Swimming Upstream:  
The Challenge of Managerial Promotions  

Arthur M. Freedman  
American University, NTL Institute, and Quantum Associates  

On the surface, promotions sound like a good thing—especially for driven high achievers bent on making something of their careers. But like most things in life, the reality is far less glamorous than the cover story. In truth, promotions to jobs of greater responsibility, prestige, and influence are among the most difficult challenges one will face over the course of a career. There is much suspense: Will the person hit the ground running? Will he or she flounder? And much is at stake: Will the organization continue smoothly, or will there be disruption? Will the individual become a more mature leader, or will he or she get stuck in old routines?  

In this chapter, I describe why promotions are so challenging and suggest how to help individual managers cope with the difficulties in making an upward transition. The chapter concludes with applying this perspective to the transition from executive leader of a portfolio of businesses to the leader of an institution as chief executive officer. The next chapter deals with the unique transition into general management.  

Pathways and Crossroads  

“Leadership pipeline” models have become popular for characterizing how the managerial job changes dramatically as you ascend the hierarchy. For instance, the best-selling book *The Leadership Pipeline* (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001) contains one such framework. These models trace back to the work of Walter Mahler and William Wrightnour (1973), who were among the first to describe how a few leading corporations like General Electric and Exxon were approaching the replacement of key executives. Over the last ten years, dozens of other organizations have adopted their general ideas about how the managerial job changes across organizational levels.  

In 1998, I described a pathways-and-crossroads model of managerial careers inspired by this work but emphasizing the psychology of an upward promotion. In that paper, I assert: “When upwardly mobile persons are promoted from lower, individual contributor roles to higher, managerial roles,
they are confronted by the challenge of negotiating a series of 135-degree ‘crossroads’ or shifts in their careers. For those who make the complete journey, they must traverse five pathways and four crossroads. These critical career crossroads are comprised of discontinuous and unprecedented changes in the role responsibilities... which managers-in-transition must [perform]. At each crossroad, people are confronted by a triple challenge: letting go of anachronistic responsibilities and competencies; preserving those that continue to be useful; and adding on new, discontinuous responsibilities and consequences. Managers-in-transition can cope with these demands by making adaptive changes in their preferred activities, behavior patterns, and style” (Freedman, 1998, p. 131).

Summarizing briefly, the four crossroads are (1) from individual contributor to supervisory manager, (2) from supervisory manager to manager of a single “business,” (3) from manager of a single “business” to executive manager of a portfolio of several “businesses,” and (4) from executive manager of several “businesses” to institutional leader. A graphic depiction of this model is presented in figure 2.1. Rather than focus on how the nature of work substantively changes across levels, I emphasize the unique psychological challenges confronting managers-in-transition. There are several resources available to those interested in how the nature of managerial work changes with hierarchical level (for example, Charan et al., 2001; Freedman, 1998; Zaccaro, 2001).

Promotable, ambitious managers-in-transition must bridge unprecedented discontinuities at each of these four crossroads to reach the senior leader position. They must recognize and respond in an acceptable manner to the unique demands and role responsibilities of each higher-level position. To ensure their effectiveness, they must be ready to alter their beliefs, perspectives, attitudes, relationships, and behavior patterns at each crossroad.

**On the Folly of “Sink or Swim”**

A critical question is how ambitious, upwardly mobile managers become aware of, accept as legitimate, and develop proficiency in applying new perspectives, values, and skills that are often quite different from those that brought them prior success. In spite of Henry Mintzberg’s (1994) admonitions, traditional and executive MBA programs omit the critical behavioral aspects of leadership from their core curricula. So the answer isn’t found in business schools.
Figure 2.1. The Five Primary Pathways and Four Basic Career Crossroads

1. Individual Contributor
2. Supervisory Manager
3. Manager of a Single "Business"
4. Executive Manager of Several "Businesses"
5. Institutional Leader

Note. Within each of the five pathways, the vertical risers imply rotation among related positions or progression along any given career pathway.

