

The Perils of Progression

How many leaders and managers have basked in the elation of an impending advancement, only to fall into the abyss of disillusionment and confusion within weeks of assuming the new position?

A recently promoted senior manager described finding himself in that quagmire. “I was talking with my new boss a couple weeks into the new position, and very hesitantly told him of some of the surprises my predecessor had left me. The rosy job I thought I was taking on was beginning to feel like a field of landmines. There were some real messes. I felt that I should be presenting my shop as working perfectly, and instead, here I was giving this new boss – of whom I knew little – bad news. I thought I might be digging myself a big hole.”

Another upper level manager bemoaned the change in his relationships with former peers. “I could feel the hush when I’d go to the coffee bar, as if there was a quick and uncomfortable topic change. People who had been my teammates for years no longer shared the daily gossip, and I suspected I was left off the invitation list for after work visits to the local pub. I felt like I had managerial leprosy!”

Surprised by the spirit of her new peer group of leaders, a young, high potential leader described her experience. “In my last job, the managers were all very cooperative, a tightly knit group. It didn’t occur to me that the team I was to join at the next level up would be any different. But wow, was I in for a surprise. I was totally on my own to figure things out. There were no pre-meeting conversations to give a healthy debate on an issue, no cluing each other in on what was going on at the next higher level that might affect us, and no sharing of our individual groups’ dilemmas that could benefit from a more objective view. The leadership meetings were cold, competitive, and sometimes downright destructive. I didn’t know if I’d be able to stick it out in this higher level with so little oxygen.”



The following newly promoted leader shows the bafflement that many experience when encountering the next higher level of organization. “During our first leadership team meeting I didn’t have a clue what the others were talking about. I kept thinking to myself, I’ve been in this company for 15 years, and I thought I knew the right kind of indicators to track my group’s progress, and what to bring to the leadership team meetings. But, but this group is talking in language I don’t recognize. I don’t have a clue!”

Each of these managers alludes to an aspect of the shift that occurs *in logic* between levels of organization for which they were unprepared. Quite often the basis for an initial promotion is excellent performance in a technical position, but there is little preparation or training for a new manager to understand and deal with the differences between individual performance and managerial performance. Each level of organization has its own logic, which often is unrecognized or underrated so that those promoted are left to learn on their own – if at all.

What guidance could be given to these valued individuals as they ascend to higher levels of management and leadership, so that they don’t blunder their way into their new roles? Here are some suggestions.

Expect to find problems. Chances are you left a few problems for the person who took over your last job as well! Your job is to find problems and to support your direct reports in their resolution, not to present a false picture of your group as perfect.

Your new organizational portfolio will include problems as well as capacities. One of the indicators of your value as a manager and leader is your fluency in keeping the environment stable enough so that your people can perform while energizing enough to keep their attention.

Expect that relationships with your former peers or with the people who work for you will be different. After all, you now have a non-equal relationship. In a higher-level position, you will make decisions that affect your direct reports’ work, their pay and their careers. A healthy relationship distance is an asset that enables having cool judgment, making difficult decisions, and giving bad news, all of which are part of the new turf.

Recognize that the levels of organizational logic shift as one moves up. On the work floor focus is on technical expertise, while progressively higher levels become more abstract as if one is in an airplane ascending to its assigned altitude. At each successive level, focus on articulate vision and strategy become of greater and greater importance, the time horizon lengthens, the breadth and depth of the organizational picture expands, and reliance on judgment as opposed to rational indicators increases.

Figure out the new ground rules, As the logic of the organizational level shifts, so do the performance expectations of managers/leaders and of leadership teams. These shifts in expectations are often not articulated, and most newly promoted leaders are on their own to figure out the rules of the road at their new level, finding it baffling and confusing.

You'll probably have to take the initiative to define the ground rules at your new level. Take the initiative to ask each of your new peers what s/he thinks it takes to be successful here.

Take an objective stance. As one rises to higher levels within the organization, the ability to hold an "archimedean" point outside of the circle becomes more and more important. At these levels the focus is rarely on technical issues, but rather on systemic issues so that the ability to be an observer of the whole and to meaningfully integrate disparate views into that whole is of great benefit. Another way of describing this attitude is "going to third position."

First position means seeing from one's own eyes, taking only one's interests into account. *Second position* implies the ability to see from another's point of view, to have empathy for another's position. *Third position* is the ability to be a fly on the wall, dispassionately taking in the whole situation at once. Being able to go to third position is the same as finding one's archimedean point outside the circle's circumference so that any specific datum is seen relative to the whole.

It would be nice if melding into a higher organizational role could be easier. But in truth, the way in which a new manager or leader faces this unformatted situation of progression is itself an indicator of situations to come.

At the higher levels, it is the ability to rely on one's own resources and guidance to find one's way that proves one's mettle. So this first brush with uncertainty might be seen as a rite of passage, outfitting one for the many ambiguities to come as one takes on the leader's journey.

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