

Leadership Transition Principles

Among many important leadership principles three stand out as especially important when there is a transition in leadership.

1. Don't change anything in the first year.

Of course it is impossible to go a whole year without changing anything at all. Circumstances will change, which will bring forth changes in response. The key idea here is to manage change gently.

Some people enjoy, yea even crave change. These are the ones who volunteer to jump out of perfectly good airplanes and cannot be content with ordinary military training, but join the Seals. These people are not normal. Normal people face change with some level of anxiety. And when that anxiety ramps up too high, the community begins to unravel.

Leaders make a serious miscalculation when they step into a troubled situation and try to fix it right away – even when the people call for immediate fixes. When there is a catastrophe, surely some immediate action is required. But unless people or property are under direct attack, even the most troubled situations should be approached cautiously. People are more comfortable with “the devil you know” than the devil you don’t know. They may clamor for quick solutions, but will often turn on the leader who disturbs the status quo – especially if change involves sacrifice.

In order to be effective a leader must gain the trust of the people, and trust is a quality which takes time to build. People must come to believe that a new leader cares about them and is competent to do things which will help them. In the initial stages of leadership a leader must communicate care and competence. As trust in his care and competence grows, the leader is able to introduce increasingly ambitious initiatives. When a leader proposes changes which people judge to exceed their sense of his care and competence, the result is resistance, resentment, and refusal – which erode any trust which had been built previously.

We might summarize this principle thus:

- a) Make changes slowly and cautiously.
- b) Begin with small, easy changes which have widespread support.
- c) Introduce changes which are consistent with the level of trust you have built.

2. Don't call for a vote until you have the votes.

Leaders commonly put forth proposals which have been carefully considered and carefully constructed – and expect people to accept them. This almost never happens – and when a new proposal *is* accepted, often it is accompanied by resentment. This resentment is often silent, so a leader might not know how much he has lost the support of his people until it is too late. More frequently the new proposal is voted down, to the anger and resentment of the leader.

This issue appears in parliamentary settings where roll-call votes are taken, but it holds true in informal settings where the support of the people is required. The reason for losing a vote or failing to gain support is that people are inadequately prepared. Proposals which are “carefully considered and carefully constructed” by the leader also must be carefully considered by the people. If the leader has spent six hours over several weeks developing his proposal, it may take an equivalent amount of time – or likely a lot more – to bring the

people to think as he does. Leaders often object that when trust has been built, people should just trust his judgment and support his initiative. This is a misunderstanding of leadership. If trust has been built, a leader can do what he deems important within the level of trust he has. He will also be personally responsible for the success or failure of that initiative. He will “own it” on his own. But if he wants the support of others, he needs to persuade them of the merits of his idea. Trust is not the issue. Ownership is.

A leader can own an initiative and execute it himself. But when he calls for a vote or expects others to support him, he is asking them to share ownership. No one in his right mind would take ownership without believing in the merits of the initiative. So the leader must persuade the people of those merits. The process of persuasion can take some time and many forms. It may involve written communication, speeches, presentations, etc. It usually requires 1-1 conversations. This may seem tedious, but it works. The alternative is to lose the vote – and the confidence of the people.

When a leader wins a vote or his proposal is accepted by the people, his credibility immediately increases. When he loses, his credibility immediately drops. Never call for a vote unless you are sure you will carry the room.

3. Communicate!

Communication may be the most important role of a leader. Christians often misunderstand this, thinking that godly character is the most important quality of a leader. Most important quality, yes – but a leader must *do* something, and his chief activity is communicating. Communicating what? Everything. Someone who occupies a position of leadership, but says little, deeply frustrates those he is called to lead. People want to know what he is thinking and what he wants to do. They would rather disagree with a leader than not know what he is doing, or is going to do. Our God is a speaking God, and those in his image speak. Not to communicate is sub-human. Or, worse, it implies others are sub-human.

Different leaders have different communication skills, but all need to make a strong effort to communicate in four areas: pastoral care, vision, strategy, and plans.

Pastoral care. Do you care for your people? We hope so! If, honestly, you don’t, you’re not the first leader who struggled to care for his people and this does not make you a bad person. God can change your heart, and you can confess your sinful attitude and ask God to give you pastoral care for your people. But it’s not enough to care for your people. It is necessary to express this care. Words are not the only means of communicating care. Acts of service and comfort are necessary, too. But words are necessary. A leader must tell his people he cares for them. By any and all means possible, a leader must communicate pastoral care to those he is called to serve.

Vision. Some leaders are natural visionaries, and frustrate the “practical” people around them. It is not necessary to be a visionary. What *is* necessary is some idea of a better future and successfully communicating it. This better future can take many forms: better outreach, better discipleship, a better building, etc. – and will vary from place to place. If a leader does not communicate a vision for the future, people will begin to wonder why he is filling up the space of leadership. If he is not going anywhere, perhaps he should get out of the way and let someone who *is* going somewhere take his place. A leader’s vision does not have to be grandiose. Great vision can be frightening and is often unrealistic and irresponsible. However humble, a leader’s idea of a better future must be communicated.

Strategy. Nothing is more frustrating than endless talk of a great future without any action to accomplish it. Strategy is a general approach to realizing a vision. It is not a plan of action. It's the approach which will provide the framework for constructing a plan. Jesus communicated His vision of the Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. His strategy was to atone for sins, send the Holy Spirit, and equip apostles to implement the vision. Within this broad outline Jesus took specific actions to execute His strategy. Is the vision for your ministry numerical growth? Your strategy might be outreach to newcomers to the community, or evangelism in your dorm, or ministry to internationals, or children's ministry, etc. You can't do everything. You must make strategic decisions. Then you will be able to concentrate your resources most effectively. It is essential to communicate strategy, even as it is being formulated.

Plans. Some people are apathetic and lazy, but most people want to do something. Nothing stunts a ministry like lifeless pew-sitters, and nothing prevents people from getting involved in the life of a ministry like the absence of good plans. If the ministry does not have specific plans for worship, nurture, outreach, etc., this is a dying ministry. When there are plans, they must be communicated. A great plan is no good if no one knows about it.

Constantly communicate! It is a big mistake to think that people will get the message by mentioning something once or twice. Pastoral care, vision, strategy, and plans must be communicated constantly. It has been said that you know you are getting your message across when people begin to joke about it – happily, we hope!

Gently managing change, cultivating ownership, and generously communicating are fundamental, but by no means the only principles of leadership. However in a transition of leadership, these three principles rise to prominence.

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