Introduction

“Human beings are overconfidence machines,” wrote David Brooks, a commentator who writes for the *New York Times*. Most executives overestimate their skill and their success. In a *BusinessWeek* poll, 90% of leaders believe they are in the top 10% of leaders. People want their leaders to be confident. But when leaders become overly confident, it increases the chances they will derail after taking a new role.

When you transition to a new role, it’s likely that you have two goals in mind. First, you want to challenge and develop yourself. Second, you want to contribute something of value to the organization. Fortunately, new assignments that build and broaden your experience tend to build capability for the organization too. It can be a win/win – organizations get new leadership to energize the company and advance the strategy, you get a new career opportunity. That’s the ideal. But the reality often falls short.

You may already realize that transitions are tenuous. The first 18 months in a new role are a proving ground. New leaders derail with alarming frequency. No one wants to end up being a statistic. And, everyone wants to feel assured that they made the right decision – your organization hiring you, and you choosing to make the leap to this new role. You can improve your chances of making the transition a smooth one by working to accelerate your contribution to the new organization.

When the suspense of interviewing for the job gives way to the anticipation of starting your new role, it can be helpful to have some guide rails. Your new organization has wagered that you are worth the investment they are making. The best way for you to prove it is to contribute value sooner than they expected. Here are a few things you can consider as you make a thoughtful and successful transition into your new role.
Focus on your own assets. It’s to your advantage to be aware of your mental model – how your confidence has served you and when over confidence can get in your way. Additionally, consider how you can stay cognizant of your strengths, weaknesses, and know-how and how they operate in this new context.

Focus on your team, your position, and the new context. Of course, it’s imperative to size up your team because it’s through your team that you will be able to make your impact. Another strategy presented here deals with political and cultural realities of the new organization and how your predecessor shaped the role you find yourself in now.

Finally, focus on your vision for what’s possible, the change you want to bring, and the contribution you want to make. Explore some ideas that will help you maximize your first 90 days.
Beware: The Transition Paradox

What you might be missing as you dive into your new role…

You got the job offer, and are gearing up to transition to your new role. It is at this precise moment, when your confidence is at its peak, that you need to pay the most attention.

You’ve been here before – selected for a promotion, offered a new job, and rose to the occasion. In fact, you’ve probably transitioned to new jobs every couple of years for as long as you can remember. You’re confident and optimistic about the new opportunity. So what’s the worry?

One of the biggest pitfalls leaders make when they enter a new position is underestimating the novelty of the situation. Sure, some of the familiar fare still stands – more direct reports, new regions, new products, new boss. Is it wrong to assume that this transition will unfold like most of your other successful transitions to new roles?

It depends. If you are entering a new corporate culture, it might be time to put up your antennae. And you may want to get some clarity around the following questions: What is the rate of organ rejection in this new culture? How has the organization responded to other change agents? What are others’ expectations of you in this role? The watch out is that you may only have a partial view that reflects the opinions of a few key people in the organization. It’s critical that you also understand the expectations of your team and colleagues – the people you will be interacting with first and most often.

If you will be leading a team, you’ll need to probe around the following:
What are the dynamics of the team? Did anyone on the team want my job or advocate for someone else to get my job? Awareness of these areas can help you avoid potential land mines.

If you feel comfortable with your leadership style, ask yourself: How well will my leadership style fit in this new situation? You may feel good about your style, but it is not just a matter of whether your style works, it’s about
fit. Any leadership style can be a bad fit depending on the context. A very collaborative, socially participative style, for example, may be too inefficient for an organization in crisis or one that demands an extremely decisive approach.

Maybe this transition will go smoothly as all previous transitions have gone for you. But given the exponentially complex business world, it’s possible that this is not just another step up for you, but rather a quantum leap. Take the time to pause, question, and reflect on what you might do differently this time.

Rebuild the Knowledge That Doesn’t Travel Well

Some things are portable and some are not...

Actually, the adage “you can’t take it with you” is only partially true when it comes to your new role. Building on the work by economist Gary Becker, it is possible to distinguish between firm-specific knowledge applicable at only one organization and general knowledge (general management, industry knowledge, strategic skills) that applies virtually anywhere you go. However, your relationships in the new role start from scratch, and your knowledge of the organization – no matter how effectively your due diligence – will be limited.

