

Mastering executive transitions

A new leadership role can be thrilling, career making, transformative—and utterly disorienting and disastrous. How can you plan for uncertainty and the unexpected?

By Jackie Sloane

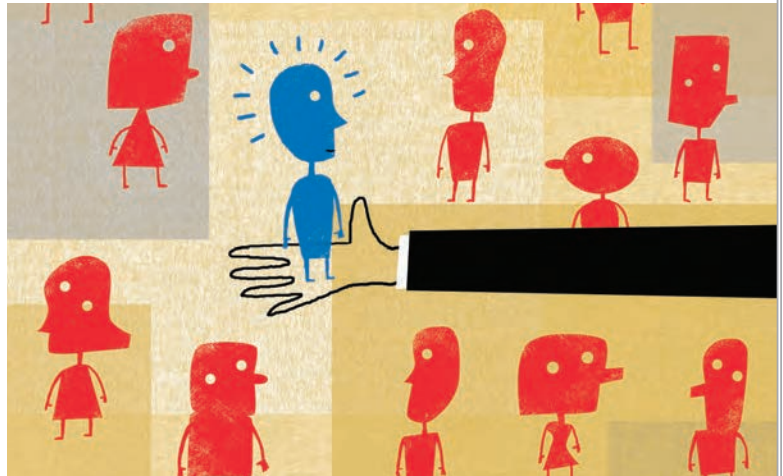
Daniel was brought in to head communications for a very public transition during a national crisis. He was a well-known expert in his field but new to the industry and the organization. The pressure was enormous and unrelenting. In the midst of managing an image, developing messaging and working with international news media, he also had to build an organization and cut staff who no longer fit in. Looking back, Daniel (not his real name) might have altered a choice or two, but he was generally successful and highly regarded, and many sought his guidance because of his effectiveness.

Not everyone is so fortunate. In a 2009 interview with the *Financial Times*, Kevin Kelly, CEO of Heidrick & Struggles, said that “40 percent of executives hired at the senior level are pushed out, fail or quit within 18 months,” according to an internal survey of 20,000 of the firm’s searches. Some writers claim it’s much higher.

New leaders can make critical assumptions about their organizations and their role—assumptions that they don’t always verify. They also may be under tremendous scrutiny and not comprehend that everything they do sends a message. The messages you send can support what you want to achieve—or derail it.

Your transition into a new leadership role begins before your first day on the job. How you plan for it, how you respond to challenges and the tone you set will create a powerful foundation for what you are being brought in to accomplish.

Daniel pointed to several things that worked in his favor as he dealt with all the uncertainty and responsibility in his new position: complete access to his boss, a willingness to ask lots of questions, a level of self-knowledge and maturity



that proved critical to remaining calm, and a keen awareness of internal politics and how to adjust to them.

It’s tough to recover from early judgment errors, such as failing to secure needed support or cultivate key relationships. Often overlooked is the fact that leading a major strategic change may cause the executive to undergo personal transformation that can be disorienting, humbling, anxiety producing and confidence killing. In order to help you overcome these obstacles, my colleague Elizabeth Olsen and I have developed a simple but essential four-step program.

1. Get curious.

Ask yourself: What am I getting into? What do I need to bring forth? As Michael Watkins, author of the bestseller *The First 90 Days*, inquires, are you coming into a startup or a turnaround? A realignment or sustaining success? What are the related challenges? What resources must you secure to succeed? The more senior your role, the more important it is that you come in with a learning strategy instead of a precooked plan. And what you personally bring to your new role may be different from your last. For example, one executive who’d been successful as an individual contributor in a task-oriented culture failed to recognize the premium on collaboration and connection in his new job

and found it difficult to overcome a reputation for being aloof.


2. Launch your reputation.

Recognize the power of the tone you’re setting and the reputation you’re building with each conversation and action—perhaps your most effective tools. Daniel set a tone of certainty amidst the uncertainty; he became known as a learner and relationship builder with a knack for being decisive, someone who had access to the most powerful person in the organization.

3. Activate alignment.

As part of your learning strategy, you’ll determine how things get done, who the key influencers are and the relationships you need to cultivate to accomplish your goal. Create strategies to build alliances with these people.

4. Manage yourself.

Make a list of what keeps you focused, centered and energized. Do at least half of the items on the list on a daily basis. When you feel centered, you can often slow down enough to make better judgment calls. 

JACKIE SLOANE is an executive coach specializing in leadership communication. Her clients achieve greater satisfaction and results through how they and their teams communicate, engage others and cultivate relationships.