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Why New Leaders Should Be Wary of Quick Wins

by Dan Ciampa

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As soon as you step into a top position at a company that needs to significantly improve the way it operates, there's pressure to get off to a quick start.

Yet the best way to succeed, paradoxically, is to slow things down.

Forces pushing in the other direction — toward hyperspeed — are powerful, of course. You must prove you are the right leader by getting the organization to deliver better results, and soon. That's why you were brought in.

So, you set out for early wins in what seem like obvious areas to fix — on the cost side, perhaps the speed of processes within production, and on the revenue side, the size of the sales force.

But rushing toward early wins, even in areas that seem uncontroversial, can be unexpectedly hazardous. That's because when a new leader takes hold, changes aren't just about efficiency or revenue; they are also about people's feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty about what the changes will mean for them.

No matter how sophisticated and mature the new leader may be, rushing too quickly toward early wins can deprive the new leader of the insight needed to understand the culture and build relationships. As a consequence, quick wins may soon be undone, or they may beget new leadership problems.

Deliberately slowing down allows you to clarify what the people around you want most, the effects of your behavior, sources of resistance, and the ramifications of your decisions. The result: You will have more control over the pace of your transition to new leadership responsibilities and the company's transition to its new era.

The New Leader Who Starts Too Fast

For an example of the importance of controlling pace, let's look at the case of an executive I'll call Greg. Although talented and competent, he allowed himself to enter a negative cycle of activity after being hired into a large consumer goods company as the COO, and the presumptive successor to the CEO, who planned to retire in 24 months.

Greg rolled up his sleeves and worked harder than he ever had, pushing the organization and himself. To be responsive, he studied each presentation deck and answered each email right away. To be accessible, he said yes to each meeting and one-on-one drop-in. All of this took time, but he wanted to do everything possible to prove to the board — and to others in the company who had been passed over — that he was the right choice to be the next CEO.

His projects redesigned the supply chain for significant cost and time savings, created a new structure to quicken decision making and increase flexibility, and improved the new-product process. Managers grumbled, and the CEO wasn't as enthusiastic as he should have been, but Greg assumed these were consequences of the inevitable resistance to change. What mattered was that people were following his plan and responding to his direction, and the results were good.

To make sure he was being clear, Greg had a habit of using a sort of double-barreled communication approach, following up each request with a here's-what-I-mean explanation. And it worked: Subordinates listened, nodded, and rarely pushed back.

At his 16-month mark, as he prepared for his performance review, Greg wondered how big his bonus would be and when he'd be named CEO. Instead, he was told that the CEO would stay until the CFO developed the capabilities to succeed him, and Greg would be allowed to resign. The CEO acknowledged that Greg's changes had improved performance, but he hadn't won people's loyalty and his style was mismatched with the company's culture.

Greg learned the hard way that people at the top rarely fail because of strategic or operational problems; usually it's because they have poor self-awareness and mismanage relationships.

In going full throttle, Greg had misinterpreted the CEO's reactions and missed signals that direct reports saw his intensity as a way to get promoted rather than to help them or the company. His behavior blocked him from getting feedback and cost him the support necessary for success. And that double-barreled explanation technique backfired: People quickly learned that they didn't have to ask questions, give feedback, or even think creatively.

How to Slow Down in a High-Speed Job

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman explores the intricacies of judgment and argues that different tempos of decision making are better for different challenges. Fight/flight/freeze decisions must be intuitive and quick. But actions that are complex and require careful judgment must be made more slowly and deliberately.

In order to build coalitions, a new leader must recognize that a handoff at the top is unsettling for everyone. Employees wonder how expectations of them will change, and executives worry about the effect on their power bases. It takes months for a new leader to allay concerns and win loyalty — a reality even for a leader who is promoted from within and is therefore a known quantity.

Subordinates will follow a leader they can count on. Decisiveness is an important factor, but more important is wise judgment in the face of complex, important challenges. Followers want the leader to listen to their ideas and merge them with her own, and they want to see her handle difficult problems carefully. This requires controlling the action and slowing down the pace.

There are a handful of techniques that allow the new leader to do this. They fall into five categories: *control the flow*, *reflect*, *repeat*, *question*, and *use silence*.

Control the flow. Because a new leader inherits their predecessor's administrative system, the mismatch between the rhythm of the new office and their decision-making style can slow progress toward early successes. Managing the flow of information into your office and into your brain is critically important for the judgment required by the most important issues. That can happen much more quickly with a structural step: creating a senior aide position, such as a chief of staff, who is responsible for making sure the right information reaches you at the right time and in the right format.

Reflect. Controlling the flow should offer more time for reflection so that you can better grasp subtleties of relationships and the underlying meaning of information coming at you. It's enormously helpful to have trusted advisers — both inside and outside — who are dedicated to your success and have expertise in areas important to your agenda. If there's no one to talk with confidentially when you first take over, the next best option is to talk to yourself; that's where keeping a personal journal comes in (see "The More Senior Your Job Title, the More You Need to Keep a Journal").

The next three tactics help to control the pace of interactions.

Repeat. Even if you understand perfectly what has been said in a meeting or one-on-one discussion, repeat what you heard. Similarly, when you want to verify that you've been understood, ask the listener to repeat what you said. In addition to allowing confirmation of what is intended, repetition momentarily halts the discussion's forward motion and gives you a chance to think about where you want to take the conversation next.

Question. From time to time, ask summing-up questions such as, "What did we just do?" "What just happened here?" and "What should we learn from that?" Questions like these force a pause, preventing a discussion from rushing to a premature decision or blocking a group from coalescing around what may be the wrong conclusion. Unlike declarative statements, which only require listeners to be polite, questions require them to "go active" as they think of an answer and try to figure out why the boss is asking.

Use silence. A pause before responding has a double benefit. It offers the leader a chance to weigh alternatives and decide the best way to respond, and it pushes others to wonder what's going through the leader's mind, which may cause them to think more creatively.

All of these steps would have helped Greg immeasurably. They would have slowed the pace of his interactions and decisions so that he was more aware of how he was being perceived and so that he could have carefully assessed the consequences of his decisions. He would have elevated above the action to a position where he could have exercised better judgment. He would have been more likely to realize that *how* he achieved early successes was as important as achieving them. If he had slowed things down, Greg would be CEO today.

Dan Ciampa (DC@danciampa.com) is a former CEO, an adviser to boards and chief executives, and the author of five books, including *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (with David L. Dotlich, Wiley, 2015) and *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (with Michael Watkins, Harvard Business Review Press, 1999).

Comments

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You can have quick wins as a leader as long as you are not doing it alone and the focus is not only you individually. Making others better is possibly the most appreciated quality a leader can have.