promoted, and was moving to offices in São Paulo, Brazil. Thus, only two weeks after moving into the new offices, in the midst of attempts to begin the integration of the 'new' team members and before he could get a grip of the situation, he had to assume his new leadership role. Worse, in addition to now managing former peers, he was still clearly responsible for the integration process with Forche, and he needed to assign a successor to himself, as division manager.

Returning from the trip to headquarters, he became aware of potentially serious problems with key clients. The disruptions to his team seemed to have debilitated them, and they lost all their initiative and decision making skills. His voice mail was filled with requests for meetings, and his team members all sounded worried and demanded solutions. With just 10 days to step into the new role, he couldn't help but be struck by the irony that " the reward and recognition" for his performance had caused him the greatest stress of his life.

Today, more than ever, organizations are in permanent transformation, and leaders are challenged to maintain productivity and competitive advantage in the midst of flux. The causes of transformation originate in certain key areas--new technology, new processes, new products, new people and teams--with people and teams being the most frequent, and having the strongest impact on productivity. Downsizing, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions all lead to personnel deployment, job rotations, and selection of new teams. Strangely enough, it is usually the most tangible aspects of



transitions that are carefully planned--who will have what position, where, when--but little attention is given to the transition process itself, which begins far before, and reaches far beyond, the moment when the new leader starts to work with the new team.

This transition process includes *three significant aspects*:

1) Transfer of Information

This is generally the aspect that is most easily taken care of. In the transition process the outgoing leader and his team have much information which the incoming leader should know as soon as possible, in order to be more effective. However, only rarely is this information transfer satisfactorily accomplished. Most of the time, it is merely the 'headlines' and current pressing problems that are communicated.

Essential elements that are often overlooked are:

- The hand-over of knowledge of business matters, from the outgoing team leader to the incoming leader
- Communication of vital information from team members to the incoming leader i.e. both explicit and covert information about the team and its functioning

2) Building relationships

A team generates superior performance not because of the individual skills of its members, but because of the alignment, the synergy and integration among the members. These group dynamics are affected when a team receives a new leader, and new relationships have to be built. If this doesn't happen soon, the productivity of the team freezes and each member begins to act individually, waiting to learn what the new leader rewards, values or wants. Until they have this information, members tend to minimize the risk of exposing themselves, which results in decreased initiative and lowered creativity.

The main elements in this process **for the leader** are:

- Getting to know the team members
- Establishing mutual expectations and developing norms for working together
- Generating mutual trust

For the team members the issues are:

- Making explicit the history of that team
- Getting to know the new leader's vision
- Understanding his leadership style, preferences and value system

3) Capture the learning

For the outgoing leader, the departure provides an invaluable opportunity for personal and professional development--provided he/she seeks feedback from team members on his/her performance so as to apply the learnings to the next challenge. In the reflection and feedback session, the review of past performance should take the form of a joint reflection of leader and team, and discussion should center on:

- What attitudes and behaviors made the leader effective in working with the team?
- Which ones caused difficulty and conflict?

When all three aspects are taken into account and carefully prepared, the transition process is shorter and less stressful for those involved; the productivity of the team is maintained; and the organization captures learning and insight that benefit leaders and team members alike.

Isabel Rimanóczy

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