

Manage the dilemmas of job transition

Arriving in a new job is a particularly risky time, with a failure rate of at least 20 percent, and even one-third or half for senior executive positions! This seems natural when an external candidate must adapt to a new culture. But the rate of failure is much the same for internal recruits. Indeed, the challenge is to manage three delicate balances:

Learn and take action simultaneously

A new job must be approached with a mindset of discovery and learning. New assignments, new challenges, new operating practices, new context—the biggest mistake would be to underestimate this need for learning. Initial meetings are hence key moments where the newcomer discovers what he or she is really expected to accomplish and starts to identify available key drivers and obstacles to surmount. Taking on a new position thus resembles a marathon, combining briefings with superiors, meetings with subordinates, field visits, meetings with peers, customers, suppliers, etc. At the same time, others in the organization are observing the newcomer closely, seeking reassurance that he or she is successfully assuming his or her new job responsibilities. Moving

To succeed in a new position, you should be wary of your old reflexes in order to find a new balance.

rapidly into action is just as important as learning—two competing objectives in an overloaded agenda.

Be wary of relying on your past strengths

When we are under pressure to prove our worth, **we naturally want to rely on our strengths**. However, these very strengths might not be adapted to a new position! This is typically the case when experts become people managers. They spontaneously tend to hang on to the expertise that spelled success in the past. But in doing so, they risk encroaching upon the role of subordinates and neglecting to develop team management skills. Similarly, newcomers to an executive committee may discover that their excellent mastery of their domain of responsibility or their remarkable ability to lead teams are not the principal strengths on which they should rely. Rather, they are henceforth expected to

wield influence within the management team. Paradoxically, learning to give up relying on certain strengths may thus be essential to success in a new role.

Rely on your team and on external support

Finally, taking on a new job exposes managers to a large number of requests, not all of which can be honored. **The challenge is hence to manage priorities carefully and to avoid sacrificing one set of relationships in favor of another.** Some focus primarily on their team or field visits, aware that they must build trust for people to follow them. But if they delay positioning themselves at headquarters or with their boss, they may be deprived of support critical to their success. Conversely, focusing primarily on political positioning may seem like a good short-term calculation, but teams will never forgive the feeling of being abandoned or considered as less important. A fragile balance must thus be struck continuously.

Three balances must be found in order to transition successfully to a new position:

- 1 Put things into perspective and **act quickly**
- 2 Rely on your **strengths**, but be wary of them
- 3 **Be there** for people inside—and outside—the organization

1 Put things into perspective and **act quickly**

Each of us has a natural preference for either action or observation. In the first weeks on the job, however, it is more critical than ever to learn to combine these two attitudes. It is a matter of laying the foundations for your future success by taking the time to fully understand your new environment and the corresponding challenges and priorities. But it is just as critical to mark points and build your credibility by rapidly obtaining visible results.

Fully grasp your new environment

When taking on a new job, we tend to feel obliged to rapidly prove our worth. Taking the time to explore our environment thoroughly may seem like a superfluous luxury given the scope of the task at hand, especially if we have already been working in this environment. Yet, every new position involves a new context and a new set of challenges which may be very different from the idea that we may have formed before being immersed in the new environment. One executive testifies to his impatience in the first weeks: *“I had prepared carefully before arriving. I had ideas galore and was*

burning to start implementing them. But after my second meeting, I realized that I had to put things on hold to give myself time to take full measure of the situation. I discovered not only obstacles that I had never suspected, but also things which I had wanted to change that were actually working pretty well! Restraining my impatience certainly helped me to avoid missteps.”

Indeed, the initial weeks on the job—and even ideally the preceding weeks—must be devoted to getting better acquainted with the ecosystem. Identify key people to meet, ask questions, listen to understand the main challenges, identify some suitable

Learning is a priority, provided that you also get results.

field visits, cross-check information, meet with customers, etc. (Figure A). You can then draw a map of your environment—including the players and challenges—providing the overview you need to calibrate your approach. By general consensus, launching big changes too quickly runs the risk of underestimating the accompanying culture shock and undermining trust. Conversely, setting yourself a period of exploration before moving into action maximizes the chances of seeing your ideas really implemented.

Identify potential quick wins

This does not mean you should stand on the sidelines and observe for months! Building your credibility by achieving results is an essential prerequisite for the success of your future projects. Yet this requires pursuing the right objectives—the first weeks on the job go by very quickly. Although enthusiasm and a taste for change may encourage you to launch radical changes to generate new momentum, you are better off focusing initially on a few quick—albeit modest—wins that will be rapidly visible to the greatest number (Figure B). One new manager, for example, discovered on arrival that a particular project had been dragging on for six months, and the delay was a source of frustration for the team. After some investigation, he noted that the expected impact of the project was rather hazy and the topic concerned wasn't a top priority. He consequently made the decision to halt the project then and there! Relieved by this decision, the team rapidly reengaged around more strategic issues. Visible and yielding clear benefits, this measure helped the new manager rapidly establish his legitimacy and send a strong signal that he was devoting effort and determination to the right topics.

FIGURE A Prepare for Day 1

If you possibly can, prepare for arrival well before Day 1. Arriving well-prepared will facilitate your first days, make you more comfortable and enable you to lay the foundations of your credibility more rapidly. What initiatives can help you do this?

