

# Taking Your Leadership to the Next Level

Scott Eblin

The transition from manager to executive-level leader can be tricky and treacherous. Research has found that about 40 percent of new executives leave their jobs within the first eighteen months. The organizational toll of such failure is high: a recent Harvard Business School study found that the cost of a failed executive hire or promotion can run above \$2.5 million.

Why do so many new executives fail? What separates successful new executives from those who don't succeed? These are questions I have asked as both an executive and an executive coach. In conducting interviews on success and failure with nearly thirty seasoned executives over the past year, I have come to the conclusion that there is an important truth that rising executives need to keep in mind: what got you there probably won't keep you there.

## PICK UP, LET GO

Someone once defined insanity as doing things the way you've always done them and expecting different results. Successful new executives learn to adjust their behavior to achieve what is expected. To succeed at their new level, new executives need the courage and confidence to *pick up* behaviors that align with the expected

results and to *let go* of other behaviors that no longer serve them well.

Consider the case of Amy, a rising star in a financial services company, who was recently promoted from director to vice president. Since the day she joined the company, she has had a reputation as a brilliant analyst and project manager who always delivers excellent results.

Amy has been a vice president for four months and feels as though she is paddling hard to keep her head above water. Many changes came with the promotion: three new product lines in addition to the two she had grown and overseen as a director; a larger team, which has been achieving less-than-optimal results; meetings with peers in which she needs to have a strong handle on the broader business; and higher expectations from her senior vice president, which she can sense but not clearly define.

Amy's dilemma crystallized for her in her first quarterly business review with the company CEO and his other direct reports. To prepare for that session, Amy had her staff work for weeks on a thirty-slide PowerPoint presentation. But when her turn came to speak, she sensed that she was losing the group about three slides into the presentation. She sped through the next several slides, skipped some in the middle, and attempted to salvage her main points by jumping ahead to the summary slide.

Amy left her first quarterly review with her confidence shaken. Other than what she said during her presen-

tation, she had not participated in the roundtable conversation. She felt that she was playing at a level she was not ready for.

What got Amy to the executive level was her knowledge and her ability to get things done. When it came to crunch time, she always pulled through by bearing down, working harder, and knowing more about the situation than anyone else. Since becoming an executive, she has been falling back on these same habits. She needs to let go of some of the habits that served her well earlier and to adopt some new behaviors. Her troubling performance in the quarterly review offers some clues to three behaviors she needs to let go of.

## Using One-Size-Fits-All Communications

The higher that leaders rise, the more they need to custom fit their communications to the audience. As a manager Amy dealt mostly with details. That shaped her style of communicating with her team and her boss. Now that she's communicating with other executives, she needs to let go of her old approach. In her quarterly review, she put the emphasis on a PowerPoint presentation; it would have been better to concentrate on what she needed to accomplish with her audience. In preparing for meetings with senior executives and other key stakeholders, executives need to ask themselves questions such as these: Who is the audience for my message? Where are

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these people now in terms of their thinking? What, if anything, do I need to emphasize to shape their thinking?

Before Amy makes her next presentation, she should custom fit her communications by assessing who will be in the audience and determining what she wants them to think and how she wants them to feel after she speaks. Amy should shape the content of her message, her body language, and her tone of voice to elicit the response that leads to the optimal reaction from the audience.

### Telling Others How to Do It

Amy had her staff work for weeks on the PowerPoint presentation that fell flat. The level of involvement and resource deployment that she put into the less-than-successful presentation shows that she needs to let go of telling her team *how* to do the work and instead put more emphasis on defining *what* the team needs to do.

This behavioral adjustment can be difficult for new executives. They usually get to the next level because they are very good at something; they know their discipline better than most. The idea of turning over the nuts and bolts of the operation to others can be unsettling. I have known many executives who could not let go of the details for fear that something would go wrong or that the work would not get done in the way they thought best. The results for these executives, their teams, and their organizations usually fell short of expectations. Executives who constantly tell their teams *how* to do the work stretch themselves too thin to be effective, and their attention is diverted from the more important work at the next level. To be fully effective, executives need to be the keepers of the *what*, not the masters of the *how*.

George Sterner, a former vice president of strategic pursuits at defense and aerospace systems supplier Raytheon, learned to step back from the day-to-day details while in

the U.S. Navy, from which he retired as a vice admiral and commander of the Naval Sea Systems Command—a massive organization with an annual budget of more than \$14 billion. In the Navy, recalls Sterner, “I went from commanding one submarine to visiting forty of them in a single year. I quickly realized there are hundreds of ways to run a submarine—not just the way I did it.”

### Looking Only Up and Down

In the months leading up to her first presentation to the CEO, Amy could

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sense that she was struggling with the learning curve. Most new executives face this situation. Too often the tendency is to bear down even more instead of pulling up, looking around, and asking for input and advice. In preparing for the quarterly review, Amy could have benefited from looking to her peers on the left and right instead of narrowing her focus to the up-and-down perspective. Instead she succumbed to *vertical tunnel vision* and didn't take the opportunity to learn from her peers what works best when presenting to the organization's senior executives.

The importance of looking to your left and right as you lead cannot be overstated. In research conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council, failure to build partnerships with peers and subordinates was cited by 82 percent of survey respondents as one of the primary reasons why executives fail in their jobs.

Donna Morea, president of the business processes consulting com-

pany CGI-AMS, offers this advice to newcomers to the executive ranks: “The one thing I would do if I were new to a team is meet with every single person on the team to understand who they are and where they are. What I would not do is come to the first meeting and start stabbing around about the issues without knowing much history or much about the dynamics of the team.”

Amy, to put her performance back on track, needs to recognize and respond to the things that have changed since she became an executive. One of the most significant changes—and opportunities—created by her promotion is that Amy is now part of a new team—the executive team. She needs to be intentional and deliberate about looking left and right to collaborate with her new executive peers. As an executive, Amy has more access than she did as a manager. If she chooses to take advantage of her access, she will have valuable opportunities to partner with her peers who oversee other functions and to contribute to the broader business agenda of the company. In turn, she can bring a broader and more grounded perspective back to her functional team that will enable the team members to better understand how their actions support the goals of the company. No one else on her functional team has the kind of access that Amy now has. She is the only one who can leverage the unique aspects of the broader view that she can take as a new vice president.

The path to picking up this new level of executive presence begins with letting go. ✍

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