Most leadership transitions are regarded as sink-or-swim propositions, and even talented leaders can sink.
Welcome to your new job! If you are really good, you will figure out the important stuff on your own. Everything else will be covered in your “on-boarding.” There are at least a dozen different landmines and booby-traps out there waiting for you. Some of the advice you get will help you avoid the pitfalls, and some of it will steer you into the path of an oncoming train.

Surviving this transition with your career intact is merely the price of entry into the leadership ranks. If you do well right away you’re a phenom. If you and your team do well right away—you’re headed to the high-potential hall of fame.

Sound familiar? If it does, you are one of many leaders who have faced the harsh reality of a leadership transition that has been left to chance.

Companies spend millions each year on executive selection, but little on ensuring the successful transition of leaders and their teams. The effort put into carefully choosing a talented prospect is not matched by the effort to bring that person on board. Intense energy is expended by a company right up to the point where the leader actually has to begin performing – then they are largely on their own, cast into the “deep end” to sink or swim.

There are important details new leaders will never be told. They will not get crucial feedback on how they are doing – at the very time they need it most. They are unlikely to hear the expectations from their team, their peers, and their sponsors, although they will quickly be sized-up against those expectations. Rarely will people in the organization take the risks necessary to help the new leader because of the unknown downsides they might personally incur.

Recent research has uncovered some sobering data about leadership transitions:

- 70% of all leaders fail within 2 years of their assignment.
- Perceptions of a leader’s abilities are formed within the first 5 days.
- Leaders are expected to begin producing results within 30 days.
- On average, it takes 6 to 12 months for new leaders to fully adapt to their new role.

Most leadership transitions are regarded as sink-or-swim propositions, and even talented leaders can sink. Sometimes weak leaders stay afloat long enough to do serious damage to their teams and companies. The trick to avoiding these maladies is not leaving the transition to chance.

Too often, a transition is treated less like a growth opportunity and more like a rite of passage. But developing top talent has as much to do with setting up leaders for success as it does with sending them to executive MBA courses, setting stretch goals, and entrusting them with high-profile projects.

Take these steps to ensure successful leadership transitions:

- **Get expectations on the table.** Right from the start, leaders need to know what is and is not expected. This goes beyond simply providing performance goals. It means filling them in on the behaviors that are and are not accepted in the culture. Leaders need to know what the “sacred cows” are and begin their role with an open and honest baseline for working with their team, peers, and stakeholders. Identify those actions and behaviors by the new leader and team members that are absolutely critical – and those that are critical to avoid.

  **Leader Action:** Right away, arrange time to meet with the team and key stakeholders and discuss their expectations for you, as well as your expectations and hopes for working together.
Take stock of the business. Leadership transitions often require a turnaround or boost in sagging performance. This won’t happen simply because there’s a “new sheriff in town.” The leader needs to have meaningful dialogue with her/his team, sponsors, and stakeholders about issues important to the business and what it will take to hit key targets.

Leader Action: Develop with the team a 30-, 60-, or 90-day plan to get results on track. This includes a plan for tracking and managing consequences when targets are met, and when they are not.

No news is bad news. In a new position, nothing is louder than silence. Leaders need feedback – especially when they are in a new role in an unfamiliar environment. The “rules” may be quite different, and they are likely to need help getting started. Without reliable, honest feedback, it is nearly impossible to make adjustments with any confidence. Leaders and their teams need to know early and often when they are doing well and when they have fouled up.

Leader Action: Establish steps for peers, team members, and sponsors to provide frequent and specific feedback on how you are doing. Similarly, you should provide frequent, specific feedback to your team and stakeholders as well. It helps to have someone act as a coach and guide to you and team members during these transitions. The coach can gather confidential feedback on how things are going and incorporate that into regular coaching sessions with you and your team.

Clear the air. Past performance problems, interpersonal conflicts among team members, or hidden agendas will quickly derail a leader’s best efforts if not dealt with from the start. They will consume time and energy and divert attention from delivering results. Leaders need to get these issues out on the table in a confidential, constructive way and lay out a clear path for moving forward.

Leader Action: During initial 1:1 conversations with team members and stakeholders, identify conflicts and barriers that will keep the team from hitting its objectives. Identify specific behaviors that will need to change to remove those barriers, and incorporate these behaviors into the expectations you set with the team.

Get everyone on the same page. The team members and their leader need to agree up front on how decisions will be made and how they will work together. A great deal of confusion and wasted effort can be avoided if everyone on the team agrees to and practices making decisions as a team.

Leader Action: At the initial team meeting, work with the team to establish and agree upon ground rules for working together. Determine how decisions will get made, which decisions require consensus, how team meetings should function, etc. Periodically, ask the team to score themselves against these agreements and identify examples where the team functions well and where it can improve.
The First 60 Days

Often the on-boarding process is facilitated by a trusted external or internal expert. Everyone involved should feel free to speak their mind and provide candid insight without concern of reprisal. Right out of the gate, direct reports are typically reluctant to be candid and deliver honest feedback to a new leader, although this is the point where the leader may benefit most from that feedback. It is important to have a trusted professional facilitate the process and act as a coach to the leader, the team, and stakeholders. The diagram below provides a quick summary of steps to be accomplished in the first 60 days of a leadership transition.

The First 60 Days

**Launch New Leader for Success**
- 1 – 2 Weeks
  - Leader selected
  - Meet the team
  - Survey the team landscape
  - Plan for getting results

**Maximize Leader & Team Effectiveness**
- 2 – 6 Weeks
  - Meet individually with team members
  - Establish team processes and accountabilities
  - Launch team

**Achieve Results the Right Way**
- 6 – 10 Weeks
  - Manage team accountability
  - Collect feedback for leader and team
  - Coaching for leader and team members

**Investing Time**

Putting time and energy into rapid and effective leadership transitions is an investment in results. The sooner the team members and their leader are clicking, the sooner they can meet and surpass their goals.

The market for top talent is already very tight and will only become tighter in the coming years. The time and resources put into selecting new leaders should at least be equalled by the investment in their immediate success in their positions.

Leaving the transition to chance is a foolish gamble: the new leader will either sink or swim. The steps taken to ensure that the leader swims will send a strong message to the leader, his/her peers, the team, and all the other talented leaders for whom your company will be competing in the coming years. Guard your investment in talent and don’t leave the process to chance!
About CLG

CLG is a leader in behavior-based strategy execution, performance improvement, leader-led change, and health-behavior change consulting. CLG helps companies to better understand how to execute their business strategies and processes with a higher level of employee engagement and greater performance by helping them to pinpoint and effectively manage the critical few High-Impact Behaviors™ that have the greatest effect on their business results. CLG’s unique application of the principles of Applied Behavioral Science enables the companies they work with to achieve lasting results consistently, with speed, precision, and control.

About the Author

Leslie W. Braksick, Ph.D., is a nationally recognized thought leader in behavior-based strategy and performance improvement. Dr. Braksick brings her talents as a C-Suite executive coach, author, and speaker to Fortune 100 companies, helping them achieve sustainable, large-scale change and results.