

CASE STUDY:

Leadership Transition

Key words:

- coaching
- leadership development
- managing upwards
- transition
- career path

How do I know when my difficulties in the company reflect a need to develop my skills and capacities, or when it's time to move on?

When an individual is struggling in their job, it is important to look beyond a requested outcome and to dig deeper to identify challenges and paths to overcome them. For example what may appear to be a lack of advancement opportunities could reveal a misuse of talents and a desire to make a significant career change. When coaching others, it is essential to investigate goals fully, and to be open to exploring new possibilities to find career satisfaction and fulfillment.

Identifying obstacles to professional success and the paths to overcome them.

Background

Michael was a dynamic senior manager at a leading apparel company, poised to become the Vice President of his division. The problem was, he had trouble working with his boss. His boss was a very brilliant strategist but her managing style was disorganized and autocratic. She relied heavily on Michael for execution, and for getting the division on board because everyone had trouble with her. Michael often felt like he was caught in the middle, translating the boss' chaotic and disorganized directives into plans that could be executed. But it was taking a toll.

Michael felt that his boss stood in the way of his promotion because she needed him to compensate the managerial skills she lacked. Michael wanted to move to another division where his talents could be more readily identified and appreciated, and where he had more room for advancement.

He initially sought coaching in order to work on getting along with his boss. After identifying the issues that stood in his way, we identified Michael's objectives:

Objectives

1. **Learn to manage upwards.** Part of this was to establish a communication routine between Michael and his boss: initiating regular contact and setting a weekly Monday morning meeting where upcoming deadlines and projects could be reviewed and planned for (no more urgent 4:59 pm Friday calls with 48 hour deadlines) .
2. **Identify opportunities to develop skills necessary for advancement.** While Michael had exceptional creative and managerial skills, he was weaker with the technical business skills that would be crucial for advancement. We identified key areas needing improvement, and mentors and projects he could engage with, to help him develop those skills.

3. **Embrace a position of leadership.** Feeling underappreciated and stressed by his boss, Michael tended to rely on the support of his team. There was a danger however, of creating a coalition with his direct reports against the boss. He needed to see himself as a leader, and to act like one, not as 'one of the team.'

Interventions

Michael and I met weekly for approximately 6 months and reviewed progress on the three objectives. Over time, it became clear that Michael's problems were not just with the boss. In reviewing his history with the company, it appeared that Michael never felt he fit in. We conducted an inventory of Michael's skills and abilities and discussed the possibility of his transitioning, not just within the company, but outside of it.

The company culture was aggressive and competitive and focused on acquisition, numbers and market share. It didn't suit his more creative, innovative style. He was talented in driving new product development, but this skill wasn't as valued, not just by his boss, but the culture itself. We realized that his problem with the boss was symptomatic of a larger problem of recognizing his unique set of skills, and putting himself in a position to maximize them.

Recognizing and valuing his talents was not easy. He had internalized the culture's attitude and tended to minimize these skills. After having worked for 14 years in the same company, rising from a junior project manager to a senior business manager role, he had begun to view his skills through the lens of the company's culture.

We worked for several months on identifying and appreciating his talents, and discussing where and how to use them more in his current role. As time went on, he began to get clearer that he really might be in the wrong company. As we discussed his options, out of the blue, he got a call from a corporate recruitment firm, asking him to interview with a rising competitor that was expanding and needed a new Vice President of Product Development. It was a major step up for him, and a move that would showcase his talents.

Update

Michael accepted the VP role at the new company, and after initial start up uncertainties, is flourishing in the new role. He manages a larger team and has much greater responsibility and freedom in the positions. And best of all, he is able to use his talents more fully, leading the design and execution of new products and opening up new markets.

Insights

- **The identified problem (conflict getting along with boss) may be a symptom of a deeper problem.** Only by careful discussion, asking the right questions, and being able to discern patterns from obstacles could we find the real problem underneath
- **Knowing when the problem means changing ourselves or changing our context is the key to career development.** In the early stages of a new position or role, skill development takes precedence, yet later on, being able to recognize when we no longer fit a particular culture is crucial.
- **Identifying talents and abilities is challenging** because it also requires understanding where and how we have internalized the values and culture of our context.