

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS IN UNIVERSITIES

Arriving, Surviving and Thriving at the Top

ACCELERATING PERFORMANCE IN A NEW ROLE:

Successful Senior Leadership Transitions *Reducing risk and optimising performance*

All appointments into new roles, particularly those at a senior level, are subject to a degree of risk. Sometimes the risk is relatively low; perhaps the person has been performing successfully in the role in an interim capacity prior to final confirmation into the position. In other cases, the risk is slightly higher, for example, while the person appointed has performed successfully in a similar role elsewhere, the context and culture of the new organisation create different challenges. Many more appointments are, of course, promotions. A move up from a prior level of seniority, a rise in the span of control, or in the complexity of the operation, and for some, a move across sectors or countries.

Risk also rises with the level of seniority. Appointments at the very top level as a CEO or Head of University (HoU) add new risks. For some, the move to a higher level, places demands on the person that they – and others - thought were within their capability, but prove not to be. This was one step too far. While such inadequacies can arise in other roles, the damage done from an unsuccessful transition at the top is likely to be much greater, not just personally or financially, but also reputationally.

When undertaken with care and attention throughout the recruitment and search and selection process, most appointments do lead to positive outcomes. Sometimes the fit of the person is right and their performance takes off immediately. In other cases, however, while the appointment process is deemed as concluded, some aspects of performance remain a ‘work in progress;’ a longer time-span is required before the appointee is operating at their optimum level. In a few cases (thankfully) there may be several significant early warning signs suggesting concerns about a poor fit. Additionally, while there is apparent progress in some areas of performance, sadly, this is not enough to allay developing concerns.

Based on experience of working for over 20 years with senior leaders in higher education, and particularly those appointed to the top role as President, Vice-chancellor or CEO, we believe the risks associated with top leader transitions can be reduced significantly. Our recent research, reported in a new book published in Spring 2021 (Kennie T. and Middlehurst R. *‘Leadership Transitions in Universities: Arriving, Surviving and Thriving at the Top’*, Routledge reinforces and amplifies these ideas. The findings are also relevant to those transitioning into other senior roles such as DVC, COO, PVC, Dean or Director.

The approach that we have taken complements the processes of successful recruitment and/or search and selection. Our purpose is to accelerate performance in role and minimise the risks of a poorly co-ordinated transition. The process does not involve a single intervention, but rather includes a range of activities that aim to ‘nudge the odds’ in favour of success for the individual and those around them.

Typically, our role comes to the fore at the post-appointment phase as individuals and organisations prepare for the arrival of a new leader. In some instances, the work (and funding of it) is undertaken by the incoming leader. In others, the work is funded by the new organisation and has a wider remit. This might involve working with the team that the leader is joining, in order to prepare the runway for their arrival as new leader. It might also extend to working jointly with the outgoing leader, and with the person to whom the incoming leader will report.

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What are the options and possibilities?

We work with institutions to co-create, facilitate and guide a number of activities designed to nudge the odds towards success. Throughout, we bring an objective, independent perspective to complement local detailed understanding of context and culture. We work at the level of the individual, the team and the whole organisation.

Individual transitions

Incoming Leader

- Building on the final stages of appointing a new leader, we provide a package of transition coaching support. Typically, this would involve a series of sessions in the post appointment-pre-arrival phase with a further series over the first 3-6 months in office. The sessions are tailored to reflect the distinctive needs of each individual with some pre-work before each session focussing on those needs that are agreed as being of most importance.
- We also offer the option of joining a virtual transition leadership action learning group. Through this process we create a confidential, peer coaching network for others in a similar stage in their leadership transition journey.

Incoming and outgoing leaders and teams

- In this option we extend the coaching to include some engagement with the outgoing leader and/or with the team with whom the new leader will be working. This typically involves some preparatory work by the team members to help ensure the new leader 'lands well'.

