

Setting yourself up to make an impact and succeed with change

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You are a leader taking upon a new challenge and wish to hit the ground running to make an impact - fast.

Many of us will be familiar with this situation and the challenges and opportunities it provides. Few organisations hire leaders into a role to simply maintain the status quo. Often, there is an expectation that they will bring something different to the table and make an impact.

Over the years, I have had many calls from experienced leaders who have either taken on new roles within their current organisation or who have accepted a new challenge at a new company. I have had the opportunity to follow many of them, supporting them from the sidelines to ensure they were able to hit the ground running: thus, they made the impact they were brought in to make.

Here I will share some of the learnings which I have seen make a massive difference to whether you as a leader

onboard successfully and make an impact or whether you just land.

1. Be clear on your direction and desired end-state, however flexible on how to get there

Before you start your new role, have a clear vision of your goal, a North Star if you will. This should be short and precise.

Here's a practical tip from several senior leaders I have had the pleasure of collaborating with: take some time to address the impact you wish to make and visualize your vision. How will you know, when you have reached it? Then use a sparring partner: explain your vision to them and get them to mirror what they hear and help put it in writing. It doesn't have to be perfect - simply spending two hour slots by way of preparation can go a long way. It will get you off to a good start by helping you set out a clear direction for your next challenge.

- Clearly communicate your vision (North Star) and some of the key drivers.
- These key drivers should be ambitious enough to be relevant in 3-5 years' time with limited editing.
- The North Star is not up for discussion. How you get there is.
- Involve your leadership team in building the road forward. Why? I will explore this in my next post.

“The mobilisation process developed our leadership team whilst creating a foundation for successful implementation.”

Regional managing director, Central and Eastern Europe

2. Be clear on what's up for discussion and what's not

Many leaders aim to create engagement via involvement, and involvement is indeed a powerful tool. However, if you ask for others' opinions regarding matters that you have already made your mind up about, it can also backfire.

- Challenge yourself to be precise regarding which areas are up for discussion and where you really are completely flexible, and which areas have already been decided upon.
- Be clear on where the playing field is for the areas in which you are flexible and ensure you communicate this clearly.

One leader I worked with spent time noting down what was up for discussion and what was not before entering into a session with her leadership team. That way, she was able to communicate what was already decided but also to involve her leadership team in the areas where she was happy to let them make decisions. The result: her leadership style was seen to be transparent and effective in creating ownership within her team.

3. Have the right support around you and don't compromise

As senior leaders, you are under extreme time pressure. Therefore, make sure you have the right

support team around you before you set out on your journey. Many journeys lose momentum, not out of lack of focus or on purpose, but simply due to lack of time. As a leader, be mindful of where your time is being taken up by matters that could either be handled by your support team or are simply irrelevant.

What is the minimum support team?

- An HR specialist – the right HR support can proactively help you navigate the change journey and can provide strong insights, especially if you wish to make changes to a organisation's culture or to your team.
- A finance expert – besides the obvious financial focus, a finance expert can provide strong insights regarding the right data to support and challenge your vision: this can be a huge enabler for change success.
- A strong Executive Assistant (EA) – will manage your calendar, ensure you are prepared for various meetings and in general handle a lot of the 'smaller things', making for a smoother process for everyone involved. The right EA is a person who is constantly two steps ahead of you, ensuring you are ready and can perform at your best.

The most successful team moves seamlessly around you, each briefing the others on updates resulting in each member knowing what needs to be done.

4. Empower those around you to lead and be firm, when offtrack

Be clear on the added value and impact you wish your leaders to make and give them the freedom to decide the best way to achieve it. Ensure you set clear goals and align expectations regularly. The more freedom and trust you wish to delegate, the firmer you will also need to be when problems need to be addressed.

Be clear regarding your ways of working. I once worked with a senior leader who always requested all prereads for the coming week by Friday and used the weekend as his buffer, if there was more that he could take over the week. Find your way of working and communicate it from the outset.

- Be clear regarding your work style and communicate it.
- Be clear on what you expect from your team. Put it in writing and communicate it clearly. It's not being bossy, it's being easier to work with.

5. Move forward in 'sprints' and build your team together with the journey

Building your journey together with your team gives you an insight into who believes in the journey. It gives you the opportunity to both challenge the team and to learn from them, and it allows you as a leader to see where they see the main challenges.

Many leaders do not take the time or, at least, do not make the most of their time to build their journey and their team together. They treat these as two separate things and build each separately. In my experience, the quickest route to success is when leaders do this together – they build the journey and the team as part of the same process.

What's the best way to do this?

- Tailor SPRINTS with your leadership team with a clear purpose and outcomes that are centred around leadership time together (whether virtual or in-person).
- Remove the 'business as usual' setting and set the process up so everyone is 'ready to run' once you meet and ready to execute once you are done..
- Use an external facilitator as this gives you (or your HR specialist) the opportunity to truly engage and take part in the process without having to capture learnings. As one global HR leader told me, 'having you in the room enabled me to fully engage and deliver value'. A strong external facilitator can also mirror you and your leadership team on your journey, ensure you do what you say, and act as a sparring partner / sounding board for you and your team.

6. Be bold yet realistic

Often, your journey starts months before you take on your new role. Therefore, be aware that your team and organisation will also need time to understand, get involved and engage in the project.

- Your leadership team will need to be integrated, enabling them to take ownership for their journey together with you. Be mindful at the start that they are at least one step behind you and will need time to embrace new concepts and to communicate their own input.
- When it comes to your employees, consider how best to mobilise those who play key roles in order to create motivation within the organisation. Which employees can help you create and convey excitement for the journey, thus becoming change agents?
- Accept there is a time delay, and you cannot simply avoid it. However, you can work actively to shorten and overcome it.

- Speed things up! You can ensure the process happens quickly by being well-prepared. However, people need to understand before they can buy in and engage.

To this end, a senior leader once told me that an external facilitator was the best investment: an external facilitator kept both him and his leadership team focused and accountable and acted as a mirror, which kept them moving in the right direction and proved extremely effective.

7. Have the right team – also externally

The higher up you move in the organisation, the lonelier the role. You yourself don't change, but how people see you and interact with you does.

Therefore, ensure you have a good support group around you - both within the organisation and externally. A good support group helps keep you focussed, mirrors progress, challenges you, acts as your sounding board and sometimes just listens.

Being realistic, your role will be a multifaceted one and it is often the case, therefore, that no one advisor can provide the support required for the full spectrum of your leadership role and journey. Therefore, keep track of the good people you meet along the way and engage with them, seeing where they can add value. A good advisor will also let you know when they are not the right person to help you move forward on a specific step of the journey.

As one leader once explained to me, throughout his career he had met people who really had the ability to see things differently and act as a sounding board. He specifically kept in touch with three individuals, two professional advisors and a trusted sparring partner within his field. The reason he kept in touch with them was simple: he found them to be honest, saw that they truly added value when he engaged with them and wanted to secure that support going forward.

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