

Leaders in transition: the dramas of ordinary heroes

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CHAPTER 1 LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS - WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Carnival time

Transitions are like a carnival – an upside down time of great uncertainty and anxiety. It has long been noted that personal transitions, whether “happy” or “unhappy” events, are unsettling and can lead to anxiety and depression. A new baby or new job can lead to stress and difficulty, just as the loss of a job or death in the family does. So, also, leadership transitions can challenge people’s sense of order, their notions of competence, status and value and even their identities. Alongside the business issues, an old order is dying and a new one is being born. In between there is uncertainty.

We were made acutely aware of the anxieties, both of new leaders – issues like, “Who can I trust? Who’s on my side? Will I be ok in this new role?”; and of the people around them – questions such as, “What will my role be in the new set up? Will the new leader back me? Will the new leader help or hinder us?” There was excitement and anticipation. But we were made much more conscious of the anxiety.

It is not easy being a leader in transition

The difficulties faced by leaders and others were made worse by the profound contradiction between the expectations placed on leaders and the realities of what they could achieve. We found that the dominant model in people’s minds was that of transformational leadership. The job of the leader, it was generally assumed, is to transform the organisation – not just achieve the targets and objectives, but change the nature of the organisation and make a step change in its performance. The model is seductive: leaders are there to set out a vision and then to inspire their people to realise that vision. They should seek to “empower” their people and bring them together as a team so that the organisation is no longer dependent on the skills and insight of one person. The energy, knowledge and skills of everyone should be mobilised.

Leaders and others frequently referred to this model, not without some scepticism, but still as a picture to aspire to. Yet the practice of transitional leadership we saw was a long way from it. The pattern we saw most often was leadership by school master (or mistress): a relentless focus on getting things done (at the cost of ignoring relationships through which results are delivered); a handing out of assignments to individuals (not a request for managers to define their own priorities and goals); and the public marking of past work.

Why was the practice so much at odds with the model? It seemed to us that leaders in transition were often caught in the mincer, torn between inflated and unrealistic expectations on the one hand and an often bitter sense of what was realistic on the other. They could easily fall into a vicious cycle of perceived inadequate performance leading to new and ambitious targets being imposed (without much reference to those who will have to achieve them) and thus leading again to poor performance and ever more manic activity to make up the short fall.

Disturbed world

Throughout our work we found that the context for new leaders is a bit mad. We found never-ending transitions. The old pattern of “freeze, unfreeze, re-freeze” no longer applies (if it ever did) in the organisations we experienced. Some now say, “Change is the only continuity.” One wave of re-organisation follows another. Though there are periods of relative calm, there are complex transitions going on all the time. In many companies, people have become habituated to organisational upheaval. They are resigned to seeing their roles and work being frequently re-structured. They don’t ask whether the next re-organisation will come - but when and how.

Within large international companies, people have valiantly complied with the demand to live in a “borderless” world, in which they feel increasingly “dis-embedded” or uprooted. They have lost, to a large extent, the roots or identity that anchored them in the past. Managers appear ruled by this dynamic. They feel they must go along with it.

There is the sensation of speeding up – of moving faster and faster: less time between product launches if you are to stay ahead of competition, less time to conquer new technologies and markets, less time to equip the organisation to adapt to changing demands of customers and users. Leaders are used more quickly than before.

Yet we also experienced a persistent, deep unease and a wish to recognise not just the opportunity created by continual change, but also the discomfort and distress. At some level, people are inconsolable. There is no way back to a more stable world. Nor is there any sign of deceleration to make the organisational world more digestible. There is a persistent yearning for stability and attachment. In many organisations people do feel as though they are supported, valued and considered as integral (we describe this as being ‘held’). The more local disturbance there is in their world, the more they hanker for stability and an employer they can trust. They want to know who their leader is, what their task is.

