

# When You Are New in the Leader Chair: Avoiding the Traps in a Transition

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**L**ike all human institutions, Christian organizations regularly face leadership transitions.

Unless they cease to exist or merge with another entity, every church or other Christ-centered organization will sometime have a new face as their leader. Sometimes the change occurs because human life is finite. One wag put it well, “God buries His workmen, but His work continues on.” Sometimes the change occurs because God moves His people to a different part of the harvest. This happened often in the Bible, most notably with Peter, the indisputable leader of the fledgling church in Jerusalem. After his miraculous escape from prison in Acts 12, it says simply that Peter “went to another place” (Acts 12:17). Others stepped in the void, but a significant transition had occurred in the church.

Transitions can be filled with an assortment of landmines that even the most savvy leader can detonate. Having survived one transition nine years ago when I assumed the CEO post of a mission agency and now seeking to navigate through a new one as president of a Bible college, I have collected a bag of insights concerning such changes. Some have come with appropriate scars, but all are offered from one who has trod such precarious paths.

**1. Expect surprises.** Any board worth its salt will endeavor to orient an incoming leader to the culture and challenges of the new organization. You will likely be given an abundance of reports containing the latest financial statements, organizational charts, policy manuals and employee handbooks. You need this information and you need to carefully digest it.

But be prepared for an assortment of surprises. No amount of organizational orientation can uncover every skeleton that has remained carefully hidden in the closet. Interpersonal conflict, lack of departmental cooperation, silos and even low performing

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employees can be tucked safely away in the interview process only to be fully revealed when you assume your new responsibilities. Expecting surprises allows you to not be jaded or disappointed when you discover your new organization has as many warts as your old one—maybe even more! Every Christian organization is populated with people who are still in the process of sanctification. Knowing that, don’t be surprised when you are surprised.

**2. Listen well.** Unless your new organization is a fledgling start-up,

the group you are joining has a history. Both new organizations I joined had a legacy dating back well past a century! Consequently, gaining a full appreciation of the organization is necessary before wise changes can be implemented. You need to listen, listen broadly, and listen well.

Every organization has people who are keepers of the history and culture. Tap those storehouses and seek to download their files into your mental hard drive. Obviously, it is wise to filter such information for unneeded biases, but a number of carefully executed meetings can greatly accelerate your learning curve. In addition, don’t connect only with executives. I have found some of the greatest insight in some of the deepest bowels of the organization. There is gold to be mined at all levels, but you need to be committed to listening.

**3. Explore red flags.** As your data base grows, so will your list of areas that need attention. Perhaps it is a personnel issue, a financial issue, a policy issue, or even a cultural issue. But as you comb the organization in your early days, some areas will get flagged for deeper investigation.

It is critical to mark these areas when they emerge because you will lose your objectivity far too quickly. The fresh set of eyes you bring to the organization will rapidly develop lenses that will lose their ability to see red flags in the future. Therefore, tag them now and be diligent to investigate them further. Otherwise, the red flags will turn into green lights and your opportunity to be a valuable change agent will be compromised.

**4. Invest in relationships.** An organization's top leader enjoys a unique perch. Everyone "knows" you. From that first day in the office they recognize your face. Conversely, as the new kid, you "know" hardly anyone and you stare at the faces of strangers.

Yet the people of your organization truly want to know you. They want to know your passions, your dreams, your journey, and your focus. The relationships you build provide the working capital for motivating and aligning the organization later. When you are drinking from the fire hose of information in the first year, there may seem to be precious little time for relationship-building. But make the investment. The payoff later will exceed any returns gained from other activities.

**5. Cast vision.** As the new leader, people inherently want to know the direction the organization will take. Generally, they anticipate

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that changes will come. But without hearing from you, they can only speculate on what marching orders may emanate from your office. Clarity comes when you purposefully and carefully cast vision.

Timing of vision is everything. Once you assume your role, the clock starts ticking. You have a window of time in which to share a motivating vision with the organization. If you delay too long, the

window closes and the current culture becomes more entrenched. If you move too quickly, you run the risk of sacrificing needed "buy-in." If you have listened well and invested in relationships, you will know the right timetable for casting vision.

**6. Make changes graciously.** Change is hard. For everyone. Change agents, with their eye on the future, can easily forget the emotional pain their decisions can cause others. A new vision, with its appropriate new paradigms, will require change for the organization. Most of the people in your organization will know that.

But make the needed changes with grace and class. Go the extra mile for those in transition. Demonstrate overt respect and honor for those functions that will end. People want to know their lives have mattered for the Kingdom. Changes bathed in grace will celebrate the past while enabling movement toward the future. ☺

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