According to recent surveys, few organizations feel as if they do a good job of preparing upwardly mobile persons to assume more senior roles (see chapter 1). According to my forty-five-plus years of consulting with dozens of large and small corporations in all sectors, it seems that the way most companies handle this rests on the implicit belief that it is acceptable, if not appropriate, for newly promoted managers to either sink or swim in their new roles. Responsibility for making the transition successfully appears to be left
to the managers themselves; in many cases, the organization assumes little, if any, responsibility.

This approach makes for an inefficient talent management strategy, made worse by the modern era of scarce talent. A much more effective strategy is for organizations to assume the lion’s share of responsibility for upward transitions; they must create strategies, processes, and mechanisms to actively manage conditions that enable high potential managers-in-transition to traverse the four crossroads in figure 2.1. To do this, organizations must develop the capability to enable, support, and provide incentives for such upwardly mobile individuals to

- understand where they fit within their organization’s executive continuity and leadership succession plans;
- develop realistic career goals and plans for achieving them;
- identify personal and systemic obstacles to fulfilling increasingly demanding leadership roles and prepare themselves to change—to learn and in many instances to unlearn;
- take advantage of relevant executive education, training, and developmental opportunities, prior to being promoted, that will prepare them to assume higher-level organizational positions;
- take advantage of coaching and mentoring resources.

Unless organizations properly and realistically prepare them, managers-in-transition are likely to assume that traversing a promotional crossroad will be an easy transition rather than the challenging, discontinuous transformation that research has continually shown it to require (for example, Charan et al., 2001; Downey, March, & Berkman, 2001; Freedman, 1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988).

The Psychological Challenge

Major upward transitions move managers out of their comfort zone. Promotions trigger strong emotions that naturally arise as managers-in-transition realize that the demands made of them at higher organizational levels differ in kind from those that were made of them when they held lower-level positions. Under the surface, this challenge often threatens managers-in-transition. It can undermine their sense of coherence and well-being—critical components of self-esteem and confidence that are weakened by the loss of psychic
anchors, such as their competent performance of public roles (Freedman, 1995b). This is to say that managers-in-transition gradually discover that opportunities to perform their familiar, well-practiced, public roles as individual contributors or lower-level managers are drastically reduced or entirely lost as they work their way upward.

Initially, managers-in-transition often feel adrift—isolated and alone. Too often, they are both unfamiliar with and unskilled in performing their new tasks, activities, and functions. Their dawning awareness of this discontinuity often triggers a sense of intense discomfort and insecurity. They frequently speak of feeling hollow—empty and without purpose or value. They may feel like frauds who have deceived themselves, those who promoted them, and those who now depend upon them. Not that all of this is public knowledge. I’ve come to learn about this phenomenon in my intensely personal consulting experience with individual executives. These managers-in-transition aren’t comfortable with such feelings and mask them from their coworkers. But that they aren’t obvious doesn’t mean these powerful emotions are not at play; they are real and they do have a significant impact on executive performance.

Managers-in-transition typically require at least six months of post-transition experience to recognize, accept, and develop reasonable proficiency in performing their new role responsibilities (Freedman, 1998; Gabarro, 1987). It may even take up to a full eighteen months for most managers to feel emotionally confident in a new role (Downey et al., 2001; see also chapter 3). All too often, organizations neither recognize nor dedicate necessary and sufficient resources to adequately prepare or support them through the intellectual and emotional learning curves. Managers-in-transition are likely to be left on their own. They may realize their existing skill sets are inadequate in coping with their unprecedented leadership responsibilities and may sense the need for assistance to adapt and cope effectively with the demands of their new roles. However, too often they will not act on that realization because they fear that requests for assistance may be construed as an admission of some personal defect, deficiency, or inadequacy.