The expectations placed on incoming leaders are frequently too great. There is a self-feeding cycle. Leaders often feel under pressure to paint a picture of their achievements in previous roles, a pressure not to be themselves but to be the heroic figure they believe others want them to be. Organisations look for leaders who will transform their performance. It is taboo to talk about limits. Leaders can feel that they are left alone with the secret that the task is frequently “undoable”. Leaders - who inside are often very self-critical – respond often by blaming themselves and taking on yet more to prove to themselves that they can do it.

Tensions inherent in leadership transitions

Underlying what we saw and experienced in all the cases were tensions - never ending struggles to find a good enough balance between conflicting pulls and pushes. There was no one answer, no one way of overcoming or resolving these tensions. Both sides of each tension were needed at different moments and in different situations. Our leaders were involved in a constant balancing act to find a good enough route through the tensions.

The tensions to which we refer are there in any leadership situation and we identified four of them. What we found is that they were acute in leadership transitions. They went to the heart of the issues new leaders and those around them must struggle with.

1. Mentality – knowing while holding uncertainty

A key issue for a leader in transition is his mentality as he approaches his new role. On the one hand there is the need to *know*: where to focus attention, how to work, with whom to work, and in which direction the organisation should go. On the other side is the need to *hold uncertainty*: to keep an open mind, to tune in to the organisation and hold open questions so that, when appropriate, others can answer them. We often found leaders who felt under pressure to know more than they really did, and found it difficult to value the holding of uncertainty.

2. Direction – shaping the new while working with reality

Another continuing challenge for the leaders and the people around them was to confront the realities of the present and past, while remaining true to their aspirations for the future. They needed a sense of history, and to be able to look the present in the face while still, somehow, hanging on to their dreams.

We found a pre-occupation with the future, an emphasis on visions and idealised strategies and, often, denigration or ignoring of the past. Paradoxically, the focus on setting vision and direction – intended to instil a positive, forward-looking mentality – could leave people feeling compliant, resentful and paralysed. It was by beginning to name uncomfortable parts of current reality that energy was released and people could look forward. The more leaders could live intensely, in the moment, and let go of the anxiety to impose themselves on events, the more effective they could be in leading change.

3. Relationships – getting close while maintaining distance

If people are to have effective working relationships and get good information on the issues they face, they need to get close to others. At the same time they need to remain detached if they are to see the “wood for the trees” and take tough decisions. Leaders need to stand apart from their teams and they need to relate enough to others for others to attach to them.

This was a “hot topic” for leaders and others in our cases. Our leaders felt under pressure to get close to the people around them, to spend more time with them, get to know them better as people and help with personal issues. They often found this pressure intolerable. They seemed to fear being eaten up by the groups around them. Leaders felt they could only hope to stay in control if they stayed distant.

4. Boundaries – being yourself while being a good company servant

The leaders we observed were navigating their way between two contrary pulls. On one side was their sense of obligation to their organisation or company and to the leaders who had selected them (we call this “being a good company servant”). On the other side was their commitment to themselves, to their own views, interests and careers (“being your own person”).

This also was an acute tension. The leaders had to work hard to be good company servants. The objectives that they were working to were not clear. Their bosses acted like Greek gods with contradictory, capricious, insistent demands to follow this direction or that and endless demands to re-structure and re-organise.

These demands posed a challenge to people’s own boundaries. A key to survival was to find some limits to how much of themselves people invested in their work. Without clear limits, people lost the capacity to think and act appropriately and became trapped in reactive activism.

We saw leaders who were often under pressure to hold to one side only of these tensions: to know, to shape the future, to stay detached and to be a good company servant. The uncertainties of transition and the dominance of the transformational leadership model pushed them in this direction. The consequence was leaders who sometimes lost touch with the people and situations around them and their own needs.

Personal quests

It was not by chance that leaders got caught by these pressures. We observed intense personal dramas that played out for our leaders. All had an "inner worm", something within themselves that they were trying to fix through their work with others. This seemed to us the source of their remarkable drive and determination. They were trying to go where they had not gone before, to prove something to themselves, remedy some perceived weakness or inadequacy. They were often very self-critical. There was the risk that they would reproach themselves for "poor performance" that in fact was overwhelmingly the product of circumstances, of trends and forces outside their control.

