

Swimming Upstream: The Challenge of Managerial Promotions

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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).

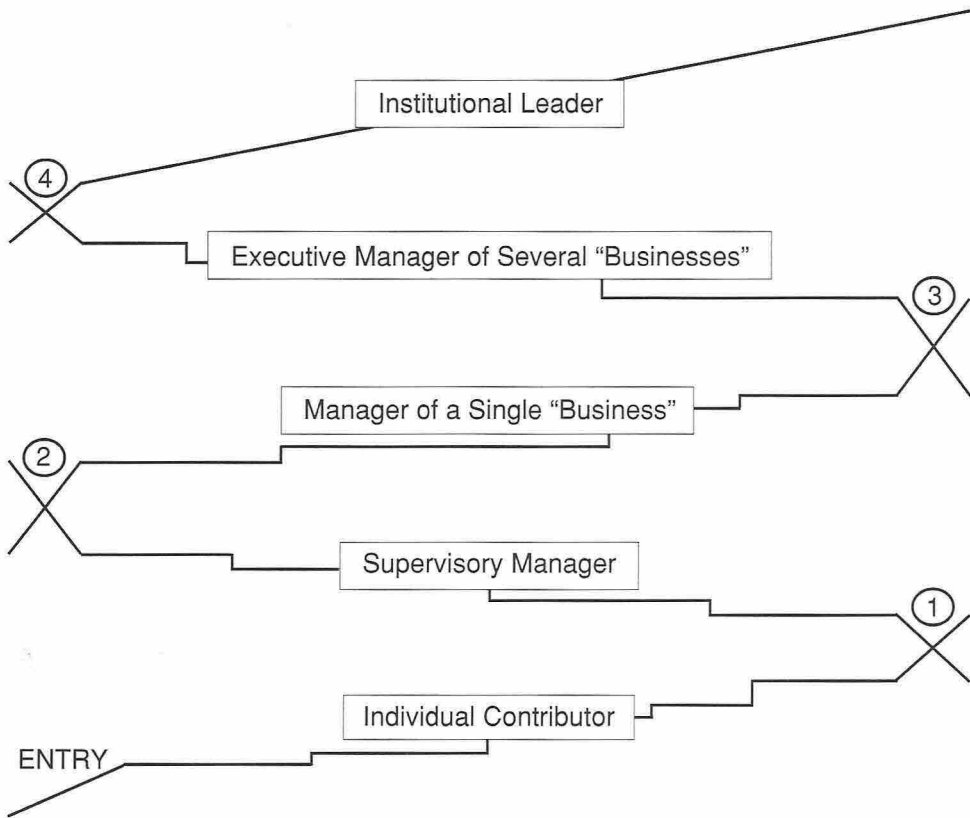
Summarizing briefly, the four crossroads are (1) from individual contributor to supervisory manager, (2) from supervisory manager to manager of a single “business,”¹ (3) from manager of a single “business” to executive manager of a portfolio of several “businesses,” and (4) from executive manager of 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



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

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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

