



Music to the Ears

Orchestrating Successful
Leadership Change

By Darcy Loy



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ransition can be defined in numerous contexts: Evolution. Shift. Alteration. Changeover. In music, transition can be “a progression from one key to another in a piece of music.” Michael Watkins, author of *The First 90 Days* states, “Transitions are periods of opportunity, a chance to start afresh and to make needed changes in an organization.” (Watkins, 2003, p.1) For those of us in the facilities world, transition can often refer to a change of leadership; which more often than not results in a change in vision, perspective, leadership styles, and practices.

Not all perceive leadership transition in a positive light. Some team members view the prospect of change as being a negative and daunting concept and would rather change not take place.

TRANSITION IN HARMONY

Perhaps we could convince these individuals to see change in the perspective of the above musical definition: the complete musical piece being our entire organization; the “keys” being individual team members; and the new leader conducting the piece of music so that it flows smoothly through the changes in time and tempo. When all of the notes are properly in tune, they blend together to reach that final outcome—harmony. If your team could look at it in that context, maybe they could perceive that surviving leadership change doesn’t need to be daunting; that as members of the team they play a valuable role with regard to the success or failure of said change.

As effective facilities leaders it is our responsibility to provide our employees, as well as the incoming leader, with the information and support necessary for a successful leadership change. We need to communicate the whys, whos, and whats of the change. Why are we experiencing the change? Who is going to fill the leadership role? What is going to be needed by both the employees and the leader to survive the change and be successful? Communicating vital information and answering the many questions that will arise are imperative to successful leadership transition.

WHY ARE WE EXPERIENCING THE CHANGE?

Organizations seek new leaders for a variety of reasons. How teams respond to and transition through a change in leadership will be somewhat dependent on the nature of the change itself. A pending retirement within the organization allows the luxury of time to plan how the transition will materialize. It allows everyone to adjust to the concept gradually. If an internal candidate is being prepared to step into the position, the opportunity exists for job shadowing. However, a new leader might suddenly be needed to replace someone that departs due to a serious illness or injury. Or, worst-case scenario, a director may be asked to leave because they weren't performing up to task. These examples have totally different effects on how transition might flow.

Sudden departures leave units little time to prepare, hastening the search for a suitable candidate. Troubled work relationships resulting in the termination of an individual in a leadership position can create another set of challenges. Involuntary separations such as a firing are likely to evoke a great deal of emotion. The team as a whole may not be privy to the reasoning behind the dismissal, which in turn has the potential to lead to trust issues within the organization. If the director had a strong bond with the team, alliances will have been formed making the acceptance of a new leader more difficult.

PLANNING FOR TRANSITION

Regardless of what brings about leadership change, organizations can implement the change more effectively if they have a transition plan in place prior to a needed transition. Deb Marshall, author of *Succession: Planning for a Leadership Transition*, writes, "We strongly encourage boards to include CEO transition planning in their strategic planning process at least every three years." (Marshall, March 2010, p. 1) A transition plan can assess the necessary skill sets and character traits that are needed to fill a particular leadership role. It allows the organization to analyze their vision statement; focus on where they are today and where they need to be tomorrow in order to be successful.

Assessment can also include employee relations and define internal candidates that have the potential for moving up within the department. Succession plans should be revisited often. Leadership skills that are needed today will change significantly

and probably won't address challenges in the future. As stated in the article "Best Practices in Succession Planning," we need to "look through the windshield rather than in the rear-view mirror to understand the leadership skills required of the next CEO." (Bennett, Miles, November 2007, p. 1)

"The actions you take during your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you succeed or fail."

—Michael Watkins

WHO IS GOING TO FILL THE LEADERSHIP ROLE?

So many questions surround the "who" of a leadership change. What will the expectations of the new leader be? What will their management style be—the values and perceptions that they will bring to the table? How well do they know the culture of our organization and will they be able to move the team forward?

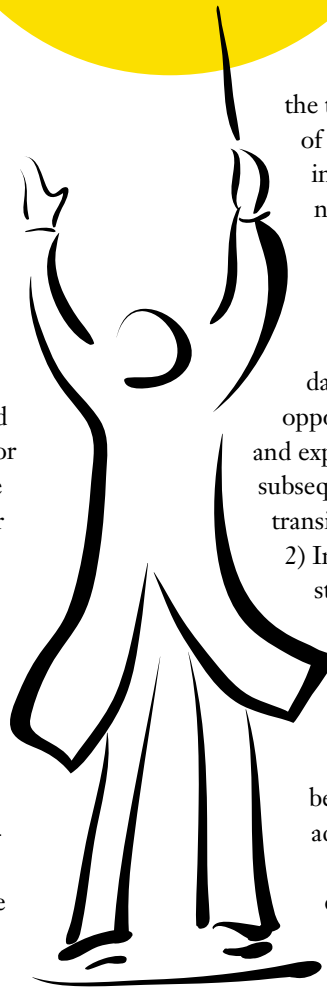
It could possibly be the most daunting piece of the transition puzzle because we deal with personalities of people. One of the most significant questions asked in this process is, "Do we hire from within our organization or do we seek an external candidate?" There are advantages and disadvantages to each scenario.

