

WITH A NEW  
INTRODUCTION

# MASTER YOUR NEXT MOVE

The Essential Companion to  
*The First 90 Days*

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HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

# The Promotion Challenge

Bert Vandervliet had been working steadily toward this promotion for years. But just four months into his new job, as a business unit leader at BSC Chemicals, the euphoria was beginning to wear off: the realities of what it would take to lead the company's plastic resins manufacturing unit were becoming evident—and Bert was wondering if he was fully prepared for the challenges of handling a global business with more than three thousand employees worldwide.

Bert had spent his entire fifteen-year career at BSC, a maker of specialty chemicals, plastics, and pharmaceuticals headquartered in Belgium. He had joined BSC's performance plastics unit soon after completing his master's degree. Even in his first job, as an assistant product manager, he had won early recognition for his leadership abilities. Bert's strong performance continued, and eventually he was assigned to help set up the performance plastics unit's new Asian business center in Singapore. He quickly built

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up the sales side of that venture and was promoted to sales manager. In addition to the sales responsibility, he was also charged with managing the subcontracting of BSC's plastics production, so Bert ended up gaining some good exposure to the manufacturing side of the business.

When he returned to Belgium three years later, he was promoted to European marketing and sales director, overseeing a group of eighty professionals in technical marketing, sales, and customer service. He also became a member of that unit's top management team, which allowed him to experience decision making at the business-unit level and to familiarize himself with what was going on in other functions. In due course, he was transferred to BSC's polyethylene division as a vice president of marketing and sales, responsible for a cluster of products, related services, and a staff of nearly two hundred.

Now recognized as one of the future leaders of the company with twelve years of experience, Bert was asked to join BSC's corporate human resources organization. He was responsible for internal sourcing and external recruitment of executives, a role he held for almost three years. This gave him a deeper understanding of HR, a broader view of the company's operations, a chance to build an organization-wide network, and greater visibility with BSC's senior executives.

All of Bert's hard work culminated in his appointment as the business unit leader for plastic resins, a sister unit of performance plastics in BSC's plastic materials division. The resins business manufactured the raw material for fabricating plastic components. It was relatively small but one of BSC's best-performing units. Quite intentionally, the senior team at BSC had assigned Bert to a successful business with a strong team that could help him learn what it meant to head up a thriving unit and, over time, push his leadership skills to the next level. The setup was

perfect, completely in his favor—yet Bert was astonished at how much he was struggling to climb the learning curve.

He fretted about the high expectations placed on him; after all, when you inherit a successful business, there's often no place to go but down. The resins business was highly profitable but mature—which presented Bert with a very different set of challenges than he had experienced in the high-growth performance plastics business. He worried that any significant misstep could seriously limit his future prospects at BSC.

Bert also quickly recognized the difference between leading a particular functional group, as he had in the past, versus overseeing multiple functional areas within a complete business. Most of the people Bert was leading now knew much more about operations, say, or R&D, than he did. Yet they were expecting him to make the right trade-offs between the supply and demand sides of the business (operations versus marketing and sales) and between focusing on current results and investing in the future (finance versus R&D). Because of the cross-functional nature of his new role, *Bert felt much less rooted in any one area of expertise*, and thus much less confident in his ability to discern the strengths and weaknesses of his team.

Bert was also now leading many more employees than he ever had. In his other management roles at BSC, he had been able to initiate a reasonable degree of personal contact, albeit sometimes sporadic, with most of his employees—something that was simply impossible in this new role, with more than three thousand people scattered in facilities around the globe. The implications of this became clear to him as he worked with his team to craft the annual strategy. When the time came to communicate it to the organization, he realized that he couldn't go out and simply sell the vision and strategy by himself; he had to work more through his direct reports and find other channels for spreading the word. And after

touring most of the unit's facilities, Bert likewise worried that he'd never really be able to keep in touch with what was happening on the front lines.

