



Center for  
Applied  
Research

Philadelphia, PA  
215.320.3200 tel  
215.320.3204 fax

Cambridge, MA  
617.576.1166 tel  
617.576.3015 fax

info@cfar.com

### ***Briefing Notes:***

## **Managing the Entry to a High Pressure Leadership Role**

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Upon one's announcement as the new leader, key stakeholders are actively strategizing how your appointment might affect their passions and agendas—what some have referred to as “reading your entrails.” While you are thinking through your own entry strategy, the use of time between the appointment and your assuming office, the early months, the critical issues, many stakeholders simultaneously are researching your background, contacting people in their network who know you and reading your available writings. Thus in almost any encounter that you have with a particular stakeholder, they will have had more time to prepare for the meeting than you will.

Upon your appointment, everyone needs to see you yesterday and often they and observers will over interpret the meaning of the order in which you attend to various constituencies. Below we offer some advice for the early stages of one's leadership especially on ways to leverage one's scarce time.

### **Begin to build your staff system**

Early on one has to determine the mix of staff you inherit and people you bring or hire. Beware taking on too much too soon, especially before your support systems are high functioning. People will give you intelligence about the staff and operations of the CEO's office, but trust your own instincts about chemistry and style. You can move too quickly before realizing how rich a staff member's networks and institutional memory are. Conversely, you can move too slowly and miss a window for change. Early on it is easier (and expected) to change staff than after you have worked with them for a period of time. Handling transitions out sensitively is critical in institutions where loyalty and tenure are deep values. Often a mix of new and old serves you well initially. Especially when you are keeping people on, the more transparently you can discuss how you like to be supported and what their ideas are the faster you can build a high functioning support system. All too often when you think you are responding quickly, others are making untested assumptions about your leadership style. The early interactions are inevitably about analyzing the criteria you bring to decision-making. Reich, (1997) when assuming the Secretary of Labor job, shortly after arriving, asked his chief of staff what criteria they were using to screen correspondence. They replied confidently, “the criteria you would use” to which he replied, “I don't know yet my own criteria.” This triggered a useful joint-

learning process where they developed some guidelines and ways for updating them by sampling a few of the screened out and periodically reflecting back on what was screened in over a month or so to refine the criteria.

Your personal staff is the front line for the crush of people who want the leader's time. Reflection on the early specific examples is the best way to evolve shared approaches. Many times calls that seem like they are from the outside are actually simulated by internal stakeholders seeking to advance their agendas.

### **Invest in the successful transitions of your key hires**

A new leader will often be hiring for many key roles. Just as boards often think their job is done with the hiring decision, so to can a CEO step away too quickly after a significant appointment. Think with these individuals what is the best way for them to enter successfully, perhaps giving them more time for the transition than your eagerness to have them start yesterday. Advise them to talk with key stakeholders of the job they are taking, to bring an outside perspective, which is easily lost once one signs on to a high-pressure job. Spend time with them early on to both help them and get their fresh perspectives on the issues you are taking up. Actively work to connect new hires with existing staff.

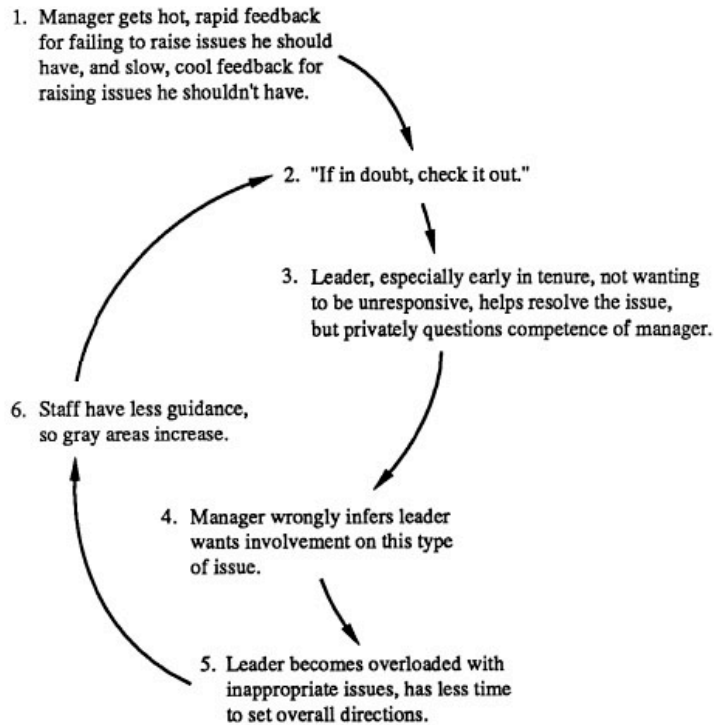
### **Align your time and attention to constituencies around a few carefully chosen critical agendas**