To compensate for feeling inadequate, new managers often regress to performing familiar lower-level managerial or technical responsibilities that used to lead to recognition and approval. Unfortunately, these are now their subordinates’ responsibilities; to persist in performing them simply does not satisfy the new demands of the higher-level managerial roles (Freedman, 1995a). As an example, Kaplan and Kaiser (2003) describe the common case of freshly minted senior executives who misallocate time and energy by
delving into operational detail and diverting attention from the more central strategic aspects of their new job. Not only does this rob the organization of strategic leadership, but it also can be maddening and alienating to the new leader’s subordinates, who feel untrusted and micromanaged.

Managers-in-transition must develop an understanding of when and how their circumstances have changed. They must learn to recognize when they are confronted by a major career crossroad. They must discern the new, unprecedented, mostly discontinuous but legitimate and demanding requirements of their new career pathway. They must recognize that some of their existing competencies will be required on their new pathway after they have traversed their next higher crossroad—and these must be preserved. But the relevance of many other competencies will be lost. They must learn to let go of these anachronisms quickly—with respect and appreciation for their historical relevance and contributions—and then move on. And they must identify and add on (that is, acquire proficiency in applying) at least a few new, radically different competencies and attributes to perform their new responsibilities and cope with and satisfy the demanding requirements of their new roles.

**Why Managers Get Stuck**

The irony is that upwardly promoted managers are leaving jobs they are likely to be better qualified to effectively perform than the ones they are entering. These old, familiar roles have provided opportunities to practice and develop competence. With sufficient repetitions, competence then leads to confidence in both the skills they have mastered and in themselves more fundamentally. In turn, they become comfortable in performing their role responsibilities. The result of this cycle of the three Cs—competence, confidence, and comfort—is an enhanced sense of pride and self-esteem.

Understandably, many people like these good feelings that come with the three Cs. Unfortunately, many rely on these good feelings to the point that they addict themselves to whatever results in recognition, achievement, and success. The corollary is that addicted persons pay an opportunity cost: to the extent that they continue to perform anachronistic roles to which they have addicted themselves, they will not create opportunities for themselves to even attempt to identify and master the new competencies and to perform the new role responsibilities that their discontinuous, higher-level positions may require. To let go of addictive but outmoded performances is often experienced
as a tremendous loss—the loss of habitual sources of social reinforcement. As with addiction to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, it is very difficult to let go and experience the pain of loss and withdrawal.

Leaders who are unaware of their behavioral addictions—that is, leaders who lack self-awareness—are most likely to act in ways that are self-defeating. They “shoot themselves in the foot” and often displace blame onto others for interfering with their ability to deal with new challenges, even though they are the ones who choose to use their anachronistic competencies. When they are confronted with unfamiliar challenges, they intensify their habitual ways of coping by applying their historically useful but no longer relevant competencies (“I don’t know how to do this, so I’ll do more of what I do know”). New circumstances, conditions, events, and situations become threats to such people. Over time and without modification, anachronistic coping patterns become the addicted person’s primary but flawed means of coping with anything new—and for defending themselves against any threats to their pride and self-esteem that discontinuous organizational role changes so frequently provoke. These are very powerful motivational forces. Yet they are rarely discussed or acknowledged in the standard way that most companies manage an upward transition.

So what are organizations to do? Exhibit 2.1 (pages 32–33) lists several tactics and techniques that talent management, HR, and OD professionals and even senior managers can employ to help managers-in-transition overcome behavioral addiction and assist them through the processes of letting go and adding on.

**Letting Go, Preserving, and Adding On**

To find their way through any of the four career crossroads effectively, managers-in-transition must make conscious decisions to let go of some of their habitual or preferred lower-level perspectives, familiar responsibilities, and work habits. Discarding anachronistic work practices and routines will free them up so they can focus on the demands of the new responsibilities that they must master. This enables managers-in-transition to adapt to the novel demands of their higher-level roles. This process will be repeated each time managers-in-transition are confronted by the challenge of negotiating the next higher career shift or crossroad that they must navigate.