INTERNAL CANDIDATES

Author Kellye Whitney states, "Internal candidates have an edge, because an organization has the opportunity to proactively assess what development and experience candidates are missing, provide these and subsequently mitigate risks well in advance of a proposed transition or succession." (Whitney, November 2007, p. 2)

2) Internal candidates bring familiarity. They understand the culture of the organization and are aware of the characteristics of the employees they have worked with. Internal candidates are well versed in the vision and mission of the unit and have invested themselves within the organization. Promoting from within shows team members that they are valued and that opportunity for advancement exists.

With advantages come disadvantages. Internal successors often struggle with their new leadership role; finding it difficult to transition from coworker to "boss." Existing friendships might lead to a sense of entitlement by the former coworker; that special treatment is expected as a result of that friendship. There perhaps are team members that had also applied for the management position and didn't get it that harbor resentment. Sometimes internal candidates have been working within the organization or with a specific team for a long period of time. Failure to see flaws of the team that need corrected is a definite possibility and the success of the team will be jeopardized.



EXTERNAL CANDIDATES

Hiring an external leader can add value to the organization. They bring a new viewpoint and perspective; a new way to look at the culture of the organization. An external candidate can provide a different approach to problem solving and innovation; a useful tool for a department unable to solve issues themselves due to lack of resources. They bring with them an established network of outside resources and contacts. Hiring externally is also a solution for units that might not see potential for leadership within their teams; or don't have the financial resources to train and groom their employees. Most importantly, external hires have the potential to bring new vision and motivation, resulting in creation of momentum to a team that has become stagnant as a result of the current culture.

On the down side, research has shown that the failure rate for external hires is greater than promoting within. Ron Garonzik states, "Outside CEOs tend to get the boot quicker. They're at a disadvantage, because it's harder for them to read the people, culture, and nuances of working within the organization." (Whitney, November 2007, p. 1) Being unfamiliar with how the organization functions means they start from scratch. It may be harder for team members to accept a leader from "outside"

making the adaptation time for cohesion considerably longer. The external hire will have to spend significant time gaining trust within the team.

WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP TRANSITION?

Successful leadership transition cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the new leader. All members within the organization must be accountable. Employees, upper management, and the new leader will each play an essential role in how they interact and respond to one another. While having a solid succession plan in place is essential to ease the transition process, there are many other processes that can be implemented to achieve harmony.

Communication throughout the organization's structure is vital. Foremost, a new leader needs communication from superiors in regards to expectations of their new role will be. Many new leaders fail because the demands of employment haven't been articulated. They lose their way because they were unable to figure it out.

Upper management must address key questions and concerns that team members have in order to establish trust. Not only will this help relieve the uncertainty that a change evokes, but it will also give them a sense of value—that they are being heard

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and that their opinions matter. The new leader needs to communicate his vision for the team; what his hopes are for the future as well as his expectations of each team member.

A strong support network is vital to the survival of the incoming candidate. Upper management must remain engaged throughout the transition period providing insight and mentoring as the new leader acclimates to the culture of the organization. Support from superiors during reorganization will be instrumental in the development of relationships between staff and the new director. Front-line employees are a significant piece of the transition puzzle. Those eager for change will embrace the new leader and be supportive. They will assist in spreading the message of how transition will be beneficial to those that see change as detrimental. The new leader needs to establish alliances early in the transition period, with those that they can trust to assist in promoting the value and importance in the changes that are to come.

Lastly, a new candidate needs to establish credibility quickly in the transition process. This means setting small, easily attainable goals at first that will allow the team to experience success under the new leader. Not only will this act as a motivational tool and create momentum for the team, but it will help influence those that were so opposed to the change.

CONCLUSION

Who doesn't want to be a part of a successful organization? Issues that the employees deem to be important are a good starting point. Swift implementation of solutions to these specific problems display to the team that they are being heard, and that their ideas and concepts are valued.

Leadership transition isn't easy. There is no such thing as a "ready-now" candidate that can be "dropped" into an empty slot within an organization. Successful leadership transition is hard work and is the responsibility of the

"In order to reduce succession risk, some industry thought leaders say the safe bet is to groom internal successors rather than venture outside an organization to find needed talent."

—Michael Watkins

entire unit. Alfred North Whitehead, a British mathematician and philosopher, once said, "In every age of well-marked transition, there is the pattern of habitual dumb practice and emotion which is passing and there is oncoming a new complex of habit."

If we put best practices and processes in place before a critical leadership shift occurs, surviving leadership change will be less daunting to those involved and can result in a successful outcome for the organization as a whole. ☺

NOTES

1. Bennett, Nathan & Miles, Stephen. (November 2007) "Best Practices in Succession Planning." www.forbes.com/2007/11/07/succession-ceos, p 1.
2. Ciampa, Dan & Watkins, Michael. (December 18, 2007) "Advice for Vikram Pandit, the New CEO of Citigroup." *Harvard Business Review*, p. 1-2.
3. Marshall, Deb. (March 4, 2010) "Succession: Planning for a Leadership Transition." www.wipfli.com, p. 1.
4. Watkins, Michael. (2003) *The First 90 Days*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Publishing, p. 1.
5. Whitney, Kellye. (November 16, 2007, Volume 2, Issue 9) "Internal Versus External Succession May Be Best Long-Term Talent Bet." <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com>, p. 1.

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