Work from your outbox rather than your inbox. Bennis (1989) has written about the unconscious conspiracy, the “helpful” acts of others in bringing issues for your resolution that in aggregate keep you from being a strategic transformational force. The internal equivalent—“the internal saboteur” (Fairbain, 1952) is that part of yourself that keeps you in your comfort zone of old skills versus risking being less competent transitionally in new areas that are critical for the success of your strategy. Another variant is letting yourself be caught up in busyness to avoid thinking about the really difficult dilemmas in realizing your vision. Periodically do an analysis with your secretary or assistant and review how your calendar matches up with your strategic priorities and adjust your screening and scheduling criteria accordingly. It also helps to “identify a center of gravity,” or areas whose improvement can have a disproportionate impact on overall operational financial performance. (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999) Make changes transparent to key constituencies, for example if you need to drive a major initiative (i.e. merger, alliance, road show for VC funding etc.), tell people how much time that will take you away from other responsibilities and authorize key others to take up aspects of your role.

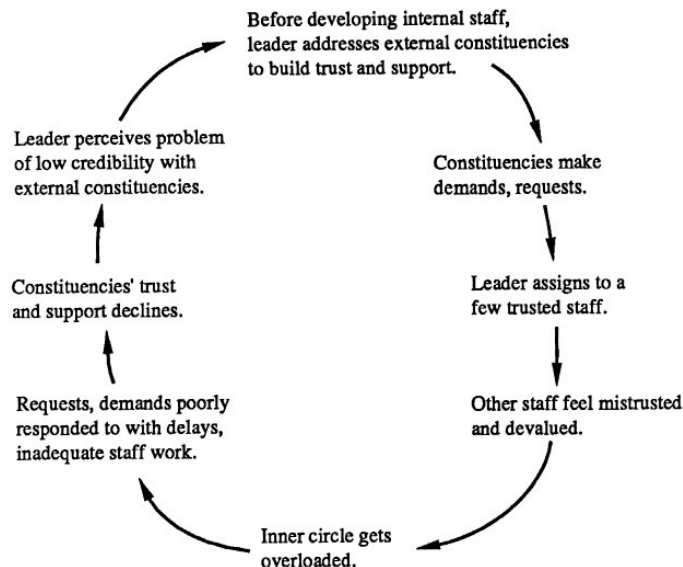
## Avoid the typical traps in connecting with existing staff

There are three predictable dynamics between a new entering leader and existing staff that are diagrammed below (Gilmore, 2003, Ch. 9).