As a member of various management teams during his tenure at BSC, Bert had gained some appreciation for how difficult it was for business heads to prioritize all the issues thrown at them in any given day, week, or month. Still, Bert was surprised by the scope and complexity of the problems at this level. He wasn't sure how to allocate his time and immediately felt overloaded. He knew he needed to delegate more, but he wasn't clear yet about which tasks and assignments he could safely leave to others.

Never mind that Bert had also recently become aware of some potentially dangerous patterns in how he was managing his new team in the plastic resins unit. A month earlier, his vice president of HR, an experienced and insightful executive, offered the new leader some blunt but friendly feedback: "You seem to be over-managing your VP of sales and marketing. You need to give Kurt a little space." The HR executive also suggested that Bert be a bit more careful about how and when he raised new ideas in meetings with the senior team. "I know you're just trying to get the group to be more open and flexible, but they worry that they need to mobilize around every brainstorm."

Finally, Bert was still adjusting to the increasing external demands on his time. While he had of course listened in on analyst calls in the past, he was now expected to lead the discussions and field tough questions. Other types of requests were flooding in to the unit leader's support staff, as well: Could Bert participate in important industry/government forums sponsored by the corporate government affairs group? Would Bert be willing to sit for an interview with an editor from *Forbes* magazine? Could Bert speak at the various industry conferences, awards

ceremonies, and other events happening locally and overseas within the next few months?

## The Promotion Challenge

As Bert's experience suggests, a promotion definitely marks the end of years of hard work to persuade influential people in the organization that you're willing and able to move to the next level. But it also marks the beginning of a new journey in which you must figure out what it takes to excel in the new role, how to exceed the expectations of those who promoted you, and how to position yourself for still-greater things. That's the promotion challenge.

What does it take to meet this challenge? In *The First 90 Days*, I stressed the importance of "promoting yourself." Rest assured, I was not advocating the ego-driven selling of oneself, but rather, highlighting the need for executives to prepare themselves mentally to move to the next level of the organization and to meet any personal-change challenges. As I put it in that book, promoting yourself doesn't mean believing that you will be successful in your new job by continuing to do what you did in your previous job, only more so. It means letting go of the past and embracing the imperatives of the new situation.<sup>1</sup>

As you work to promote yourself, it also helps to *distinguish between challenges that are common to most promotions and challenges that are specific to the level and position to which you're ascending*. The common challenges flow, in large part, from predictable changes in the information-processing demands placed on leaders as they rise up through organizations. As I will discuss in the following sections, for example, coping with increasing issue breadth and complexity requires leaders to *rethink how and what they delegate each time they get promoted*.

But it's not enough to focus on these common promotion challenges, because there are specific, level-dependent competencies that leaders must develop to be successful. It's here that newly promoted leaders tend to get into the most trouble; their experience better prepares them to deal with the common challenges of promotion (e.g., delegating differently) than to develop wholly new level-specific competencies.

Bert Vandervliet, for example, is trying to figure out what it means to move from a functional vice president's role to a true general management job. To solve this riddle, he'll need to identify both the core challenges and competency gaps he faces, and then organize himself to deal with them most effectively. He'll have to exercise personal discipline to do things he normally wouldn't, build a team that complements him, and think hard about what advice and counsel he'll need and how he'll use it.

## **Core Promotion Challenges**

Many of the core promotion challenges leaders face, listed below, are actually by-products of the different information-processing and influence demands transitioning executives encounter at higher levels of the organization.

- Your *impact horizon*, or the range of issues and challenges you have a direct hand in addressing, broadens significantly as you move up; you are juggling more things and are forced to do more multitasking.
- The *complexity and ambiguity* of what you have to deal with increases: for any given issue, there are many more variables to consider, and cause-and-effect relationships often become less clear as you move to higher levels of the organization.

- *Organizational politics* become more challenging at higher levels; peers and bosses are more capable and have stronger personalities.
- You need to lead *farther from the front lines*, which can make it difficult to communicate strategy downward and stay informed about what’s happening on the ground.
- You are under *more scrutiny* by more people, more frequently; there are fewer private moments when you are not on stage.

For each of these common core challenges, there are associated strategies for what you need to do to promote yourself. (See figure 1-1.)