The personal dramas of our leaders were, to an uncanny degree, linked to the stories of the units or organisations they led. Perhaps unconsciously, their organisations had selected individuals who were superbly attuned to the underlying tasks they were given: the rootless leader for the globalisation of a French subsidiary; the perfectionist, cautious mandarin to safeguard the parent company while it made an exploratory voyage into the world of the Internet; the "safe pair of hands" to manage the development of a new health trust that espoused change - but actually wanted business as usual.

Context, context, context

What dominated the stories in our cases were not the leaders but context: the environment around the organisations, the organisational culture, the dynamics of the team. Again and again, it seemed futile for the leaders to struggle against this context. In every case, in the end, the context won where the leader or group around it was foolish enough to take it on. The leaders who were perceived as successful found ways of going with the wind and stream. They studied their movements intently. They negotiated carefully to define and redefine what objectives were possible in reality. They moved adroitly to take advantage of whatever currents or winds were moving their way.

Heroic ordinariness

The leadership we witnessed was dramatically ordinary stuff – leaders who:

- in moments, connected with the people around them as well as with the work to be done
- helped their teams or groups have realistic, searching conversations about ends and means
- were seen to stand up for their people, when necessary, against pressures from above and around
- made links with the rest of their organisations.

It was remarkably unremarkable stuff. Yet it was also surprisingly rare. Under the pressures of transitions, it often got squeezed out. We saw many capable individuals, sympathetic and thoughtful when encountered one on one, "lose their wits" when in front of groups, and become tired and anxious taskmasters. It seemed that the responsibility they were carrying, the sense that if things went wrong they alone would be held to account, was incompatible with all the happy words about empowerment, teamwork and inspiration.

Survivors

In the complex and problematic setting of transitions, we found leaders coping in different ways at various moments. Sometimes we saw them go into survival mode. This is "when it is all too much" – there are too many issues to think about, too many things to do, too many pressures to deal with. The leader experiences a loss of clarity, an inability to deal with more than one issue at a time. The response is to "keep your head down" and hope to survive from day to day. At other moments, the leaders were in "thinking" mode, able to think and act wisely and make use of their experience and wisdom. Sometimes they were in defensive mode, somewhere between the two poles of surviving and thinking.

Our discovery about these modes was not just that leaders in transition spent a lot of time in survivor and defender modes – unable to think and act appropriately. What distinguished some leaders in some situations was the ability to "recover their wits" – to remember what it was like to be in survivor or defender modes, and to learn from the experience. No one escaped the survivor or defensive modes - but some made use of the experience to learn and develop. We found extraordinary resilience – leaders who bounced back despite overwhelming pressures. We also found it was easier for the groups around the leaders to "hold on to their wits" and act intelligently. Often it was the leaders who in the moment lost sight of what made sense for the organisation and the groups who saw it more clearly.

Reflecting on how leaders recovered their wits, we were reminded of a poem by Eric Fried:

Heroic ordinariness

I remember a joke

*in which a child
who came late to school
blamed the black ice on the roads
For each step forward
he said
he had slipped back*

*Not so unlike my own case
'Then how did you get here at all?'
asked the teacher
'That's easy – I gave up
and just tried
to go back home'.*

We found that there is no one answer. The leadership needed for transitions is specific to each situation and can only be developed *in the moment*, in relation to the specific context of organisation, group and leader. There are too many subtleties, too much complexity for just simple prescriptions to be effective. The wrestling with the tensions we describe goes on and on. The tensions are not overcome or resolved.

There is no magic, no one big step that will produce effective leadership. People need to let go of that fantasy. People need to re-learn how to put one foot in front of the other. They

sometimes need a process of “detoxification” to wean them off the simplicities of management dogma. What is required is heroic ordinariness and toughness.

Embrace the “negative”

What we saw convinces us that it is essential for leaders in transitions to face the “negative”. Powerful feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and anger are exposed by transitions. They have to flow somewhere. The attempts to ignore them and “always look at the bright side” didn’t work, and stunted the dialogue between leaders and followers.

