

Making Your Mark In A New Leadership Role

According to Dan Ciampa and Michael Watkins, authors of best-selling book *Right From The Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role*[1], what you do in your first few months can mean the difference between success and failure. Whether you are joining a new organisation or have risen up through the ranks, starting life as a senior leader, department head or team manager can be daunting. Follow the methodology outlined in this article to help overcome the tensions and challenges associated with a new leadership role and ensure you make a positive mark.

Secure early wins

In the transition period [2] of a leadership role, Ciampa and Watkins argue that a new leader must focus on energising people and addressing short-term business challenges. Securing early wins which result in visible results (e.g. improvements to the bottom line or operational processes) will build confidence in a new leader's abilities as well as setting the tone for how the organisation will progress under their direction.

Lay a foundation for the future

To establish a firm basis for moving the organisation forward, a new leader should focus on three key building blocks:

1. **Visioning:** beginning to develop a personal image of how the organisation will work. This involves:
 - Careful observation of the current situation and noting thoughts and feelings which can be reflected on later.
 - Imaginative visualisation to form an image of what the organisation could become, based on reflection.
 - Clarification by discussing and testing ideas with others.
2. **Building a political base:** identifying, strengthening and extending the political support necessary to overcome resistance and bring about change. Political mapping techniques can help new leaders navigate organisational politics effectively.[3]
3. **Changing the culture:** identifying and diagnosing problems with the current culture and supporting cultural change where needed. Culture change can be achieved by:
 - Using pilot projects to try out new tools and behaviours.
 - Changing performance measurements to align positive behaviours and organisational objectives.
 - Educating and involving people in new ways of thinking.
 - Building on islands of excellence by encouraging them and showcasing them as examples for others to follow.
 - Using external support to stimulate creativity, e.g. a specialist consultant or organisation.

Build credibility

People's early perceptions of a new leader have a strong impact on the development (or otherwise) of long-term credibility. New leaders typically come under scrutiny from the general employee population, senior management and the board as well as external customers[4] and stakeholders, yet have a limited time to make an impact.

It is essential that a new leader brings the right kind of energy to the organisation and is able to cultivate productive working relationships with key influencers quickly. According to Ciampa and Watkins, for a leader to build credibility they should be:

- demanding but able to be satisfied
- accessible and approachable yet not too familiar
- decisive but judicious
- focused but flexible
- active and inspiring without causing commotion
- willing to make tough calls but with compassion

Get orientated quickly

It is essential to establish a clear understanding of the organisation's strategy, direction and capabilities at an early stage, and assess whether these match the demands of the market in which it operates. This process combines:

1. **Strategy mapping:** to assess the organisation's existing (or stated) strategy and determining whether it matches the de facto (or actual) strategy followed. From this follows an assessment of strategic position and its

appropriateness to organisational goals and objectives.[5]

2. **Assessing organisational capability:** to determine the nature of the organisation's core technical, cultural and political landscapes. This involves assessing:

- How well key processes, technologies and skills meet the organisation's strategic objectives. Do they meet or exceed stakeholder requirements?[6]
- If collective employee values, attitudes and norms allow high performance. Does the corporate culture facilitate or undermine performance?[7]
- How power and influence is distributed. Whose support is needed to implement key decisions?[8]

Manage your learning

Continuous learning is important throughout the leadership journey, and is particularly critical during the transition period. A new leader will face many competing demands on their time, and considerable pressure to get up to speed with an unfamiliar array of systems and strategies. However, in the early days of a new leadership role, it is important not to dive straight in, but to take time to soak up knowledge and reflect upon it before taking action.

Define your vision

One of the most important things a new leader can do is develop a clear vision of how the organisation will operate in the future. Over time, initial thoughts develop into something which the new leader can clearly define and share with others. To help define a compelling yet achievable vision, Ciampa and Watkins suggest developing a vision hierarchy using the following factors:

- **An evocative description:** What will you see and hear?
- **Your core values:** What do you value? What achievements have meaning?
- **Your A-items:**[9] What do you want? How will you recognise it?