FIGURE 1-1

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### Core promotion challenges

*For each core challenge there are corresponding strategies that newly promoted leaders should employ.*

What’s really changed?	What should you do?
<b>Broader impact horizon:</b> There is a broader range of issues, people, and ideas to focus on.	Balance depth and breadth
<b>Greater complexity and ambiguity:</b> There are more variables, and there is greater uncertainty about outcomes.	Delegate more deeply.
<b>Tougher organizational politics:</b> There are more powerful stakeholders to contend with.	Influence differently.
<b>Further from the front lines:</b> There is greater distance between you and the people executing on the ground, potentially weakening communication and adding more filters.	Communicate more formally.
<b>More scrutiny:</b> There is more attention paid to your actions by more people, more frequently.	Adjust to greater visibility.

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### **Balance Breadth and Depth**

Each time you're promoted, your *impact horizon* broadens to encompass a wider set of issues and decisions. Whereas Bert was formerly focusing on his function and its impact on the larger business, now he has to deal with the full array of issues affecting the unit.

To deal with this increase in scope, leaders have to be able to gain and sustain an integrative view of the business. In *The Nature of Leadership*, authors B. Joseph White and Yaron Prywes describe this as a “helicopter view”—a broad perspective on the organization, encompassing its past, present, and future.<sup>2</sup>

But the leader-as-helicopter metaphor has even richer possibilities: Helicopters don't just hover; they move up or down in response to the pilot's needs. In the context of promotions and transition challenges, it's helpful to remember that even as you gain managerial altitude and perspective, you must preserve your ability to dive deep into issues when the situation demands it. You can't afford to always stay at fifty thousand feet. You have to be able to pick an issue of concern and start digging into it, asking questions and pushing for answers until you are confident there is a firm foundation for people's opinions and judgments. Doing this well means knowing which are the critical “fulcrum issues” that now or will impact the business, which in turn rests on your ability to gain and sustain the integrative view. It also means, as I will discuss shortly, being an effective “problem finder.”

You need to do this selectively, of course, and you need to be able to move back up to a higher level once you're satisfied: it's dangerous to hover near ground level for too long, regardless of how interesting the scenery is. This is especially the case if you find yourself focusing too much on the business activities or functions you were involved with before you were promoted. The concerns raised by the VP of HR that Bert was “overmanaging”

his VP of sales and marketing suggest that he might be at risk of falling into this trap.

Understanding when to keep soaring and when to swoop down for a closer look is something that every leader needs to relearn each time he or she gets promoted—because the fifty-thousand-foot view in your previous leadership role may just be the world at five thousand feet, or even five hundred feet, in your new job. Key here is to have early discussions with advisors about how to approach this. It also helps to identify one or more role models, people who are viewed as highly effective at the level to which you have been promoted. Talk to them or people who have worked with them if you can; study them from a distance if you can't.

### ***Rethink What You Delegate***

The complexity and ambiguity of the issues you are dealing with will increase as you move into a new role—which means you'll need to reorganize your approach to handling particular projects, products, processes, and so on. In particular, you'll need to rethink what you delegate.

Management sage Peter Drucker said it as far back as the early 1950s: the ability to delegate lies at the heart of leadership.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of where you land in the organization, the keys to effective delegation remain pretty much the same: you build a team of competent people whom you trust, you establish goals and metrics through which you can monitor people's progress, you translate higher-level goals into specific responsibilities for your direct reports, and you reinforce them through some sort of management-by-objectives process. In other words, the “how” of delegation is a constant.

However, “what” you delegate—the basic units of analysis through which you engage with your direct reports—often needs

to change when you get promoted. If you are leading an organization of five people, it may make sense to delegate specific tasks such as drafting a piece of marketing material or pursuing a particular customer. In an organization of fifty people, your focus may shift from tasks to projects and processes. At five hundred people, you often need to delegate responsibility for specific products or platforms. And at five thousand people, your direct reports may be responsible for whole businesses, and so on.

