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# Right from the Start

**Taking Charge in a  
New Leadership Role**

**By Dan Ciampa  
and Michael Watkins**

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## **Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role**

By Dan Ciampa and Michael Watkins

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## Introduction

For athletes, events such as the Olympics, the World Series and Wimbledon are the ultimate — the moment when they want to be at the top of their game. For managers, taking over a new leadership role provides the same intense challenge. All eyes are watching. The tasks are usually formidable. The future of the new leader — and the organization — may depend on how successfully he or she performs.

## Four Pieces of Advice

These ideas come up so frequently in conversations with successful leaders that they deserve to be highlighted at the outset:

1. *Take advantage of the transition period into the new job.* New leaders must use the precious time before and just after entry to learn about the organization and think through how to create momentum. Most new leaders believe themselves ready to lead their organizations from the day they arrive. Indeed, that confidence is one reason they were hired. But they later admit wishing they'd been better prepared. The period between the first approach about a new post and the first day on the job is so important it deserves a name: the fuzzy front-end. Use it well.

2. *Don't underestimate the importance of advice and counsel.* Don't let the flattery about being offered the post divert you from the

complexities ahead. Hubris — the conviction that you have things under control and know what needs to be done — is one sure way to fail. Take time to construct a strong network of advisors and counselors.

3. *Show some empathy for the person you're succeeding.* If you're being brought in to replace somebody, remember this a painful time for them and they may have trouble letting go.

4. *Become a student of leadership.* Leadership examples abound. Study the leadership process in every situation — business, sports, social. Remember that we're all leaders in some settings and followers in others. Your experiences as a follower can help you become a better leader.

## The Five Primary Challenges

As you enter the new role, you'll face five primary challenges:

1. *Acquiring needed knowledge quickly.* This is particularly important when you're entering a new organization. It's never the way you expected it to be, no matter how much you prepared beforehand. You'll need to pick up information in three different areas: technical, cultural and political. Technical will involve matters like markets, technologies, processes and systems. Cultural covers the company's norms, values and behavioral expectations. Political highlights the importance of understanding the "shadow

organization” — the informal processes and alliances that run through the organization, aren’t depicted on formal organizational charts, but strongly influence what gets done.

The learning curve must be climbed quickly. Expectations are high when a new leader arrives, especially if a change mandate is involved. The time pressure heightens the likelihood of missing something and makes it more important to establish good working relationships.

*2. Establishing new relationships.* In the previous job, the leader probably had well-established working and mentoring relationships that became taken for granted. Now they must be replaced if you’ve shifted to a new organization, and supplemented or reshaped if the move is internal.

The impossibility of functioning effectively without this crucial “wiring” makes it important to establish productive working relationships and build credibility as soon as possible. Those relationships are essential for getting things done. They provide support as well as predictability.

*3. Juggling organizational and personal transition.* Some people will be eager for change under the new leader while others will cynically sit on their hands. The people who hired you probably expect immediate action to prove the wisdom of their decision and solve the problems that led to the hiring. Uncertainty will

prevail. You must avoid reacting to expectations in the initial period and instead set the tone and pace for change.

4. *Managing expectations.* You must manage expectations — from Day One. Not just Day One on the job but from the first moment you're approached for the post. Of course, not all expectations can be managed: employee scuttlebutt has its own charmed life. But the leader must try to understand prevailing expectations and deflate those that are dangerously high while taking advantage of those that are useful.

5. *Managing personal equilibrium.* To handle that challenge, it's important to maintain emotional balance and judgement in a trying time. The physical demands of the transition are high. You'll log many hectic hours each day only to face a bulging briefcase when returning home at night. The emotional demands are also extreme: the usual rhythms of home life are disrupted, and spouses and children must cope with their own transitions.

## Traps to Avoid

Along with challenges come traps that must be avoided. It's easy to get tied up in negative feedback loops in which seemingly sensible actions trigger negative reactions. The resulting downward spiral can sap energy and waste valuable time. Watch out for the following traps:

- *Falling behind the learning curve.* Start working on entry immediately, identifying and analyzing the issues you'll have to deal with.
- *Becoming isolated.* Don't allow yourself to become invisible.
- *Coming in with "The Answer."* Don't try to arrive with a single answer. It's unlikely that a universal fix can deal with complex organizational problems.
- *Sticking with the existing team too long.* You must be collegial and reach out, but sticking with mediocre performers seldom works. Make necessary personnel changes during your honeymoon period.
- *Attempting too much.* Yes, if you try a lot of things, some will work. But lots won't and if the organization is confused you'll have added to it. Make priorities clear.
- *Being captured by the wrong people.* Avoid being captured by the bureaucracy, the dissidents in the old regime, or others who can't be helpful. Remember that judgements are made about new leaders based on perceptions of who influences them.

## Taking Action

To handle a leadership transition, follow seven steps:

1. Plan on taking two to three years to make measurable progress in changing the culture and improving financial performance. That's a reasonable period for major organizational

change. Even to accomplish that, you'll have to hit the ground running.

2. On arrival, you should understand the organization's existing strategy, goals and challenges and should have formed hypotheses about operating priorities. During the first six months, you must test these hypotheses to see if they're valid. This highlights the importance of getting a jump-start during the fuzzy front-end period but also avoiding the trap of thinking you're walking in with all the answers. Arrive with some hypotheses — and begin checking them out, like a scientist. You're also like a historian, delving into the company, trying to gather information about its operations.

3. New leaders must balance an intense, single-minded focus on a few vital priorities with flexibility about when and how they're implemented. During the transition period, you'll select a few priorities for the remainder of the era. But you must recognize that the organization's ability to grasp and implement the priorities will be more limited than you expect. You must be prepared to modify priorities as circumstances warrant. That may involve rethinking the relative urgency of priorities, figuring a new way to make them understandable to others, or adjusting them because the world has changed or new opportunities have opened up.

4. Within the first six months, you must make key decisions

about the organizational architecture of people, structure and systems. Most crucially, you must decide whether the composition of the inherited team is appropriate and whether the structure must change. As one leader said, “You inherit what you got from Day One, but after six months you’ve bought into everything that’s still going on.”

5. By the end of the first six months, you must also have built some personal credibility and momentum. Early wins are crucial, as is beginning to lay a foundation for sustained improvements in performance. You must build productive working relationships with superiors, subordinates and the broader base of employees. But with that must come some action. Find a center of gravity for initial action — some area for improvement that’s aligned with strategic objectives and will have an immediate impact on the organization. Launch pilot projects, to gain early successes and adherents.

6. You must earn the right to transform the organization. The initial mandate is never sufficient nor will it remain static. You must build coalitions of change. Recruiting is a mating dance. Once the marriage begins, things can quickly change. Nothing can be taken for granted.

7. There’s no single best way to manage a leadership transition. Approaches vary because of the differences in situations and the leaders. It’s important, however, that you understand your

own style, strengths and weaknesses. This allows you to build a personal support system that augments strengths and compensates for weaknesses.

New leaders face three core tasks. You must create momentum, getting employees activated towards desirable ends. You must master the enabling technologies of learning, visioning and coalition building. And you must manage yourself. It's vital to avoid arrogance and tearing down any fence until you know why it was built. The best new leaders can tell it like it is without doling out blame unnecessarily. At the same time, they're sensitive to people's concerns without being mired in old ways of doing things. **e**

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