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Awakening Leadership Within

Moving to the Next Level

As an executive coach I have come to understand that there are certain truths to moving into a leadership position. First, your greatest asset will undoubtedly be your greatest liability. Second, what got you to the next level will get in the way of your success at the leadership level. Third, you most certainly will not have clarity on what is truly expected from you. Fourth, to lead effectively you will have to redefine yourself, privately and publicly, letting go of your perception of who you are and embracing a renewed self-awareness of your impact on others. Fifth, like having a baby, you are never really fully prepared for what is to come.

According to research conducted by Manchester Associates, forty percent of new executives fail within eighteen months. Most have risen to their positions through high levels of competence in their fields, yet still, these highly competent men and women fail. Let's look at the First "Truth": *Your greatest asset will be your greatest liability.* Personal trainers know that during intense exercise, the muscles of the body will default to using the strongest muscle. Similarly, if your strength has been analytical, you may apply this strength to a problem expecting to be successful as in the past. Yet, the issue may require intuition, or another skill that you have not developed, valued or learned. If your strength has been in processes, issues relating to people or emotional intelligence may go unrecognized. As the saying goes, if you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

The Second Truth: *What got you to the next level will get in the way of your success at the leadership level.* By being attached to past models of success you forego learning new skills. Julio Olalla, founder of the Newfield Network claims, "We invest so much in what we already know that we refuse to give it up, even when it has stopped serving us." Human beings will always revert to what they know in the face of ambiguity or stress. New executives will continue to apply their old models and techniques to problems encountered at the leadership level. Yet, regardless of how well you have honed these past techniques, applying them to your new role, to a role that requires a different set of competencies, will compromise, and not lead to, your success.

This brings up the question of how to define success; and our Third Truth: *You most certainly will not have clarity on what is truly expected from you.* Implicit in a promotion into a leadership level is the unstated expectation that having gotten here; you should know what to do and what is expected of you (perhaps by osmosis?) without needing any "hand-holding" or clear instruction. After all, you ARE a senior executive! Despite quantifiable



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measurements that may exist on an organizational level, you will soon discover that your success depends on working effectively through others. Michael Watkins, in his book **The First 90 Days** claims that the actions you take during your first three months will largely determine your success or failure. He claims, "Transitions...are a period of acute vulnerability, because you lack established working relationships and a detailed understanding of your role."¹

What is required in this period of transition is an inner confidence in your right and capability to be at the leadership level. I often find that newly promoted executives bring with them an inner question regarding their ability to succeed. This is normal given that the environment becomes a moving target, with forces outside your control exerting influence and impacting your role on a daily basis. And further, your role is likely to be more visible and public, especially if you have moved to the CEO position. Developing a strong and authentic leadership presence and emphasizing mentoring of others are key to your success at this level. The opportunity then becomes to make the position your own, and then letting others know about it.

Which leads me to the Fourth Truth: *To lead effectively you will have to redefine yourself, privately and publicly, letting go of your perception of who you are and embracing a renewed self-awareness of your impact on others.* As if your new position were not challenging enough, you have to contend with your inner beliefs about yourself. Scott Eblin, a colleague of mine agrees. In his "must-read-for-new-executives" book, **The Next Level**, Scott identifies nine key sets of behaviors and beliefs that rising executives must pick up and let go of to succeed at the next level. He says that success at the next level requires "the insight to pick up what you need and the courage to let go of what served you well in the past".² He further supports the idea that success at the next level also takes into account a redefinition of self, at work and personally. "The people who are most successful in dealing with change or navigating the uncharted terrain of the next level are those who choose to step back and get some strategic perspective on what is working and what isn't. They then apply that perspective, not just to their career, but to their life as a whole."

Last, but not least, the Fifth Truth: *Like having a baby, you are never really fully prepared for what is to come.* I remember telling a friend of mine that I was not having a baby until I had fully explored what that meant in my life and looked at this from all angles. My friend who had already had two children met my comment with laughter. She replied, between fits of

¹ Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, pg. 1

² Scott Eblin, *The Next Level*, pg. 191



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laughter, "What ever makes you think you will be prepared?" Honestly, as a mother of an eleven year old, I ask myself that question often. Life, and leadership, doesn't always happen when we believe we are ready for it or when we plan it. Yes, you can certainly begin to develop your leadership competencies now; in whatever position you have at the moment. Looking at your life and work as a learning opportunity, the positive and the negative, can begin to prepare you for the next level. Yet, once there, be prepared to throw out what you know if indeed it does not serve you. The greatest attribute you can bring to your leadership position is identical to the one you can bring as a parent. It is presence. Cultivate presence and self-awareness as the foundation for success at the next level.

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