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Briefing Notes:
Small “L” Leadership Transition Skills

Leadership transitions are opportune moments for the entity, the new leader and for the existing staff. Yet often we get through transitions rather than build skills to better cope with the inevitable uncertainties they stir up. Below are some small “L” leadership skills that can help with transitions at many levels: a new colleague joining a work group, a new unit leader, or even the CEO of the enterprise.

- 1. *Leader as time traveler.*** In transitions, the skill of linking past, present, and future helps blend continuity and change. Revisit and revise the narrative of the journey at the institutional, unit, and personal level (Gilmore & Shea, 1997).
- 2. *Borrow others’ perspectives.*** A new person sees the existing organization with fresh lenses and also can benefit from imagining how it looks and feels to longstanding staff. Existing staff should borrow the fresh point of view of the new leader. At whatever level one enters, it is powerful to see the situation from a level up, and a level below.
- 3. *Think in triangles.*** A new leader joins an existing organization that often has a dyadic frame – hence the metaphor of ‘honeymoon’. Yet most of the challenges are triangular: the old leader, the new, the existing group; the board, the new leader, the group; two peers competing for resources (attention, money, access, etc) with the new leader; the leader, a follower and the mission of the enterprise. The co orientation toward a third point creates more energy and less gridlock (Briefing Note, CFAR; 1998).
- 4. *Deepen inquiry, mindfulness, listening versus talking.*** In ongoing meetings, research suggests assertions significantly dominate genuine inquiry and learning from one another. Especially in transitions, the risks of misperception and stereotyping are high. Both leader and follower should find moments in the flow of the actual work to inquire of one another what has been helpful and not as they learn how best to collaborate (Briefing Note, CFAR; 2006).

5. Take stock of where the enterprise, the unit, and yourself are.

Transitions are natural discontinuities that support reflection on wider, longer goals and investigating the alignment of what is likely compared with your ambitions. Resigning and re-signing up are linguistically linked: by imagining leaving, we get re centered on why we stay. Often, existing staff imagine the new leader is in transition and they are not, but both are in transition. Existing staff should choose whether they fit with the new leader as much as the reverse.

6. Link. E.M. Forster (the English novelist) wrote, “Only connect.” In an increasingly fragmented and specialized world, especially during transitions, appropriately linking related processes, people, levels, functions, increases intelligence, coherence and effectiveness. Newness can create gingeriness and ‘wait and see’ in early moments of tension, just when the opposite of moving closer to learn from the dynamic is adaptive.

7. Create space. Transitions inevitably put more initiatives in play. Create headroom by making “not to do lists”, by dropping low value adding activities to create the capacity for new developments. Leaders should question old routines, existing staff should use the occasion to question themselves and others as to what really adds value.

References

Gilmore, Thomas and Shea, Gregory. *Organizational Learning and the Leadership Skill of Time Travel*. Journal of Management Development, 16 (4) 1997, pp. 302 – 311.

"Briefing Notes: *Dynamics of Triangles*." Philadelphia: CFAR, 1998. pp. 1 -- 4.

"Briefing Notes: *Managing the Entry to a High-Pressure Leadership Role*." Philadelphia: CFAR, 2006, pp. 1 -- 6.

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