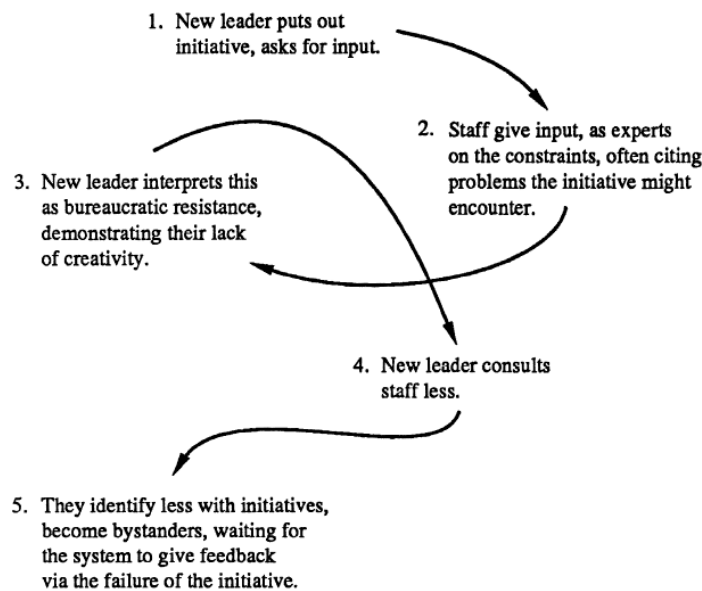
### 1. Cycle of overloading the leader



### 2. Over-focusing on external constituencies before developing inside staff.



Misunderstanding the mix of conserving and changing between a new leader and staff.



### **Match your early promises to the carrying capacity of you and your staff**

Under promising and over delivering creates credibility early on. But this refers to the number of issues you put in play, not to how high you set the bar on the few key ones you chose. Thus for example, if there are a number of searches underway, you might want to focus on the few most important and send a strong signal both about how you will be engaged in key searches as well as the level of talent you want to bring to the organization. For new leaders, the most potent form of communication in an increasingly cynical context about spin and rhetoric is through actions. Therefore, with each of the early actions in the many arenas in which you lead, think explicitly about the signals that the action sends: the standards, the values, and the directions.

### **For each key issue, work early on to authorize a partner to provide the continuity and keep you informed**

On most issues, identify early on someone who will support you or take the lead on various initiatives and include them even when stakeholders want to see you alone. Paul Gray, former president of MIT, always asked himself before each meeting, “whose job am I doing in this encounter,” or, “whose job am I undercutting by inadvertently communicating a message of mistrust in their capabilities.” By being transparent with others that their interests will be better served by working directly with the right member of your staff, you will save time and get the intelligence directly to the right person without you having to brief your staff after meeting alone with someone. One CEO is explicit that “this issue is too important for me to be the weak secretarial link to get what we will discuss to

the right person, so we need to at least have him in the meeting with us. But my schedule may slow us down in getting started, so I am comfortable with your meeting with him and keeping me involved when I can really make a difference.”

### **Think of issue jujitsu**

When you look at your calendar each day, forget for a minute why they want to see you and associate to how they might be helpful for your agenda, perhaps linking you with a key supporter, giving you a piece of intelligence on a proposed action, etc. This harvests more value from an investment of your scarce time you have already made in agreeing to see this person.

### **Invent more effective forums for connecting with multiple constituencies that work for you and them and get more out of existing meetings**

One leader invited others to join his morning run. Another new leader (a school superintendent) had his financial briefings about the major components of his agency as an open session, allowing other staff, community members, and even union leadership to attend as observers to enact transparency and deepen their understanding of the fiscal challenges. When giving a speech to key stakeholders, allow some time at the end for participants to jot down 2-3 key bits of advice on a specific issue of concern to you and them (May, CFAR, 1999). Look at your calendar of regular and ad hoc meetings and explicitly think about how they might be used to engage some of your key insights, rather than creating new meetings.

### **Mouse trap yourself with commitments that will embed you in the right groups for your key agendas and take care of your own mental health**

Explicitly lay out an annual calendar, with board meetings, key events in the life of the institution, external boards and meetings so that you have a sense when calendaring other things how you can fit them in. Then agree to talk on issues that align with your strategic agenda so the deadline pulls you to propose and share your thinking. (Gardner, 1993)

### **Discipline your meeting systems**

Build in not just the time for the meeting, but also the necessary time for notes about follow up and time for preparation. You are much more efficient following up on a meeting right after its finished, than later trying to recall the follow up. Explore where a slightly longer group meeting can replace a series of one on one's and enact a message about joint responsibility for function/unit and the whole institution. Build in periodic retreats with groups or a rhythm where the key strategic agenda can have more prominence. Some leaders focus every fourth meeting on strategy and extend it an hour. Reflect, learn and flag changes for long

cycle processes so that you harvest learnings when they are fresh versus just before starting them again, when the standard ways of doing it will predominate—e.g., for board meetings, budget cycles, annual retreats, orientation, etc.

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