

Making a Leadership Change

How Organizations and Leaders Can Handle
Leadership Transitions Successfully

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Part One

The New Reality of Leadership Turnover

The rate of leadership turnover is increasing, and the norm of organizational loyalty is weakening. Organizations risk a succession of new leaders, each of whom do not serve long enough to fully implement a new strategy. On the positive side, new leaders offer a powerful way for new values and behaviors to enter an organization, to revitalize working alliances, and to stimulate rethinking of outdated assumptions. In earlier times, the intergenerational process of death and succession was the major mechanism of adaptation and change. Mechanized farming evolved in America not because the father suddenly realized its benefits, but because the son went to agricultural college, returned to struggle with his father, and finally took over the family farm and introduced dramatically different methods.

Such natural succession processes are giving way to a maturing and more rapidly changing executive labor market. Who will take charge of any organization is less and less predictable, as future challenges may require dramatically different skills than the loyal heir apparent has developed. All involved in leadership transitions will need to become more skilled in successfully managing each of the major phases of the process, from the triggering decisions that create the vacancy all the way through the process of the effective joining of a new leader with the existing staff.

How each of the steps is handled will make a significant difference in the steps that follow as well as in the quality of the ultimate outcome—a new leader at the helm. Care and time invested in these critical steps will pay significant dividends to the future health and vitality of the organization.