Prior to (or very soon after) navigating a crossroad, those who are most successful seem to recognize the need for and actively seek out ways to
Exhibit 2.1. Tactics and Techniques for Facilitating Upward Transitions

There are several things organizations can do to help managers-in-transition hit the ground running and successfully take charge of a more senior role. The table below contains a generic list of interventions for helping managers at all levels let go of irrelevant skills, perspectives, and values and add on new ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letting Go</th>
<th>Adding On</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visible role models:</strong> Offer internal programs that include senior leaders in the firm who share their own journeys and discuss their own struggles with letting go of anachronistic skill sets—and the benefits they gained when they did let go.</td>
<td><strong>Integrated career planning and succession planning:</strong> An underexploited synergy is the natural affinity career planning with individuals has with succession planning for the organization. Among other things, aligning these activities can provide managers with a realistic preview of what to expect in future roles and identify where targeted skills training may help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mentoring:</strong> Sponsor and encourage the development of mentoring relationships in which senior managers share their experiences of withdrawal and letting go with individuals on a similar career trajectory.</td>
<td><strong>Developmental assignments:</strong> In anticipation of a transition, it may be advantageous to put the person on a task force or in a “stretch assignment” that requires, on a small scale, new skills that will be needed in the next role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting Go</td>
<td>Adding On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support groups:</strong> Provide a loosely structured forum where multiple managers-in-transition meet regularly to discuss how “what got them here won’t keep them here.” It is intended to facilitate the “grieving” of letting go as well as to provide encouragement and practical tips.</td>
<td><strong>Rotations:</strong> Again as preparation for the next role, managers-in-transition can do a short stint in the functional units that they, if actually promoted, will be responsible for. This will expose them to the work, key people, and an inside perspective on a foreign topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Coaching with a psychologist:** Managers-in-transition are unlikely to admit having difficulty; psychologically oriented coaches are uniquely suited to guide them through the emotional aspects of grieving and mourning in a confidential helping relationship. | **Action learning:** A bona fide action learning project (Marquardt, 1999), where ad hoc teams are presented with a novel business problem, is a powerful way to expose managers to alternative perspectives, take account of their biases and preferred ways of approaching problems, learn firsthand about essential interdependencies across the organization, and establish key relationships. |

*Note.* As a general principle, all training and development and talent literature, materials, and intranet sites should communicate a consistent, clear, and succinct message about how positions on different levels require somewhat distinct skill sets. This will prepare upwardly mobile managers to expect change as they traverse the career pathways and crossroads.
develop proficiency in the new competencies and skill areas needed in the new role. For instance, in chapter 5 Martineau, Laskow, Moye, and Phillips describe how the Central Intelligence Agency is using competency models tailored for each level of management as a way of signaling to up-and-coming managers what will be needed in the next job. Such a road map is enormously helpful because managers-in-transition are on a journey that requires them to abandon the familiar and courageously enter new, unfamiliar territory—repeatedly. They must stay alert, be astute, and be cautious. To the naive, the new work and its demands may look deceptively familiar, particularly since managers-in-transition may feel insecure and understandably are motivated to deny any differences. Proactive inhibition (Coch & French, 1948), or what is more commonly known as shooting yourself in the foot, may amplify the difficulties that managers-in-transition may experience when trying to discard and let go of their habitual work patterns and practices. The keys to a successful transition at each career crossroad are letting go, preserving, and adding on (Freedman, 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Harrison, 1972). Figure 2.2 contains a graphic depiction of this triple challenge facing managers making an upward move.