### ***Influence Differently***

Conventional wisdom says that the higher up in the organization you go, the easier it is to get things done. Not necessarily. Paradoxically, when you get promoted, positional authority becomes less rather than more important for pushing agendas forward. You may indeed have increased scope to make decisions that affect the business, but there are significant differences in the ways you need to make those decisions. The process becomes more political—less about authority, and more about influence—which isn't good or bad, simply inevitable.

There are two major reasons why this is so. First, the issues you're dealing with become much more complex and ambiguous when you move up a level—and your ability to identify “right” answers based on data and analysis declines accordingly. In this milieu, decisions are shaped more by others' expert judgments and dominant worldviews, so, despite your positional authority, it's actually the people who exhibit that expertise and create those worldviews who have the most influence on what happens.

Second, at a higher level of the organization, critical constituencies are more capable and have stronger egos. Remember, you were

promoted because you are able and driven; the same is true for everyone around you—peers, bosses, and other stakeholders. So it shouldn't come as a complete surprise that the decision-making game becomes that much more bruising and politically charged the higher up you go. It's critical, then, for you to become more effective at building and sustaining alliances and for you to become expert in corporate diplomacy.

### ***Communicate More Formally***

The good news about moving up is that you get a broader view of the business and more latitude to shape it. The bad news is that you are farther from the front lines and more likely to receive filtered information as a result. “Now, folks shield me from information that I ordinarily would have received in my old job,” one newly promoted executive told me.

To avoid this, you'll need to establish alternative communication channels. You might maintain regular, direct contact with customers and select front-line employees, for instance, or create formal protocols so people at lower levels can raise serious legal or ethical concerns—all without undermining the integrity of the chain of command, of course.

You'll also need to establish new, more formal channels for communicating your strategic intent and vision across the organization—convening town hall-style meetings rather than individual or small-group sessions, or using e-mails and video more frequently to broadcast your messages to the widest possible audiences. Your direct reports may also end up playing a greater role in the spread of critical information—something to remember when you're evaluating the team members you have inherited and the leadership and communication qualities they possess.

**Adjust to Greater Visibility**

“All the world’s a stage,” as William Shakespeare put it so aptly in the play *As You Like It*, “and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.”<sup>24</sup> One inescapable reality of promotion is that you inevitably attract much more attention and a higher level of scrutiny. You become the lead actor, so to speak, in a very important public play. Private moments become precious and few, and there is mounting pressure to exhibit the right kind of leadership presence, all the time. Spontaneity goes out the window—which Bert learned when his colleague in HR cautioned him against simply raising interesting ideas during team meetings.

That’s why it’s important to get an early fix on what “leadership presence” actually means within your new role: What does a leader look like at your level in the hierarchy? How does he or she act? What kind of spin do *you* want to put on the role? How will you make it your own? These are critical considerations, worth taking the time to explore. “Remember,” one senior executive told a group of recently promoted VPs, “you are the people that your direct reports are talking about at dinner every night.”

**Level-Specific Competencies**

Besides the common challenges associated with being promoted, there are level-specific hurdles to overcome and associated competencies to develop. Again, you’ll increase your odds of making a successful transition if you can master the new skills required in your new role and let go of some of the behaviors that made you successful previously but that might not work as well in your new job.

How do competencies shift as you get promoted? In *The Leadership Pipeline*, management researchers Ram Charan, Stephen

Drotter, and James Noel focused on this question. Building on the Critical Career Crossroads framework developed by Walter Mahler in the 1970s and implemented at General Electric, they developed a model of competencies focusing on seven levels: managing oneself, managing others, managing managers, the functional manager, the business manager, the group manager, and the enterprise manager. A modified version of Charan, Drotter, and Noel’s framework is summarized in figure 1-2.<sup>5</sup> At each level, there are skills to acquire or maintain. I’ve also added some common, level-specific traps to avoid.

