

## Leadership Barometer 169 Temporary Assignments Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



Organizations use temporary assignments for a variety of reasons. These assignments are usually loosely controlled activities of convenience.

Sometimes temporary assignments are for a specific project. An example is to serve on a transition team during a merger or acquisition.

Many organizations use temporary assignments as a way to enhance the skills of an individual. They are also used to test the person in different ways prior to a promotion.

### **There is a wide variety of temporary assignments**

Temporary assignments can be delightful opportunities to pick up new knowledge and shine in a different way. Most businesses are becoming more global. Assignments in a different country give rising executives a convenient way to become more sensitive to cultural differences.

### **Temporary assignment in a merger or acquisition**

In a merger or acquisition process, there are often numerous temporary assignments because conditions are changing dramatically. It is important to have some people pulled out of the daily business decisions. They need to focus on the integration effort. In the steady state, these design and policy-making positions will no longer exist. During the transition, there may be numerous people in temporary slots.

The science of making temporary assignments work well is rather eclectic, and the track record of success is spotty. This paper deals with some of the problems that can occur. It includes several ideas that can help improve the probability of success.

### **Ten typical problems with temporary assignments**

**1. Poorly defined position** – Sometimes leaders make the assignment in haste. The temporary position is ill-defined. The cure is to take the time to consider at least a partial list of duties that transfer with the individual. Make

the assignment one that includes a real challenge, along with the authority to make professional decisions.

**2. Inadequate facilities** - Many temporary assignments require people to perform in ad hoc project teams. Finding a central location with the proper facilities in which to do the work is a typical challenge. For some period of time, individuals may have to work out of hotel rooms or sparsely-equipped community gathering places.

**3. Inconvenient location** - Often the need requires an individual to live in a different city and fly home on weekends for months. Sometimes it is possible to arrange temporary housing for the person. This is a typical scenario for expatriates.

**4. Lack of Authority** - Roles of a temporary assignment are transitory by definition. Individuals often feel a lack of authority at a time when they must assume greater responsibility. The antidote here is to give decision rights to the individual on the assignment. Also, be sure to back up this person's decisions and actions publicly.

**5. Bad Personal Chemistry** - An individual doing a temporary assignment is often entering a society with little knowledge of people, customs, and culture. The exact reason for this person coming in may be unknown. An individual must establish new relationships from a position of distrust. The antidote here is simple. Whoever arranged for a temporary assignment owes the person being moved a good introduction. It includes an adequate rationale and an expectation of fair play.

**6. Sense of futility** – Some people may assume the job is just a placeholder. Assure the individual that it is due to this person's worth that he or she was selected. There will be a good job at the end of the ordeal. Actually, people on the integration team have a natural advantage. They help invent the structure and rules for the merged entity.

**7. Burnout** - There are just not enough resources to cover everything. Both the ongoing business resources and the integration team are stretched to the limit. It is easier for the ongoing business to stretch. Some people from lower levels can step up to temporary management positions to cover. For the transition team, life is more difficult. There are literally thousands of details to consider. The work is endless, critical, urgent, and highly emotional in nature. Coupled with living or working out of temporary housing, it causes many people in these assignments to burn out. For this reason, senior managers need to provide some modicum of work-life balance or "R&R breaks."

**8. Guilt or sense of punishment** - Some individuals will over-analyze the nature of a temporary move and feel a sense of failure. They wonder if this is a signal from top management that there is a serious issue. To prevent unwarranted worry, top managers need to be transparent and share the true reason for a temporary assignment. If there are issues, then the individual is due an explanation. Give the person a chance to mitigate the damage to his or her reputation.

**9. Squishy Return Arrangements** - Often a person on a temporary assignment has no visibility to his or her return path. Will there be a good job

at the end of the assignment? When will the assignment end? Was this little adventure good or bad for the person's ultimate career? Have frequent communications with the remote individual. Show appreciation for the service and assure the individual will have a viable return path.

**10. The pasture** - Unfortunately, some groups use a series of temporary assignments to encourage an underperforming individual to leave. The jobs have marginal value, yet keeping the person on organizational life support seems kinder than pulling the plug. People who are going out to pasture are usually well aware of the intent. Many upper managers hope it will cause the person to quit and leave. Unfortunately, in a lot of cases, it causes quiet quitting. Here again, the antidote is candor and transparency. Let the individual know the truth so he or she can make appropriate choices rather than guess.

## **Conclusion**

These are just 10 of the common issues with temporary assignments. They include how upper management can reduce the stress and pain. Properly managed, temporary assignments can be invigorating and helpful to both the individual and the organization. If done poorly or without care for the individual, they can be a real problem.

For additional information on how temporary assignments impact creativity, check out this article by Philipp Cornelius. [“How Temporary Assignments Boost Innovation.”](#)

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