Figure 2.2. The Tripartite Challenge of Transformational Change: Preserving, Letting Go, and Adding On
Letting Go

Managers-in-transition must stop doing or do less of some outmoded but familiar and comfortable responsibilities. They must let go of some of the competencies that led to success in their previous, lower-level jobs. Managers-in-transition probably felt confident in themselves and in their competencies; they felt comfortable when using these reliable competencies in those familiar contexts. They may have even become addicted to those familiar responsibilities and competencies because of the repeated success they brought. To let go of these reliable old friends, which may feel something like jumping off a nice safe raft into shark-infested waters, is easy to prescribe but difficult and threatening to do. Managers-in-transition need firm encouragement and support to fully experience (rather than deny) their personal behavioral addiction and cope with a withdrawal process, to grieve and mourn the loss of their emotional attachment to these familiar, comforting competencies.

Preserving

Managers-in-transition must preserve and continue to perform certain familiar responsibilities and apply preexisting competencies that have been, still are, and are likely to continue to be practical and useful. However, they will have to deal with a major conundrum: how will they accurately distinguish between those responsibilities and competencies of which they must let go and those that they must retain and preserve? Few people can make this distinction quickly and accurately. As in any trial-and-error process, errors in judgment are inevitable.

Adding On

Managers-in-transition must start or do more to quickly master and apply new, unprecedented, and discontinuous responsibilities and competencies. Managers-in-transition must adopt the role of learners. This can be uncomfortable unless they are high on what Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) call learning agility: constantly seeking and capitalizing on performance-enhancing developmental experiences. Many managers-in-transition experience the prospect of acquiring proficiency in applying new perspectives, information, concepts, strategies, methods, technologies, skills, and attitudes to be "awkward and embarrassing," as one such person described it. This only stands to reason: the learning curve is not an upward parabola—real-life learning curves start with a dip in performance as the individual struggles to acquire the basics and then begin the upward swoop as mastery takes place (Downey et al., 2001; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). Managers-in-transition often
expect their progress to be a straight, upward trend line. This expectation must be challenged. Upwardly mobile managers must understand that this parabolic curve is the normal pathway.

To protect themselves from the awkward feelings that accompany the initial dip in the real-life learning curve, some managers-in-transition may convince themselves that this is an unreasonable or unnecessary and inconvenient process. Often these are rationalizations that are intended to create a facade to contain their anxiety, which can be quite intense. Beneath their brittle bravado, most managers-in-transition harbor fundamental doubts about their own capacity to learn and to adapt (see Kaplan, 1999). They must learn that such self-doubt is natural and that they must harness and direct the energy generated by such feelings into constructive channels.

**Applying the Model: The Special Case of Becoming the CEO**

As they rise within large, complex organizations (which they thought they thoroughly understood), managers-in-transition inevitably discover, as they traverse each of the four career crossroads, that they are moving into quite different, very unfamiliar worlds. Like Dorothy, they might well say, “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore...”

I have previously described (Freedman, 1998) the four critical career crossroads and the critical responsibilities and behaviors managers-in-transition must let go of, add on, and preserve to round out their repertoires. I have also described the critical prerequisite competencies and attributes the manager-in-transition needs to maneuver through each career crossroad. Readers interested in this thorough catalogue can find it in my 1998 article in *Consulting Psychology Journal*. In this chapter, for purposes of illustrating the demands of negotiating a career shift, I choose to focus on the most senior career crossroad: moving from executive manager of a portfolio of several businesses to the position of institutional leader, the chief executive officer (see crossroad 4 in figure 2.1).

**The CEO Transition**

This is the most visible career shift. Obviously, very few people are selected to serve in the role of an institutional leader. When this rare, singular event occurs, it usually has an extremely significant impact on the leader’s former peers, the board of directors, the organization’s external stakeholders (for example, customers, suppliers, competitors, regulatory agencies, the
financial community, media, investors, and employees), and the organization's future. The installation of a new institutional leader usually signals that fundamental, systemwide changes will take place and that these changes will impact all parts, all levels, and relations with all stakeholders of an organization. The process for the selection of an institutional leader is often far more political than are lower-level promotions. Other than that, the selection criteria are quite similar to—and as soft as—those used to make staffing decisions at lower levels (see Sessa, Kaiser, Taylor, & Campbell, 1998).