There also is a hidden dimension to the competency shifts new leaders face as they rise through the ranks that wasn’t explored by Charan and his colleagues. Put simply, it’s the move

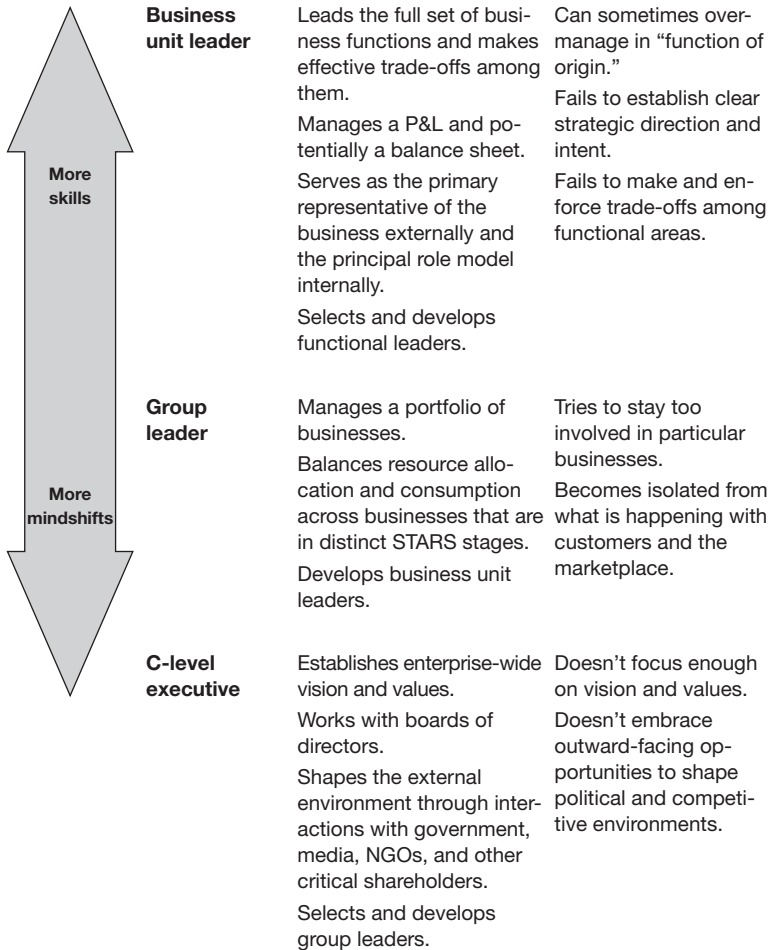
FIGURE 1-2

**Level-specific competencies and traps**

	<b>Central competencies</b>	<b>Common traps</b>
<p><b>Front-line supervisor</b></p>	<p>Knows the fundamentals of performance management: goal setting, oversight, feedback, coaching.</p> <p>Selects and develops individual contributors.</p>	<p>Relies too much on technical expertise.</p> <p>Continues to function as a “super peer” rather than a boss.</p>
<p><b>Manager of supervisors</b></p>	<p>Knows how to set goals effectively.</p> <p>Delegates management responsibility.</p> <p>Selects and develops managers rather than individual contributors.</p>	<p>Relies too much on technical expertise.</p> <p>Is unable to delegate effectively.</p>
<p><b>Function leader (typically a VP)</b></p>	<p>Leads the function as part of the whole business.</p> <p>Participates in the formulation and implementation of strategy.</p> <p>Selects and develops managers.</p>	<p>Focuses too much on the function, and not enough on the business.</p> <p>Focuses too much on the tactical, and not enough on the strategic.</p>

(continued)

FIGURE 1-2 (continued)



from managerial science to leadership art. Consider that the skills required of lower-level managers can often be reduced to rules and procedures. The basics of effective supervision, for example, have been well understood for decades and lend themselves brilliantly to conventional classroom training. As one rises through

the hierarchy, however, the requirements for promotion can be less cut and dried, involving capabilities such as effective pattern recognition, the ability to make clear and quick judgments, or soft-side skills such as political and emotional intelligence. When examined through this lens, higher-level promotions become less about acquiring specific skills and more about making the right shifts in mind-set—for example, thinking more strategically about business problems and understanding how to shape the competitive and political environments in which the organization operates.

