

Leadership Barometer 148 New Leader Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



When you are transferred or assume command of a new unit it is a special time. What happens in the first few hours, or first few *minutes*, will determine your success for your first year. Reason: People form an opinion of you very quickly (first impression). That vision stays with them until supplanted by ideas from events that play out over time.

In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell demonstrated how human beings have an uncanny ability to size up another person instantly. The level of trust that will prevail during the entire first year is usually set before the first week of an assignment.

It is crucial to get off on the right foot with people. Unfortunately, many leaders come into a new assignment with the wrong attitude, and the impressions they make mean a rocky start.

Here are seven things that can help you get off on the right foot in any new position.

1. Assume things are more right than wrong

It is a mistake to come into a new job with the attitude that everything is messed up. It is wise to remain calm initially. Seek to understand the strengths and good performance that already exists.

The best advice is to keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut in terms of pronouncements. Seek to learn, appreciate, and reinforce.

2. Establish rapport one on one

Meet with each employee in the new unit privately to chat about his or her role. Get to know the individual as a person. Be sure to put the person at ease with your demeanor. Indicate you have no hidden agenda other than just getting to know the individual. This discussion will begin to form some rapport between you and the person.

Asking questions about the employee's family and hobbies demonstrates that you care enough to get to know that person. Sharing some of your own stories also tends to form a basis for trust.

Many new supervisors like to ask what the employee would like to see him or her do and not do. This simple question often brings out issues that have been lurking in the culture before the new leader arrived. You also demonstrate an attitude of being willing to listen to new ideas.

3. Build trust as early as possible

When meeting a new person, the basis for trust to start forming lies in the answer to five basic questions. I call these things "the five C's for building trust." As a leader:

- 1. Are you Competent?**
- 2. Do you have good Character?**
- 3. Are you Consistent?**
- 4. Are you Cordial?**
- 5. Do you Care about the other person?**

When you chat with new employees, keep these five things in mind. Work to answer all of them as positively and quickly as you can.

4. Avoid pushing ideas from your former job

It is a good idea to refrain from bringing up the excellent policies in your prior position. Many new leaders make the mistake of saying, "In my last job we used to do this or that." It undermines the will of the people in the new unit. Individuals do not want to hear what went on in the boss' prior position a dozen times a day. It wears thin very quickly.

There is an antidote to this common problem. When I would promote or move a manager, I would ask him or her to refer to the prior job only one time in public. Once they played that chit, I suggested the new leader refrain from other references for at least 2 months.

This constraint gave the new leader the opportunity to appreciate the good things that were happening. The people never knew the difference; they just seemed to like the new manager quite a lot.

5. Observe the informal organization and cliques

The chemistry between people governs the culture of the organization. Be alert to the "informal power structure" because that is operating in tandem with the formal organization.

It is imperative to know who the informal leaders are, and begin a process to gain their trust. Often the sub-culture is extremely powerful, and it is often negative. Work slowly and carefully before taking any action with a clique of individuals. You can make great strides working with the informal leaders, but only after you have developed some credibility and trust.

Get to know how the various members of the group like to interface and get things done. Bond with people by seeking their advice where possible.

6. Practice management by wandering around extensively until you are a known quantity

Many new leaders make the mistake of sequestering themselves in strategic meetings early on. This labels them as suspect and less transparent. Be open and out there for people to interface with daily. Extra time devoted to this activity pays huge dividends, even if it means extra working hours for a while.

7. Check your body language

Let people know you are truly happy to be there. Smile! Make sure all of your body language reflects that of an appreciative and interested leader. Be sincere about getting to know the ropes before making important decisions.

Do these seven things during your first weeks of a new assignment, and you will be on your way to a great tenure as a leader of the group. If you remember one thing from this article, remember this; it is the first blink of an impression that makes the most difference to your future.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book *Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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