All the effort to avoid feelings traps people. It’s exhausting. It serves an ideology of how things ought to be, and cuts people off from their experience of how things are. The obsession with the positive suffocates people. Instead of feeling empowered, they feel paralysed. They pay lip service to the positive messages, “Yes, sir – we are empowered”, but inside they feel mucky. People need to embrace the “negative” so they don’t get stuck with it.

The world of feelings has apparently been made respectable in organisations by the success of Emotional Intelligence. However, we take issue with the advocates of Emotional Intelligence. For us, the attempt to put the whole world of feelings and emotions into the management box and to control it, is futile. It is part of the impoverished world of management dogma and the compulsion always to focus on control and progress that we found so damaging. We believe that it is not a question of emotions *as* intelligence - but of emotions *and* intelligence.

Our view, based on our experience of the case studies, is that there are always one or two issues that are just “off the table” that need to be brought on to it. It’s not a question of turning over random stones everywhere and finding the unpleasant “creepy crawlies” beneath. It’s allowing yourself to know what needs to be tackled now, of using your intuition to identify the one or two “undiscussables” that need now to be addressed if the group or organisation is to make progress.

Indeed we go further. Like Phillip Pullman in his award winning book *Northern Lights*¹, we say that the effort to cut yourself and others in half, and describe one side as “evil” and the other as “good” – one part as strength, one part as weakness – is a denial of humanity. It is an illusion that is profoundly damaging. How much better to value ourselves and our organisations, as a whole, to see ourselves and others not as black and white but infinite colours and both good and bad. How much better to see some of the contradictions and links and not try and change them – to see how our demons can be strengths and our assets can be liabilities, depending on the context.

It is heroic to face the things that scare us. We need to reach beyond ourselves *and* we need to recognise our limits.

Accepting limits

Part of what our leaders did when they were effective was to accept the organisational cultures that they worked in. In their moments of effectiveness they appreciated and enjoyed their cultures as well as seeking change. They didn’t want or need to recreate their whole organisations. They rejected the Maoist thinking, “The mind of the peasant is a blank sheet of paper and the job of the party and its cadres is to write on it”, translated now as mission, vision, strategy, targets and plans. They let go of the objective of cultural revolution and re-learned the art of the possible.

Ordinary heroes

¹ Scholastic Books, London, 1995

We are offering a low key, realistic view of what effective leaders do. It involves the restoration of time and space, getting people back in touch with reality. We want to encourage leaders and followers to remember what they know and what they have learnt from all their experience of life.

We saw that transitions take time. In our cases it was 18 to 24 months before a “new order” was created and there was a period of relative stability.

The myth of the “first 100 days” being all-important turned out to be just that - an illusion. There was great focus and anxiety about first impressions. But just as with individual relationships, so also with ones between leaders and organisations. First impressions could turn out to be false. The concern about the first 100 days is another symbol of disturbance, of the desire for superhuman, transformational leaders.

Our work has convinced us that attempts to make leadership simple – to reduce it to a simple formula - are not just mistaken. They are destructive. They represent the impoverished world of management theory that pretends to be practical but, in fact, relies on magical thinking. Transitions are messy and confusing. Every day, new leaders and the people around them have to face that, within their limits.

The most effective leadership that we saw were the moments when we experienced individual leaders acting as ordinary heroes. These were the times when people recognised that progress is not made in a straight line. They dealt with what they could, today, here and now. They didn't burden themselves with trying to change everything at once or even reaching the whole organisation at once. They used all the resources they, and those around them, had. They accepted their limits *and* got in touch with their dreams. The source of their success was an attachment to people – not to fantasies or visions. The effect is powerful over time.

Earning leadership

We saw that eventually leaders have to acknowledge their interdependence with others. If leaders make themselves available to others, those others will attach themselves to them. It's relationships that make results, not visions, strategies and targets. We found that leaders have to work together with others to negotiate the value and the legitimacy of their authority. Authority has to be earned. And the work has to be done again and again. It is never finished. Our recommendation is to do it from the start of a transition with open eyes.