I've surveyed leaders participating in general-management programs at leading business schools and asked them to identify the toughest job transitions they have experienced. Their top two responses were “becoming a supervisor for the first time” and “becoming a business unit leader for the first time.”<sup>6</sup> In the next section, I'll take a closer look at the changes in mind-set required to make this management leap and how competency models can help shape leadership development within organizations.

## **Becoming a Business Unit Leader**

Based on more than seventy-five interviews with newly appointed business unit leaders, experienced line executives charged with developing next-generation talent, and senior HR managers, I developed a competency model consisting of seven seismic shifts that functional leaders must make to become effective business unit leaders.<sup>7</sup> They are as follows:

1. From specialist to generalist. A company's business functions are managerial subcultures with their own rules and languages. Executives transitioning to business unit leader roles must therefore work hard to achieve



something I call “cross-functional fluency.” Someone who grew up in marketing obviously cannot become a native speaker of operations or R&D, but he can become fluent—familiarizing himself with the central terms, tools, and ideas employed by the various functions whose work he must integrate with the rest of the unit. The new unit head must know enough to be able to evaluate and recruit the right people to lead in the functional areas he himself is not expert in. While Bert Vandervliet had deep experience in sales and marketing and some exposure to manufacturing, for example, he had a lot to learn about R&D in order to be effective.

2. From analyst to integrator. The primary responsibility of functional leaders is to develop and manage their people to achieve analytical depth in relatively narrow, focused domains. By contrast, business unit leaders manage cross-functional teams with the goal of integrating the collective knowledge and using it to solve important organizational problems. As you might imagine, then, it’s important for new business unit leaders to make the shift to managing integrative decision making and problem solving and, even more important, to learn how to make appropriate trade-offs. Business unit leaders must also manage in the “white spaces”—accepting responsibility for issues that don’t fall neatly into any one function but are still important to the business. For Bert Vandervliet, it was a particular challenge to learn to make the necessary trade-offs across functions.
3. From tactician to strategist. More so than functional vice presidents, business unit leaders establish and communicate strategic direction for their organizations. So they must be able to define and clearly communicate the

mission and goals (what), the core capabilities (who), the strategy (how), and the vision (why) for their businesses. Additionally, they must be able to switch gears with ease, seamlessly shifting between tactical focus (the trees) and strategic focus (the forest). Critically, they must learn to *think strategically*, by which I mean honing their ability to (1) perceive important patterns in complex, noisy environments, (2) crystallize and communicate those patterns to others in the organization in powerful, simple ways, and (3) use these insights to anticipate and shape the reactions of other key “players,” including customers and competitors.

4. From bricklayer to architect. As managers move up in the hierarchy, they become increasingly responsible for laying the foundations for superior performance—creating the organizational context in which business breakthroughs can happen. To be effective in this regard, business unit leaders must understand where and how strategy, structure, systems, processes, and skill bases all interact. They must also be expert in the principles of organizational design, business process improvement, and skills development and management. Like Bert Vandervliet, few high-potential leaders get any formal training in organizational development theory and practice, leaving them ill-equipped to be the architects of the organizations or to be educated consumers of the work of organizational development consultants. (For more details on how to do this, see chapter 6, “The Turnaround Challenge.”)
5. From warrior to diplomat. Effective business unit leaders see the benefits in actively shaping the external environment

and managing critical relationships with powerful outside constituencies, including governments, NGOs, the media, and investors. They identify opportunities for cross-company collaboration, reaching out to rivals to help shape the rules of the game. Functional managers, by contrast, tend to be more focused on developing and deploying internal capabilities to compete more effectively. (For more details on how to do this, see chapter 3, “The Corporate Diplomacy Challenge.”)