Team and individual transitions

- As a new leader begins in their new role, we provide a further level of transition-assistance. In this instance, we work with the leader and their 'new' team to shape their future work together, clarifying both upon 'what' they will focus as well as 'how' they will work as a new team.
- For some team members, this may also be a period of further transition as they take on new responsibilities or decide to explore their future prospects in another place. All of these shifts can bring both uncertainty and opportunity. The choreography of these decisions and their implementation is often a further transition challenge for new leaders.

University strategic transitions

Integrated Leadership Transitions (ILT)

- In this case, we provide a more strategic consultancy process that explores the wider range of transitions through an exploration of the key succession points arising or likely to arise in the organisation in the short to medium term. This further reduces the risks associated with appointments by enabling increased levels of preparation for, and a clearer perspective on, the key roles for the present and future.
- In parallel, the need might arise for some analysis of the suitability of the current strategy, organisational structure and form of the senior team prior to or early on in the new leader's tenure.

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Leadership transitions developmental workshops – to add to your internal portfolio of programmes

Every year across all organisations a range of individuals are promoted into new roles. Some roles are merely extensions to existing areas of expertise, for example from a professional specialist role to a Deputy Director, or from a leader of a research group to the head of a research Centre or Institute. In other instances, the new role might demand new capabilities or the application of a broader range of skills. For example, a role with more of a cross-cutting portfolio as an Associate Dean or Associate Pro-vice-chancellor (APVC).

What all these role changes share is a process of psychological transition, and (in common with external appointments) the need to reduce risk and optimise performance.

To accelerate and optimise the transition process, we can provide a short developmental programme tailored to, and as a supplement, to your internal leadership development portfolio.

Typically, through three remote 2.5hr workshops and three virtual action learning group sessions, we explore the core principles, psychology, planning, priorities and apply a range of practical tools and processes which together, accelerate the process of transitioning and further enhance personal and team performance. Not only can such events provide insights into the new leadership landscape and opportunities facing those in (or preparing for) new roles, they can also help build peer networks and connections for the future.

The timing of these events can vary to suit your promotion rounds. Whether it is offered as an option, or strongly encouraged as part of the promotion is, of course, your choice.

We also offer a 'Leadership Transitions' open programmes and will be open to discussing the possibilities of a consortium-based approach for universities that see value in a collaborative approach.

Case Studies

To provide illustrations of the approaches outlined above, we offer some examples from recent and current practice.

- ***Transition coaching and team development***

This case involved work that started with an invitation to provide transition coaching following the appointment of an already experienced Vice Chancellor taking on the role in a second university, in a highly research-intensive context. The approach led to subsequent work with a new Senior Leadership Team (SLT). After approximately 2 years' work – and as part of the transition process for the Chair of the governing body - a process of 360 feedback was undertaken, initially with the VC and then with the members of the SLT.

- ***Interim transition leadership***

This case involved work with a new HoU who was appointed to take over from an Interim HoU who had provided leadership for 12 months following the earlier-than-planned departure of the prior leader. The work was at several levels, helping to accelerate the entry process and early period in office of the new leader and included work with the Chair of the Governing body. The project also involved designing a process of integrated team leadership development for members of the senior leadership team and a wider community of Deans and Directors.

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- ***Extended transition leadership***

This case involved a complex web of linked leadership transitions involving the appointment of an internal Interim HoU following the confirmation of the selection panel and the pre-planned departure of the existing HoU. The process involved work with the incoming and transition leaders, individually and jointly, to develop short, medium and longer-term plans.

- ***Dean and School leadership transition***

This case involved work with a Business School following the appointment of a new Dean, in this case from another country. In addition to the personal transition, this also involved work with a relatively new School Leadership Team. Over time, this also extended to work involving the School's External Advisory Board.

- ***CEO and COO transition***

This case involved work with a research institute in the lead-up to the appointment and transition of a CEO and COO. Again, this involved work at different levels: with the outgoing CEO, leadership development support for the existing leadership team, and subsequent work with the incoming COO and CEO.

Next Steps

If the concepts and case studies outlined are of interest, we would be delighted to arrange a confidential conversation to discuss your goals and your context in more detail. Please email Dr Tom Kennie at tkennie@ranmore.co.uk or call +44 1483 283040 or +44 7956 677860.