One difference in top-level appointments is the sources that provide the candidates. The challenging question confronting most organizations is whether to grow or buy their future leaders. This is a widespread dilemma (see chapter 1 for recent benchmarking research). Most Western organizations seem to rely on executive recruiting firms to provide lists of prequalified candidates from which boards of directors can select senior leaders. Thus, they opt for buying rather than growing executives. This may be expedient, since most contemporary efforts to ensure organizational continuity by planning executive succession, managing intellectual executive capital, and providing executive development opportunities seem to be inadequate. My observation is that only a very small number of public, private, NGO, and nonprofit sector organizations seem willing to make sufficient investments in developing their internal executive talent so they can select their CEOs' successors from pools of fully qualified executive manager candidates.

The most critical and most common error made by boards of directors at this crossroad is assuming that new CEOs have very little to learn other than, perhaps, the core technologies of the organization. It can be self-defeating to assume that new institutional leaders need only continue to operate as they did as executive managers of a portfolio of several businesses or as CEOs of medium-sized companies. Like high blood pressure, it can be a silent killer to assume that new CEOs are simply adding a few new specialized businesses to their portfolios and that they do not need to unlearn any anachronistic practices or learn anything new about leading an organization in an uncertain environment.

Newly appointed CEOs should prepare themselves to experience a revolutionary change in self-concept and sense of identity. As institutional leaders, they must cope with the natural anxiety that comes from realizing that their ultimate value may be based on the quality of only a handful of extraordinarily consequential strategic decisions that they will make in any given year. The stakes are enormous and are matched by the pressure with
which CEOs must learn to live. The job is exceedingly demanding and requires a nearly total dedication to the firm, often at the expense of work-life balance (Kaiser & Craig, 2004).

If they have been paying attention to their varied experiences as they worked their way through previous crossroads, they may have prepared themselves to learn how to unlearn and learn anew. If not previously, they will now have to learn how to climb a series of steep learning curves—often simultaneously, always quickly, and always substantively. Exhibit 2.2 lists some specific things that new CEOs will have to add on and let go of.

**Implications of Skipping Crossroads**

In my organization development and change consulting practice, I have encountered a number of situations in which CEOs have not traversed two or three of the career crossroads before being appointed to their current position. There are many justifications for such shortcuts. One might argue that the justifications are mostly rationalizations for hasty decision makers or politically motivated appointments. There is, however, the instance of an entrepreneurial innovator who illuminates several important implications of skipping or bypassing one or more lower-level career crossroads.

Rising within an established, stable organization is quite different from leading an organization at an earlier phase in its life cycle. For example, if and when they conclude that their companies are unwilling or unable to support the commercialization of their technological innovations, technologically gifted wunderkind are not unlikely to resign. Typically, such persons have been high-level individual contributors with little, if any, experience with the discontinuous challenges of traversing any of the career crossroads. Once in a while, one hears stories about these entrepreneurial innovators who leave their original employer but negotiate with their employer to take their patents with them to start up their own new technology-based ventures.