6. From problem solver to agenda-setter. Many leaders are promoted on the strength of their problem-solving skills. But when they reach business unit leader status, they must focus less on fixing problems and *more on recognizing and preventing what I call predictable surprises* from occurring in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Being a problem finder means identifying and prioritizing emerging threats, and communicating them in ways that the organization can respond to. The rest of the task calls for mobilizing preventive action and driving organizational change. And it ultimately means creating a learning organization that responds effectively to shifts in its environment and can generate surprises for its competitors. (For more details on how to do this, see chapter 7, “The Realignment Challenge.”)
7. From supporting cast to lead role. People in the business look first to the business unit leader for cues about the “right” behaviors and attitudes, and for vision and inspiration. At the functional leader level, it’s considered acceptable just to be an efficient, effective manager, a “role holder” if you will. Business unit leaders, by

contrast, are constantly “on stage,” being held to a higher standard—that of exemplary role model. For good or ill, the senior leadership of every organization is infectious. By this I mean that leaders’ behaviors tend to be transmitted to their direct reports, who pass them on to the next level, and so on down through their organizations. Over time, they permeate the organization from top to bottom, influencing activity at all levels. Eventually they become embodied in the organizational culture, influencing the types of people who get promoted and hired into the organization, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop—either positive or negative.

Like most new business unit leaders, Bert Vandervliet confronted the need to make all seven of these seismic shifts in tandem. He had to learn more about unfamiliar functions, focus more on integrative problem solving, think more strategically, make some key organizational design choices, conduct effective diplomacy, prevent predictable surprises, and be the most important role model for his business. That’s what makes that first appointment to lead a business so challenging. Fortunately Bert also had some important resources, both within himself and in the organization, to help him make the leap.

## **Meeting the Personal Adaptive Challenge**

With every promotion, you confront the common core challenges anew, as well as the shifts in level-specific competencies required for success. Together, these define the personal adaptive challenges you face in your new role. As discussed in the introduction, there

are a handful of things that you can do to accelerate your personal adjustment to any new leadership role: assessing your strengths and weaknesses given the situation, disciplining yourself to do things that don't come naturally, building a complementary team, and leveraging wise counsel.

A look at Bert Vandervliet's developmental history, for instance, suggests that he needs to acquire deeper functional fluency in operations and R&D—a process that might not be comfortable for him but that he needs to undertake nonetheless. He should also take his HR colleague's advice to heart and confront the possibility that his overmanagement of his vice president of sales and marketing is a symptom of his own insecurities rather than a true reflection of his direct report's capabilities.

Then there is the question of who can help Bert to better delegate the work that needs to be done. Given that he needs to focus more on the outside and has deep marketing and sales expertise, it may make sense for him to forge a working partnership with someone who can function as a chief operating officer for the business; likely candidates might be his vice presidents of operations and finance.

Finally, Bert needs to recognize that the advice network that served him well as a functional VP probably won't be enough to support his needs as a business unit leader. He needs to cultivate more wise counselors who can help him gain additional insight into the important functions where he is weak, better understand what it takes to run a business as a whole, advise him on managing the internal and external political challenges he confronts, and help him prepare for the next level. So in the midst of all the other challenges he faces, he must devote the time to thinking about and realigning his network of advisors and counselors.

## Accelerating Development

Beyond adopting a common framework and tools for accelerating every promotion transition (discussed in-depth in the conclusion, “Designing Companywide Transition-Acceleration Systems”), what can your company do to help you when you get promoted? First off, they should build and use *good competency models*—definitions of the skills required of leaders at different levels—tuned to the company’s leadership pipeline. Done well, these will give you good guidance about what you need to go to the next level.

To be truly useful, these models should be real, simple, and executable. Realism is important: managers are told advancement is likely to come if they can develop the stated competencies in the model. But if you buy into the system, invest the time, and develop the competencies, and promotions still aren’t forthcoming (and there are many reasons why this could be the case; for example, because advancement in the company actually depends on support from political networks), the model will do little but breed cynicism. So companies need to give careful thought to how they will adopt and deploy competency models.

Simplicity is critical for ensuring that competency models are actually implemented. If there are a thousand and one skills, requirements, or characteristics listed—or if they are too complex or ambiguous—aspiring leaders won’t know where to focus. Likewise, it will be difficult for talent-development professionals in the company to figure out how to use and support the model. Instead, the model should comprise a reasonably compact set of skills, characteristics, and the like. If you have more than ten for a given level, you’re certainly in trouble.