Build a successful coalition

The ability to garner support for new initiatives is a critical element of a new leader's success. Key people in the organisation must be supportive of the leader's vision and act as enablers of change. Ciampa and Watkins offer five 'rules' for successful coalition building:

1. Don't ignore **organisational politics** as political networks have the power to resist or stimulate change.
2. **Technical change** does not occur in isolation, as political and cultural impacts go hand in hand.
3. Effective **political management** is different from being political, as there is an important difference between legitimate attempts to influence others, and manipulation or coercion.
4. The goal should be to create **winning coalitions** (with the power to take action and survive crisis) and prevent **blocking coalitions** (which seek to protect the status quo or advance a different agenda).
5. Build up **political capital** by achieving early wins and channelling support for wider initiatives.

Prepare emotionally

Effective preparation for a new leadership role involves emotional as well as practical groundwork. Many leaders use self-assessment and reflective techniques to gain perspective and understand what is going on around them. It is also important to use coping strategies[10] to gain control and deal with inevitable stresses. Finding ways to relax and balance work and family life are also important considerations, as it is easy for new leaders to lose perspective.

Seek advice

Although many new leaders will be resilient and emotionally prepared for what lies ahead, the ability to search out advice can prevent individuals becoming isolated or overwhelmed. Ciampa and Watkins argue that different help is needed from a network of advisors who can offer the following mix of expertise:

- **Technical:** this consists of information about technologies, technical/scientific issues and strategy. The keys to success in using technical advice are timeliness; having the information exactly when accuracy is needed; the pertinence of the advisor's knowledge to the problem or challenge, and connection; and the leader's ability to understand the importance of the advice. Technical advisors might include heads of functional areas, senior colleagues or external consultants and industry experts.
- **Political:** this can help a new leader deal with the culture, politics and relationships in the organisation. A political counsellor is typically a sounding board who helps the new leader:
 - think through ideas

- decide on the appropriate route to take
- assess cultural and political challenges
- provide candid feedback
- act as devil's advocate by posing "what if" questions
- A political counsellor could be a senior HR colleague with knowledge of the organisation's political dynamics.
- **Personal:** this is a unique form of support which focuses on improving an individual's wellbeing and providing emotional encouragement. This is an often neglected area of leadership support, which only comes from a long-standing relationship and personal concern. Many leaders find support in a trusted senior colleague who acts as a mentor, or from an external career coach or family member who can provide an independent perspective.
- It is important to select advisors carefully, and to be mindful of their competence, trustworthiness and potential impact on a leader's status and reputation.

Conclusion

Research shows that up to 40% of newly appointed leaders fail in their first 18 months.[11] Failure can be defined by performing below expectations, poor decision-making, alienating key people, losing (and not replacing talent), missed opportunities and overlooked trends.[12] However, by following the methodology outlined by Ciampa and Watkins, new leaders can avoid the many pitfalls associated with the early days of a leadership role, and attain success.

Find out more

For more information on Kaplan and Norton's **strategy mapping** techniques, visit:

www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_strategy_maps_strategic_communication.html

For more information about **political mapping** and **stakeholder mapping** techniques, visit:

www.infomanagementcenter.com/enewsletter/200512/third.htm

[1] Dan Ciampa and Michael Watkins, *Right From The Start: Taking Charge In A New Leadership Role*, Harvard Business School Press, 1999.

[2] Ciampa and Watkins identify the transition period of a new leadership role as the period between recruitment and the end of the first six months in the role.

[3] Joel Deluca's book *Political Savvy: Systematic Approaches to Leadership Behind the Scenes* provides a useful overview of political mapping techniques.

[4] External customers might include the general public or patient groups, and stakeholders might include partner organisations and shareholders.

[5] For more information on the process of strategy mapping, see Kaplan and Norton's book, *Strategy Maps: Converting Intangible Assets Into Tangible Outcomes*.

[6] A customer satisfaction survey or stakeholder survey could be used to assess expectations against current organisational performance.

[7] An employee attitude survey could be used to establish whether values and attitudes are facilitating or encouraging high performance.

[8] Mapping the organisation's political landscape can improve understanding of key influencers and relationships.

[9] Ciampa and Watkins define A-items as the most important priorities and actions a new leader feels are necessary to achieve their vision.

[10] Coping strategies might include better time management, delegation of non-essential tasks and blocking out diary time to deal with key issues.

[11] Dan Ciampa, *Almost Ready: How Leaders Move Up*, Harvard Business Review, January 2005.

[12] Dotlich and Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail*, Jossey Bass, 2003, p 143.

Related Items

Related Resources

- [Make Your Mark in a New Leadership Role](#)
- [Sink or Swim: Surviving The First 100 Days in a New Job](#)