Whether they realize it or not, these courageous innovators are leaping from the first or second to the fourth career crossroad, omitting quite a bit of essential developmental experience. Theirs is a truly revolutionary challenge. These technologically driven, entrepreneurial leaders may be successful during the start-up and initial rapid growth phases of their new enterprises but are likely to be ineffective in leading them once they have achieved some degree of stability. Such unique individuals probably should bring in experienced managers to fill in the gaps in their capacities to fulfill the role of effective institutional leaders.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let Go (Stop or do less)</th>
<th>Preserve (Continue to do)</th>
<th>Add On (Start or do more)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make quick, tactical, trade-off decisions.</td>
<td>Build and develop your subordinate executive managers into a high-performance team.</td>
<td>Serve as the most observable company figurehead interacting with the various internal and external corporate stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a decisive and directive style that centers on your own judgment.</td>
<td>Serve as a mentor to promising subordinates (two or three levels down from you).</td>
<td>Establish and nurture relationships with external stakeholder groups and populations of constituents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate with peers (you won't have any peers within your own organization now).</td>
<td>Recognize, reward, and publicize outstanding performance of individuals, teams, and subsystems.</td>
<td>Seek and develop mutually supportive affiliations with CEOs in other companies in your own and in other industries and with trade or professional associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compete with peers (again, you won't have any peers, but whatever you do, you will have detractors).</td>
<td>Maintain and nurture strategic planning at corporate and divisional levels.</td>
<td>Articulate an attractive, compelling sense of corporate mission and purpose that employees and the investment community can identify with.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let Go (Stop or do less)</th>
<th>Preserve (Continue to do)</th>
<th>Add On (Start or do more)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expect that you can have a great family life in addition to a highly successful career as a CEO. You may have to sacrifice a balance between your career and your personal and family life.</td>
<td>Identify and challenge limiting organizational beliefs to ensure their relevance or discard and replace them.</td>
<td>Enhance the capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity in a system of unprecedented scope and scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build up your personal facade or image.</td>
<td>Maintain a global perspective.</td>
<td>Apply a systems view to understand complexity, interdependency, the nature of alignment, and a comfort with ambiguity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiment and take reasonable risks.</td>
<td>Recruit, empower, and support your subordinate executive managers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do the right things.</td>
<td>Nurture or start a formal executive succession system (not just an emergency program).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consider what legacy you want to leave to the company after you retire or depart.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alas, they rarely do what they probably should do. It may be difficult for them to understand and accept the need to supplement themselves since to do so would mean they would have to acknowledge their own personal limitations or shortcomings, which is difficult for driven high achievers. Those who fail to compensate for their limitations may be forced out by, for example, the venture capitalists and other investors who funded their start-up companies and now want to see a reliable flow of profits. Some entrepreneurial innovators may not be temperamentally suitable to make the shift to leading an organization once it reaches maturity. Such persons may have to let go of their creation and consider moving on to start up another in what may become a series of innovative enterprises. Or they may rescue themselves, take a role like the chief innovation officer, and turn the leadership of the new venture over to someone with the requisite experience, competencies, and temperament to lead the enterprise into the future.

Conclusion

When we observe an under-performing or dysfunctional leader or manager, it serves no constructive purpose to castigate that individual. Rather, we must keep in mind the possibility of organizational collusion. With necessary and sufficient preparation of individuals plus organizational support and effective performance management, we might identify and do something useful with under-performing leaders. However, ideal organizational conditions rarely prevail. Frequently, what looks like a dysfunctional leader is merely a product of prevailing organizational conditions. Therefore, rather than blaming the victim, it seems more practical to examine the organization and its executive development and succession systems to determine how to ensure that the behavior of managers-in-transition will enable them to take the leadership roles and apply the proper competencies to the relevant challenges in ways that contribute to the realization of the organizations’ vision, mission, goals, strategies, and values.

Organizational conditions can exacerbate or ameliorate flawed individual behavior. It is enlightening to illuminate and specify those organizational assumptions and practices that help and hinder effective executive leadership. The results of such an exercise can establish practical diagnostic criteria that could enable managers-in-transition and their consultants to identify areas for supportive, corrective, or preventive intervention.
Notes

1. The term *business* is in quotes because this crossroad is intended to cover any complete business process composed of a sequence of value-adding but discrete functions in public sector, NGO, and nonprofit organizations in addition to those in the private, for-profit sector.

2. It is also important to note that managers should not remain on the same pathway, or in the same type of role, for more than three or four years. Beyond that, people become too "addicted" to using familiar routines that may have been successful at lower levels as they try to adapt and respond to the new demands presented by crossing the next career crossroad.

References


teenth Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago.