Finally, there’s the issue of implementation. A competency model is worth little if you can’t evaluate baseline levels of

performance and translate your findings into programs or projects that can help individuals improve. So before you implement any kind of competency model, make sure it's supported by robust assessment tools.

Beware, however, of engaging in cross-company or cross-industry comparisons of scores: such benchmarks can't control for the differences in companies' strategies, cultures, and incentives. I saw this happen when a leading assessment consulting firm evaluated the talent at the highest levels of the number one company in a global transportation industry. The mean strategic thinking score for senior leaders was far below the benchmarked cross-industry baseline—which rightly stirred up indignation and undercut the credibility of the competency model and assessment process. What hadn't been factored into the process was company culture, which, because of the nature of the business, placed a very great emphasis on execution and operational efficiency.

The other major way that companies can help ensure successful promotion transitions is by creating career-development pathways consisting of the right types of experiences. Artfully designed pathways can accelerate companies' ability to build deep benches of leadership talent. The one BSC set up for Bert Vandervliet provides a good example. Bert was guided through a series of positions, each with a designated purpose, which offered him valuable lessons in four important career-development dimensions:

1. Development in his core function and exposure to other functions.
2. Understanding of the company's range of businesses.
3. Home country and international assignments.
4. Business unit and corporate assignments.

Note that this mix of assignments made sense given the nature of BSC's business—diversified, global, and decentralized. The mix in another company could obviously be quite different, depending on its own characteristics.

BSC used several approaches for designing its development pathways, the first one being its deployment of *stepping-stones*—the thoughtful design of a sequence of assignments, each of which represents a significant stretch along one or two of the critical development dimensions but not so much of a stretch that the leader slips and falls. In a well-thought-out progression, Bert moved from a product-management assignment to an international assignment in business development (to which some exposure to manufacturing was subsequently added), to a more senior post in sales and marketing, to a different division, and then to a corporate HR role.

The second approach is the use of *playgrounds*—putting future general managers in charge of distinct businesses (or significant projects) that they can easily get their arms around and in which they will have the opportunity to learn what excellence looks like. The plastic resins business that Bert joined was relatively small and was in a sustaining-success situation, with a strong team in place. Think of how much more difficult it would have been for Bert if he had been thrust immediately into a much larger unit, perhaps with multiple business lines, or had been immediately confronted with a turnaround or realignment situation.

One additional assignment would have helped Bert to be even better prepared to take over as business unit leader: to run a portion of a business with a distinct P&L and with responsibility for a few critical functions. Doing this while reporting to an experienced business unit leader whom he could ask for advice would have given him deeper familiarity with the cross-functional challenge. As such, it would have been both a stepping-stone and a playground.



Bert eventually found his footing in his first business unit leader role. Three years later he became business unit leader of BSC's high-growth nutritional business unit. This gave Bert experience in pharmaceuticals, another of the company's critical industry sectors, and it helped lay the foundation for his future promotion to the group leadership level.

## **Promotion Checklist**

Lists like this one appear at the end of each chapter to help you crystallize the key lessons and apply them to your situation. Use these questions to guide your analysis and develop your transition plan.

1. What does it mean to “promote yourself” into your new role? What must you do more of, even if you don't enjoy or feel fully competent doing it? What do you need to do less of or let go?
2. Which of the common promotion challenges—balancing breadth and depth, delegating more deeply, influencing differently, communicating more formally, and adjusting to greater visibility—do you most need to focus on?
3. Which level-specific competencies do you need to develop to be successful at the new level?
4. What can your organization do to help you accelerate your development?

5. What do you need to do to meet the personal adaptive challenge? Do you need to enhance your self-awareness and, if so, in what ways? Do you need to exert discipline to do things that don't come comfortably? Do you need to identify or recruit natural complements in your team? Do you need to alter your advice network or use it differently?