Listen to the voice telling you that, while you have made many successful transitions in your career, this one requires your full attention. Invest in the knowledge that you cannot take with you. . .relationships, dynamics of your team, culture of the organization, the history and traditions that are held dear, the receptivity of the organization to the new and different. Most importantly, you want to know “who succeeds here?” and “when people fail, what trips them up?”
A best-in-class onboarding plan will provide all of this, and more.

- Start with a Situation Analysis, which provides the lay of the land and gets you familiar with your new context.

- Then, with that context in mind, focus on your Leadership Style and Characteristics. What about your leadership is likely to work for you in this organization and what will likely work against you?

- Establish your three transition priorities based on your plan for mitigating those factors that may work against you.
Break the Mold

What to do when your predecessor’s shadow lingers...

Every role is shaped by the person in that role. You have big plans for how you see your position in the organization, but how was the role you are taking shaped by the incumbent?

The experience is often so subtle that few executives are able to articulate what is happening. It is not their imagination. It is independent of whether the incumbent was beloved. The role they’ve just assumed has been imprinted by those who sat in their chair before them.

Research has shown that the first person to hold a particular job in a new organization, or a long-term predecessor in an established organization, puts their imprimatur on the role so indelibly that it can determine the success or failure of those who follow. One study revealed that new leaders tend to be more successful in new positions if they exhibit qualities seen in the executive that held the role previously – even if their backgrounds were not typical for the role. In some organizations, the imprint on the role created by the first incumbent impacted the success of not just one but several generations of successors.

It is not difficult to see how this happens. The incumbent creates the role around him or herself. Not only is the job defined by them, but the jobs that are structured around them are built to fit. When the incumbent moves out of the role and a replacement is named who brings a different set of qualities to the job, the fit with the role is often poor. Filling the role will be awkward and will likely lead to early departure. Creating the role to fit the replacement is the only successful path.

There are a few simple guidelines to follow when moving into a role that has had long-term predecessors or highly influential incumbents. If you are moving into an imprinted role:
1. **Understand the impact of your predecessors.** The best discovery you can do is to learn as much as you can about those who have gone before you in the role. Your own excavation can take several forms.

   - **Ask questions.** What legacy did your predecessors leave? What priorities did they spend most time on? How did they make their mark? What were their towering strengths? How did the organization evolve around them to complement their strengths and weaknesses?

   - **Listen to stories.** As you talk with people about the organization and the role, listen to the stories people tell you. The patterns and practices of those who held the role will tell you a great deal about their priorities, their focus, their influence, their interactions, and their impact.

   - **Look for organizational clues.** If you look in the right places you will discover the changes made by those who have held your role. A quick review of historical organization charts will provide clues as you examine the roles, titles, reporting relationships, tenure, and frequency of change. Take note of how critical organizational decisions (acquisitions, downsizings, new lines of business, expansions) were made. Understand how change initiatives were launched and how successful they were.

2. **Understand your impact.** You are assuming your new role in order to move the organization forward from its current state. The business strategy determines your key priorities and areas of focus. What qualities and characteristics of yours will need to be front and center if you are to move these strategic priorities forward? Whether you seek out a mentor or colleague or executive coach, find someone to help you articulate what you will intentionally bring to this role and how your unique constellation of strengths and weaknesses will have maximum impact.

3. **Discover how the team you inherited is uniquely suited to complement your predecessor — not you.** Those who surround you now were chosen for a reason. They filled the gaps and allowed your predecessor’s strengths to shine. You need to learn how their current role came to be, how that role maximizes their contribution (or not), and how
their responsibilities intersected with their past boss. The task at hand is to determine how who they are and what they do best can complement who you are and what you do best.

4. Create the role, don’t just fill the role. Start with you – be clear about the contribution you want to make and the legacy you want to leave. This is the center circle. By knowing your strengths you will focus your own time and energy on those aspects of the work where you can make the biggest impact. Then, build the concentric circles around you. Determine who you need in your first-ring team to shore up your gaps and reinforce your strengths. Encourage your team to do the same.

