Stepping up into a strategic leadership role is a difficult transition for many managers. Typically, the person will have been promoted from within on the basis of technical expertise and business acumen. Yet transitioning into a strategic role and managing managers of diverse or related business units requires a quantum leap in leadership.

In particular, there are four core issues associated with this transition:

1. The need to let go of being a technical expert and being operational/tactical
2. Developing strategic leadership behaviours and the associated flexibility
3. Switching to strategic thinking and decision making
4. Re-negotiating the relationships with direct reports who used to be peers

Let's start with the last one. In most instances where promotion happens from within, several people will have competed for the job, but only one can get the spoils. That means a number of the leader's now direct reports may harbour anger and/or resentment about missing out. On the flip side, the newly promoted leader can no longer be a friend to his/her former peers. These relationships need to be re-negotiated and the anger or resentment needs to be addressed.

The first rule in achieving this transition is to assume the authority that comes with the new role. This authority is explicit – role authority – and implicit, based on peoples’ expectation of being led. Because of the neat combination of our evolutionary acceptance of role authority and our (general) desire to follow the leader, the expectation is that the new leader’s behaviour will change in response to assuming the role. Inside a small, critical time window of a few weeks to a few months at most, the followers will make up their mind about the new leader’s ability to fill the shoes of the role.

Then acknowledging that the person is bound to feel disappointed about missing out and giving him or her the space to voice their disappointment. From there, it is about clearly outlining the expectations on how the new leader will work together with the person from thereon. This includes voicing the requirement for the person to turn from competitor into follower. If the person is unwilling to make that switch, they need to leave the team.

We were recently asked to coach an engineer who had been promoted into a senior leadership role. The MD wanted to make sure the person realised that with the promotion there was a need for behaviour change - from a laid-back attitude and great technical expertise to a display of authority congruent with the role and more strategic leadership behaviour.

With regards to the other 3 core transition issues, they are quite strongly related. The first one is the pre-requisite to doing the other two – no one can act as a strategic leader without letting go of the need to be a hands-on technical expert first.
In the end this ability to let go is based on the leader’s ability to tolerate anxiety, uncertainty and potential failure. The higher the fear of failure, the less likely it is that the person is going to let go of doing what they were good at in the first place. When confronted with strategic tasks and strategic decision making, it is easy to get overwhelmed and realise that the skills the person has developed to this point are inadequate. From this realisation stem two diametrically opposed responses:

1. Accept the learning opportunity and anxiety that comes with trying out a new way of managing and making decisions, OR
2. Retreat from the anxiety and fear of failure into doing what the person was previously good at.

One client contacted us recently regarding a relatively young manager who had been promoted into an Operations Manager role for one of the divisions. It was her first strategic leadership role and she failed to make the transition. Instead of letting go of her need to be perfect and tolerate the anxiety of achieving through others, she tried to do each of her 5 direct reports jobs – all at once! At the stage the company started looking for support the manager’s authority had been eroded to the point that it was too late for coaching and we had to recommend that the director in charge of the division move her out of the role.

This example shows how important providing coaching early on can be in assisting the transition. Either utilising external coaches or direct coaching by the person’s manager on how to best manage the transition will prevent scenarios such as the one described.

On the flip side, the new leader should proactively approach his or her manager and talk about the anxiety around making sound strategic decisions and letting go of being a technical expert. This may feel awkward since this person just put a lot of trust and expectations onto them by promoting them into the role, but it is a far better approach than trying to wing it and falling short when it comes to making it work.

The evidence from neuroscience shows that our ability to handle complex decision making develops over time and peaks in our fifties (yes, really!). Hence the need for coaching on strategic thinking and decision making is actually more vital when a younger person gets promoted into a senior role.

The research has also shown that we make better decisions when confronted with complex choices if we use our ‘gut feeling’ instead of rational analysis. But, and that’s a big BUT, the gut feeling is only reliable if we have previous experiences to fall back on. So, in essence, we have to make mistakes and poor strategic decisions first, before we can make better ones. Dithering is usually a clear sign of someone trying to make a rational decision when there are too many factors (or too much uncertainty) to consider. Providing accurate feedback after each failure or poor decision made is vital for this learning process.

In summary, more often than not a promotion into a senior role will make the person (temporarily) incompetent. That can be a good thing if the person realises it and modifies his/her behaviour accordingly. Otherwise, the best way to support a new senior manager is to give them clear guidance on the changed expectations, the permission to make mistakes for a reasonable amount of time and mentoring; or utilise external coaches in the first few months.

Lynn Johnson, Managing Director

Lynn originates from the UK and immigrated to Australia in 1996. She holds a PhD in particle physics and has worked as a research physicist for ICI in the UK before embarking on a journey that led her from a career in management consulting to becoming the CEO of a charity and setting up her own consulting business in 2001.

Lynn has extensive experience in designing and delivering programs that help people learn more about themselves, make better choices and open their mind to new possibilities. Her focus over recent years has been to coach business leaders in gaining self-awareness, developing emotional intelligence and leadership flexibility. This extensive background in coaching has allowed her to develop the coaching tools and interventions for Leadership Mastery.

Lynn is qualified in Human Synergistics LSI, DiSC, NLP, and other coaching tools. She has delivered in excess of 2,500 hours of individual coaching and over 1,500 hours of group coaching to business leaders over the past 10 years.

Peter Lanius, Director

Peter originates from Berlin, Germany and immigrated to Australia in 1996. He holds a PhD in particle physics. Peter spent the first ten years of his career as a consultant and project manager in the IT&T industry. He held senior project management positions in blue-chip companies including Hewlett-Packard, Telstra and Texas Instruments. Throughout this time Peter placed great emphasis on coaching his staff and creating successful teams.

In 2002 Peter became a director of Leadership Mastery. Peter has a keen interest in human development, psychology, coaching, behavioural economics, neuroscience, advanced communication strategies and change management. These interests have led him to attend a broad range of trainings and seminars; he puts these learnings into practice in his coaching work.

He has attained qualifications in Human Synergistics LSI, DiSC, NLP, Time Line Therapy, Hypnosis, EFT/TFT and a number of other coaching tools and techniques. He has delivered over 2,000 hours of individual coaching and over 500 hours of group coaching to business leaders and managers over the past 7 years.

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