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OPINION

Planning a transition from a middle-level manager to an executive leadership role (1)

by UCHORA UDOJI On Dec 2, 2019



leadership

Almost every role transition – whether in personal or professional life – requires adjustments. Think about it, your role changes when you go from single to married, to when you become a parent and also a grandparent. Likewise, the employee’s role changes as the employee moves from one key organisational bar to the next.

The transition from middle-level to executive leadership positions in formal organisations is particularly interesting because many people spend much time working hard to get to transition point that they hardly take the time to prepare for the transition itself. Here are a few points to consider as you plan for this transition.

Differences in roles

Both roles are different. Executive leaders decide the strategic direction of the organisation and create policy; middle managers lead the execution of strategy and policy. Also, by its nature the executive leadership role covers a wider scope. Therefore, the things you did when you were in a middle manager role that were considered great work may not be considered great work in the executive leadership role. In fact, some of the skills that enable high performance in the middle-manager role can be an impediment to high performance in the executive leadership role.

Your organisation's view of the role

My description above of both roles is somewhat generic. Although across organisations there is a fundamental set of tasks associated with the middle manager role and another associated with executive leadership role, some differences in role definition will also exist across organisations. For example, the role in a small-to-medium enterprise will differ from that same role in a conglomerate; and the role in a hospital will differ from that same role in a fast-moving consumer goods company. It is therefore important that you understand the role from the lenses through which your organisation defines it.

Change in focus

Across organisations, the transition from the middle-manager to executive leadership role requires a shift in focus from functional to corporate leadership. This means the prospective migrant is expected to engage not just as a master of their function (IT, Finance, HR and so forth) but also as a master of the business. So, you will be required to think strategically, to understand your organisation's business model, change agency, group dynamics, budget planning and so forth. You will be expected to have a good grasp of function integration – the relationship between all divisions that form the corporate structure, how one arm of the organisation contributes to another and how this can impact the big picture.

You will be required to have considerable institutional knowledge – particular and holistic perspectives of the organisation. You will need to understand more deeply the organisation's technology, its finance, its culture and major sub cultures, its competitors as well as the existing relationships between the organisation and its influencers. There will be attributes specific to your industry and your geographic location – you will need to know that. All this means you will go from wearing one cap – the tactical engagement cap – to wearing two – the strategic engagement cap with which you engage your new bosses, peers and external stakeholders and the tactical cap with which you will continue to engage your reports.

Rethinking and redefining relationships

The broadness of the executive leadership role means that you will have many questions. Quality relationships will help you find answers quickly. Improving the quality of your relationships means you will have to develop new relationships, retain and walk away from some old ones. You will have to firm up your relationship 360 degrees because you will rely on some of the relationships for information. Particularly your critical North – fellow executives who are senior to you – they have the experience to paint you a picture of what success at your new role looks like and can also point you to the doors that you need to open and those you need to shut for you to do well in your new role.

You will also need to firm up your relationship with critical external stake holders – your organisation’s industry regulators, top customers and clients, consultants, key vendors, and so forth – those people and groups who can make your organisation “catch cold when they sneeze.” You will also need developmental relationships – mentors, coaches and in some cases sponsors – to support you through refining your leadership voice and resting your leadership feet firmly on the ground.

To connect to the world which – if I may cliché a little – is now a global village, you will need to attend more industry events like conferences in order to engage with people who operate in your organisation’s spaces of interest.

Change in leadership style

Since the executive leader is required to make apt judgments and decisions on a broad range of issues you will be compelled to delegate more – to spread the load. This implies that you will not be as “hands on” on task details as you were in the middle manager role. The quality and timeliness of your decisions will depend on your teams; your performance will depend on their performance. Therefore, you will need to ensure the growth and development of the leaders at the different layers below you. Especially if you typically tend to seek task perfection, you will also have to learn to let go and trust that others will carry out tasks well; and, while not tolerating mediocrity, you will have to learn to live with task outcomes which while imperfect are suitable for purpose.

To get your teams to deliver on top quality and on time, you will have to apply a variety of leadership styles. So, for instance, your communication style will have to change. You will need to understand how to communicate with purpose, to listen more and speak less, and when you do speak, to speak to listen. And because you will more frequently work with teams of peers, you will also need to adopt a change in tone and style when you assign team tasks.

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