Positions are indeed established in important ways by those who have held the role before. If you want to stay long enough to leave your own legacy, make the role your own.

Know Your Talent…
Know Your Team

What your team has in common with opera singers...

While your team might not roam around the office singing arias, it’s possible that they share some characteristics with opera singers from the 19th century.

The bel canto era (literally translated “beautiful singing”) marked a golden age for opera when composers wrote works that required tremendous vocal agility and control. What made these sophisticated operas possible? Top talent. The artists composing the operas found a ready supply of exceptional vocal talent – cantors from local synagogues and churches.

For any team, opera company or otherwise, talent is a primary factor that either limits or enables the accomplishment of great things.
So, how do you know if you have the makings of a great team?

Take stock of individuals’ skill sets – it’s a critical step to determining whether you have the right mix of capabilities to meet your business objectives. What skill gaps do you see? Do team members’ skills complement each other? How well-matched are your skills with the needs of the team?

Of course, a team is greater than the sum of its parts. Assess the team as a whole to see how the pieces fit together.

• Does the team have a shared mindset about its purpose and what needs to be accomplished?

• Is there a generous amount of trust among the team?

• Are team members assigned responsibilities in a way that both ensures the success of the team and develops new skills?

• Does the team atmosphere help the team operate efficiently and effectively? Even when tough decisions need to be made, conflicts resolved, or work processes streamlined?

• Does the team focus, execute, and deliver on its commitments?

Finally, view the team in the context of the organization. Without patrons, even the best teams can flounder. How well does senior leadership support and fund the team? Does senior leadership offer the team a balance of autonomy and accountability?

Assessing your team to see whether you have the right mix of skills, the right team dynamic, and the right organizational support will help you determine whether there are any critical gaps that need to be addressed.

With exceptional talent on your team, it’s easy to raise the bar and find new ways for team members to shine – not unlike the performers in that golden age of opera.
Seize Your Leadership Moment

You have everyone’s attention, now what?

Executives who are about to assume a new role hold in their hands a perishable asset: the undivided attention of people. And this may be the most frequently squandered asset of newly transitioned executives.

Few leadership challenges can be met without commanding the attention of those the leader is trying to mobilize. Cutting through the clutter to get the attention of key stakeholders is a challenge of monumental proportion. But this time of transition is the moment when all eyes are on you. It is an opportunity for you, the new leader, to set the stage for your vision and priorities. It is the time when that most precious and most fleeting of leadership assets – the undivided attention of people – is at its prime.

A newly named division president, knowing that an insular and internally
focused culture was jeopardizing the growth of the business, used his “moment” to catalyze his externally focused strategy. For his first two weeks on the job, he spent every day with his sales team and his VPs, visiting customers. No meet-and-greets at headquarters, no town hall events, no executive staff meetings. Just a very strategically focused message – our days of navel-gazing are over. Of course, this is a message he could have talked about in his meet-and-greets, covered in a town hall PowerPoint presentation, or laid out with metrics and accountabilities with his executive team. But instead – with all eyes in the organization on him – he aligned his behavior with his message and left no doubt about where he would be leading the organization.

Leaders underestimate their impact on people around them, and that is especially true when a new leader comes on the scene. The leader might think that people will give the leader some time to get acclimated before paying close attention and making judgments. Not true. In fact, in those first weeks and months of a leader’s tenure, people are paying rapt attention to the new leader’s every move, every word, and every nuance, looking for clues about what they can expect.

It is a fact that leaders underestimate their impact on people around them, and that is never as true as when a new leader comes on the scene. People are paying attention to every move, every word, every nuance looking for clues about what they can expect.

Making the most of your leadership “moment” requires three things:

**Know your message.** Articulate the reasons you have assumed this role. Even though your vision will be imperfect in your first months on the job, you know what you uniquely bring to this role and how that intersects with the needs of the organization. What will the strategy be? What changes will be required in the organization to effectively achieve the strategy? How will you lead the organization toward that objective?

