

Leadership Barometer 161 Rotate Leaders **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



You need to rotate leaders to keep them fresh, but there are precautions. Leaders who stay in the same job too long get stale and lose their edge. If you have been in the same position for more than 10 years, you would likely benefit from a change.

When developing leaders, rotating positions is an effective method of keeping things fresh. It gives leaders a chance to grow. The topic of this article is when and how to rotate leaders for maximum benefit. It helps both the organization and the leaders.

Have a specific game plan

It is a good idea to have a long-term game plan for the development of each leader. This requires a lot of planning and dialog. It is a collaborative process that needs attention. You get a sense that somebody is watching out for your career trajectory. Discussions of personal desires and potential opportunities are beneficial. They let you know that you are valued and have the potential to grow.

How often to rotate leaders

The first question is how often you should rotate leaders. My own bias is to avoid moving a leader more often than every three years. The reason is that it takes roughly three years to get the maximum learning out of a leadership assignment.

The critical first year

The first year you spend getting to know the existing systems and people. It is a mistake for a new leader to start moving people and systems too soon. Spend a few months observing what is happening and understanding it well before attempting surgery. That does not mean disengagement, just avoid being too directive at the start.

An exception to the rule

There is an exception to the rule of moving slowly at first. Sometimes the new leader is inheriting a crisis situation that requires emergency actions. Picture

a battle where a military general was killed in a war that was a nearly hopeless situation. The replacement general needs to take command immediately and direct activities from day one.

As a new leader, in the first year you begin to formulate a plan. How will you use existing resources to obtain the best performance? What additional resources do you need? Good leaders listen well and make the strategic moves with high collaboration of the people.

The second year is execution

The second year you spend implementing the plan and dealing with any issues that arise from miscalculations or setbacks.

The third year you make it work better

The third year is a critical time because you retool the strategy and policies in a process of learning. If you are rotated out to another job before this phase is completed, the learning will be minimal.

After the third year, the process becomes redundant as you seek to refine what you have already accomplished. As you spend more years on the same job, less and less learning is happening. You have already been there and done that.

It is not essential that all leaders move after the third year. As a general rule, it is better to leave them in place for at least that duration.

How to select the next assignment

The next question is what kind of assignments to look for when rotating a leader. Avoid assignments that are parallel in nature, like moving from one department to another one in the same area. The major benefit of rotating leaders is that the individual grows by operating outside the comfort zone. Consider a new assignment in a different country or in a completely different function from the prior assignment.

Conclusion

As you develop your leaders, make sure there is some flow into your organization and some flow out. Try to view leadership development as a flow of talent that is unselfish. Do not hang on to the best resources just because they are performing well. Give them a chance to move to other areas. If you do, then you will build a reputation as one who grows leaders. That is a positive reflection of your own leadership abilities.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations