



The Advisory Alliance 60-Second Email™

Promotion? No Thanks; I'll Take the Divorce Instead. ***May 31, 2007***

In this month's 60-Second Email™, we examine the paradoxical nature of promotions, and what you can do to ensure yours is a success.

Congratulations! You've just been promoted!! All the hard work, late nights, missed recitals, and missed dinners are finally paying off. What you've been shooting for all this time is finally coming to pass. Outstanding!.....So why do you feel that pit in your stomach? And in those quiet moments alone, why do you reminisce about the days when your work was simpler, cleaner, and more manageable? Wasn't the promotion what you really wanted?

In a recent study by Development Dimensions International, 385 leaders in the U.S. (from the CEO level to first-level managers) were asked to rank a list of life's greatest challenges. The #1 most difficult personal challenge? Making a leadership transition at work. Nineteen percent of all leaders chose this as their top challenge. What came in second and third? Coping with bereavement and dealing with divorce, respectively. Which says something about the level of stress for today's leaders,...or quite possibly the quality of their personal relationships.

When you think about it, it's not too surprising that leaders cite promotions or transitions as very challenging. The pace of work is incredibly fast. Scrutiny from others is more intense. And if you really mess up, it'll be on YouTube this afternoon with that Star Wars guy. Beyond those issues, if you scratch a little deeper, the research and anecdotal evidence points to the fact that many leaders don't feel prepared for their new roles. In many ways, it's like the freight train a mile a way: once the promotion's been announced, there's nothing you can do to stop it. Many sit and wait for its arrival, and then try and jump onboard as it speeds by. They've spent little time getting up to speed so their transition is a smooth, or at least a less turbulent, one.

What causes a lot of leadership transition turbulence? The top 5 issues are navigating organizational politics (65% of leaders cited this), dealing with ambiguity (56%), getting work done through others (55%), engaging and inspiring employees (46%), and creating a new network (43% - leaders could select more than one issue). So in essence, with each transition, leadership issues become more "fuzzy"; the work to be done by the leader becomes less concrete; and the leader has less control over the people he/she relies upon for success.

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So where does a leader turn to for help? The top two choices for leaders are their boss (44% of leaders selected this) and colleagues & peers (44%). Next come family and friends (22%) and internal mentors/coaches (18%). HR was significantly absent, with only 6% of leaders citing it. If anything, this is a wake-up call for HR to heighten its focus on transitioning leaders.

And what can organizations do to help leaders who are being promoted? More than half of all leaders (52%) said having "clear performance expectations" (buzzword translation: What do I need to do, and how well do I need to do it?) would be good. And 43% said it would be helpful to understand that the new role requires new ways of thinking, which is something often overlooked. And that's significant, because if you don't know what you're getting yourself into, it's very hard to be successful at it. Personally, I'm seeing more and more leaders asking for that insight before they accept a new role. Additionally, companies are becoming increasingly sensitive to the needs of leaders prior to their transition. "Sink or swim" is giving way to "We're in this together." Companies are recognizing that a failed leader is too expensive, especially given the shortage of qualified leaders so many companies face.

So, some final thoughts for leaders gunning for promotion or soon-to-be promoted:

- Go in with eyes wide open. Find out what's required of you, what you need to do, and how you need to think. Do that in advance, way in advance.
- Don't go it alone. Don't succumb to the myth of the heroic leader. Get the support you need. Find people who've "been there, done that". Pick their brains. Stay close to them throughout and after your transition.
- Get used to the pit in your stomach. Work/life balance is an oxymoron the higher up you are in an organization (which is the reason why even in the phrase "work/life balance", work always comes first).
- With each leadership transition, ask yourself: "What skills, knowledge and abilities must I preserve? Which ones do I need to let go of? And which ones do I need to add?" [Freedman, 1998 - citation upon request]
- Take comfort in knowing that, notwithstanding the stress and challenge, leaders in the study were 3 times more likely to say that their latest promotion had a positive, as opposed to a negative, impact on their personal life.

And good luck in the new role.



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Until next month,

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