**Understand the channels through which you are being observed.** Even if you have learned this leadership lesson, it’s safe to say you are underestimating the amount of scrutiny your every word and action gets. Everyone in your orbit is reading the tea leaves. It’s important to them, not because you are endlessly fascinating to them (though you may be that). It’s important to them because they like their jobs, want to anticipate any
changes or new expectations you bring. That means that you, in turn, need to be a keen observer of your own behavior – your words, actions, decisions, tone, and expressions – to ensure that your intended message is consistently coming through every channel.

**Align your message and your behavior.** Before you begin your new job, plan your key messages across all relevant channels. Plan to consistently send your messages through every channel to which people are attuned. Are your key messages being reinforced by your early decisions? By the way you allocate resources? By the stories you tell? By the agenda you set for your meetings? By the way you spend your time? By the talent you select on your team?

The old riddle asks whether the tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it. Leaders know the answer is no. People have to be paying attention for any meaningful leadership message to be absorbed and followed. When you take on a new leadership role, you have a moment when every sound you make in the forest is heard. Recognize and exploit the opportunity – albeit fleeting – to use this crucial moment to set the stage for your leadership.

**Be a Change Agent,**

**With All Due Respect**

**Without a healthy dose of respect for the organization, you risk alienating those you seek to rally...**

The biggest threat to successful organ transplants is rejection. Antibodies are on high alert and will do what it takes to maintain the equilibrium of the status quo. It’s not unusual to see similar battle lines being drawn when a new executive joins the organization. You have taken the role, not to be a maintainer but to take the organization in a new direction, with renewed energy for growth. You’re eager to get on with it, to demonstrate that you have ideas and a plan for the future. Before you charge into your change agenda, think about this: the right to be an agent of change must be earned. It doesn’t come with the role but it is quite readily earned by paying attention to three simple truths:
• **Change from a foundation of deep and genuine respect for what the organization has accomplished to date.** Your first order of business is to find those aspects of the organization – its people, mission, history, accomplishments – for which you have sincere admiration. Articulate what you find admirable. Tell stories that illustrate your appreciation for what the organization has built. Make sure your actions reflect your high esteem for the hard work that has been done to get the organization to where it is today. This cannot be lip service or posturing or glib. If you are to earn the right to be a change agent, you need to demonstrate that you have invested in the work that’s required to truly appreciate the organization.

• **Think about the impact first, then about the change you want to drive.** When you come into the organization with a change agenda and you are eager to make your mark quickly, it’s easy to focus on where you’re going and the results you will demonstrate. Anticipating the impact of the changes you will make on those you need to engage will help you understand the unintended consequences of your early decisions.

• **Understand the sources of pride to gauge reaction to your priorities and the pace of change.** If you know where the organization feels best about itself, you will be able to chart those areas where greatest sensitivity is required.

Your ability to successfully transition from role to role and organization to organization has served you well. Absorbing the lessons of these insights will ensure that your transitions, even with increasing complexity, will continue to be successful.
Don’t Always Expect the Red Carpet

Only for a select few get star treatment...

Often the focus of taking a new position is getting acclimated, building awareness of a new culture, and being agile and flexible in dealing with new personalities and new politics. But a select few are chosen for their star status.

When your brand precedes you, the organization knows what they are getting and they are signing up for it.

Rather than looking for new leaders to adapt and be agile as they enter the new environment, these are cases where organizations choose an executive based on what their track record has been in the past. They want them to do what they’ve done before. The star system.

If you are a star who has been hired to produce the kind of change and results that you brought about in your past companies, the onboarding should be more focused on preparing the organization for you and what you can bring to the party.

When your brand precedes you, the organization knows what they are getting and they are signing up for it. It becomes less about adapting yourself and more about the organization making room. Are they ready for you?

Before you self-identify with stardom, know that this is a rare onboarding situation. And, for you stars out there, take the time to help your new organization adjust to the ideas and goals you bring with you.
Conclusion

Times of transition can be overwhelming and stressful but also exhilarating. By balancing your confidence with humility, you can focus your attention carefully on potential problem areas and find ways to accelerate your contribution in your new role.

Now, go seize your leadership moment.
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References


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