Get to know your future environment	Optimize your time management
• Become familiar with key facts and figures, the organizational structure, and the broad outlines of the strategy. • Meet your future boss and, if possible, your predecessor. • Take note of any questions and observations that spring to mind; when the time comes, they will show that you have already projected yourself into the job.	• Identify people to meet in the first days or weeks and make appointments with them. • Ensure that your personal organization will allow you to devote yourself first and foremost to your new job. Anticipate what you will need to manage during this period and minimize your other engagements in consequence.

2 Rely on your **strengths**, but be wary of them

When we must put our best foot forward, we naturally tend to rely on our strengths. But in a new position, what we believe to be our best assets may turn out to be poorly suited or even counter-productive. It is thus essential to put things into perspective.

Reformulate your “strengths”

A common mistake is to believe that we have been chosen for a position based on the skills we’ve demonstrated in the past. A history of success certainly contributes to the decision, but candidates are selected first and foremost for their potential. That being said, the detected potential of an individual does not necessarily depend on the qualities that helped him or her succeed in the past. Did you previously shine by optimizing operational efficiency? Your new entourage may expect entirely different things from you. And the methods that you used to apply may not work in the new context. So be careful before blindly reproducing behaviors which made you successful in the past.

A manager of managers, for example, suddenly realized that he was going to have to give up his stance as an expert to focus on helping his engineers succeed. He was no longer in a position to answer every question in project meetings. On the other hand, he was expected to help

Your strong points in your previous job may turn out to be handicaps in a new context.

his employees position themselves in meetings. He managed this destabilizing change by reformulating his real “strength”: what he had to place at the service of others now was no longer his technical expertise, but his technical culture combined with long experience interacting in complex environments.

Identify skills to develop

Capitalizing on your strengths in a new context often requires additional skills. You should thus focus on identifying these skills in order to develop them. For example, one newly-promoted IT director quickly realized that while his technical expertise was certainly an asset, the key to success

was to capitalize on this knowledge to mobilize operational sponsors for his projects. He took the initiative to build his own development plan to improve the quality of his speeches before large audiences. A coach helped him rehearse before his presentations. He used different speech formats to become more comfortable and systematically asked for feedback to evaluate his progress. He thus rapidly positioned himself as credible and influential with his counterparts.

When you arrive in a new position and are still influenced by the culture of the previous position, it is often difficult without help to identify the skills you need to develop. Explicitly ask those around you—boss, colleagues, peers, mentor, etc.—about the skills and qualities they feel are important to succeed in the job. Concentrate in particular on behavioral skills such as political savvy, perception of the strategic vision, ability to unite others around your ideas, etc.

FIGURE B Identify potential quick wins

Your first initiatives will have more impact if they meet the following criteria:



3 Be there for people inside—and outside—the organization

A fundamental challenge when taking a position is to lay the foundations of trust with everyone you must count on in the future. Indeed, the first impression you make will have a lasting impact on your counterparts. Cognitive scientists have showed that the brain makes classifications very quickly (“solid,” “can’t handle the situation,” etc.), then filters information to reinforce this initial judgment. But what do you do when the number of contacts is insane and urgent projects engulf your schedule? There is a significant risk of leaving people wondering who a newcomer is or how he or she intends to carry out the job, opening the door to speculation, rumors, doubts, and eventually, mistrust. The solution lies in flawless organization.

Orchestrate your meetings

For the closest circle—your direct reports, your boss, your immediate peers, union contacts, etc.—face-to-face meetings should be arranged in the first month (Figure C). Otherwise, those with whom you haven’t met directly may feel left out and wary, with

the impression that you don’t care what they think. For the more distant circle—for example, staff in the countries you supervise—you can’t be exhaustive, but must be careful to send the right signals. For example, plan a day to visit a facility in another country every week, or visit large and small facilities in alternation. To find the right balance, try to see

Be careful not to neglect any key stakeholders—be they internal or external.

yourself from the perspective of your various stakeholder groups. Does your time allocation seem to indicate that you are neglecting a given category? If so, try to make adjustments—or be aware that you will have more trouble building trust with this category.

Carefully manage your agenda

When taking on a new position, the variety and intensity of demands is such that you must use iron discipline to avoid being overwhelmed. That is why it is critical to be quick in planning essential appointments and visits for the first weeks. To manage time pressure, you should also make sure to capitalize fully on each of these interactions. Every meeting must thus be approached

as a step in developing your fundamental understanding. One new manager observed that his subordinates were not able to express themselves unreservedly in one-on-one meetings at his office. So he decided to visit them at their workstations. By asking the same questions about the content of their job, the difficulties experienced and the obstacles to surmount, he triggered much richer discussions which helped him forge a general vision and confirm or invalidate his courses of action. Likewise, a regional director combined plant manager meetings with site visits and lunches with local employees. He thus cultivated his understanding of the situation with first-hand information and built credibility with local teams that proved to be invaluable when he later launched the reorganization of certain processes.

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Arriving in a new position is a stressful time, because the risk of failure is very real. But understanding the principal pitfalls and paying attention to striking the right balances significantly boosts your chances of success.

FIGURE C Understand the expectations of your boss

To be successful in a new position, it is essential to understand your boss’s expectations. You can make sure of this by going over the following five topics with him or her:

1	2	3	4	5
What is his or her diagnosis of the situation? What is his or her vision of the company’s strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities?	What are your most important assignments ? According to what criteria will he or she measure your success in the job? What results does he or she expect? In what timeframe?	What is his or her preferred way of operating in terms of frequency of reporting, means and timing of communication, decision-making style, time management, etc?	What resources do you have at hand? How much leeway do you have? What isn’t negotiable?	What skills may you need to develop to succeed in the job?