

Leaders in transition

Dramatic stories of remarkable ordinariness

An international, four year research study backed by Ashridge and Groupe HEC in France explodes many of the myths that surround modern management thinking about what makes new leaders successful. Using an innovative “fly on the wall” research method, a research team lived alongside leaders - and the people around them – in a range of organisations across Europe, for periods of up to two years. The researchers’ discoveries will be of keen interest to leaders and their colleagues as well as for those who recruit and develop new leaders.



The report tells the stories of eight leaders and the changes they and the people around them went through. It shows them, “warts and all”, battling with the real life challenges of organisational life today, when they stumbled and when they succeeded. It was observed that leadership changes are like personal transitions – an upside down time of great uncertainty and anxiety. Just as changing relationships or switching jobs is stressful for an individual, so the change of leader triggers anxiety for both the leaders and people around him/her. An old order of status, roles and working relationships dies and a new one is born.

The report exposes the irrational ideas that surround leadership changes and make the job of a new leader more difficult. It shows how

- everything does not depend on the first 100 days
- charismatic leaders can be dangerous
- team building happens more through straight conversations in the moment than “awaydays”
- changing the people who work with you can be a way of avoiding the real problems.

The report demonstrates that new leaders are most successful when they stop thinking they can shape the future as they would like and face life as it is. Instead of trying to live up to some idealised picture of what leaders are, they make best use of what is immediate and present.

Key tensions

The report identifies four key tensions that new leaders must grapple with, in the moment:

- **Relationships – *Get connected.*** How to get sufficiently close to connect with your people *while* staying detached enough to make tough decisions
- **Direction – *Get real.*** How to confront the realities of the past and present *while* being true to your aspirations for the future
- **Frame of mind – *Don’t panic.*** How to hold an open mind about how the new business and organisation will differ from your past experience *while* knowing enough to reach conclusions and take action
- **Boundaries – *Know your limits.*** How to be yourself and set limits to what you can do *while* being a good company servant and delivering what the organisation needs

Lessons

The report draws out the lessons for new leaders and for those who appoint and work with them. These include:

Context, context, context - 80% of results came from the situation, 20% from the individual. The business environment, organisational culture and group and people dynamics mattered much more than individual qualities. The successful leaders found ways to work with what they inherited, rather than fight it.

Organisational spaghetti – the confusion caused by repeated re-organisations with unclear tasks, roles and boundaries. Examples of this were “phantom bosses” and unclear objectives. Leaders had to negotiate and re-negotiate expectations.

The “worm inside” - how leaders tried to fix something within themselves through their work with others; how this inner need to prove themselves drove them on. Leaders should think about how their worm is playing out in a particular situation, what is positive and what is negative about it, here and now.

“Healthy selfishness” is needed. New leaders had to look to their own needs if they were to survive and be effective under the pressures of transitions.

Naming the un-nameable – the leader was valuable when he/she helped others to tackle issues that everyone knew were important but no one dared mention. To do this they sometimes had to delve into the taboo side of issues, daring to confront unpleasant realities, while holding on to their hopes for the future.

As an organisation, **protect your investment** – new leaders needed help and support. Don’t abandon them once you have spent much time and effort appointing them.

As leaders, **trust yourself** – in nearly every case the leaders had what it took to be successful, provided they acknowledged their limits and studied closely the new situation they were in.

About the authors

George Binney and **Colin Williams** teach, research and consult in organisation and management development. They are the co-authors of *Leaning Into the Future – Changing The Way People Change Organisations* (Nicholas Brealey, 1995) and *Making Quality Work* (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1992). **Gerhard Wilke** is a group analyst and organisational development consultant whose publications include *How to be a Good Enough GP* (Radcliffe Medical Press, 2001).

Gilles Amado, Professor of Psychosociology at HEC School of Management in France, and **Rachel Amato**, a doctoral student at HEC, are authors of *The Transitional Approach to Change* (Karnac 2001). **Richard Elsner** is principal of ‘The Point’ and **Howard Atkins** and **Elizabeth Braiden** are consultants with Ashridge Consulting Limited.

Copies of the report, price £50 + p&p, can be obtained via www.ashridge.com or from julian.doyle@ashridge.org.uk tel: +44 (0)1442 841397

