

# Transitions ABCD

## a framework for leadership coaching and development

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“I’ve been through a lot of transitions in my career,” said J.L. Albert, CIO at Georgia State University, “but I wasn’t really conscious of the changes and lessons I learned at the time. I probably missed some things along the way, but I guess I really don’t know exactly what.”

As we enter and then rise through our careers, we experience transitions – from student to team member, to manager, to executive. At each of these transitions, we learn new things – new paradigms, new skills, and new behaviors. In parallel, we grow as people, both in terms of our political savvy and our personal power.

But like J.L., most of us weren’t conscious of all the things we needed to learn at each transition. As a result, most of us have missed some lessons along the way.

For example, leaders who missed some lessons when they first began supervising others may not provide constructive and effective feedback, so their staff may miss growth opportunities and perform less well. Leaders who missed some lessons as they grew into managing lines of business within the organization may execute tasks well, but offer little in the way of vision and strategies for a function.

As successful as J.L. is, like all good leaders, he’s always interested in improving his effectiveness. Leaders (at all levels) can benefit from looking back at their past transitions, assessing and addressing any lessons they’ve missed along the way, and proactively filling any gaps.

This white paper provides a framework of the lessons and growth opportunities at each transition. It can help leaders assess what they’ve missed, and translate gaps into development action plans. It also can help executive coaches to structure their client programs. And it can contribute a framework for the design of leadership development programs.

### Four Critical Transitions

There are four critical transitions that occur in a career on the way to the top.

First, people enter the business world, and need to learn basic survival skills. This includes reporting to a boss, doing things well independently, and developing a specialization.

Then, they take on responsibility for managing others – either as project leaders, team leaders, or formal supervisors with direct reports. At this stage, people need to learn to get things done through others, letting go of their impulse to do it themselves and learning to motivate, guide, and manage others.

Next, leaders are given responsibility for managing functions – lines of business within an organization. These may be internal support functions, or external-facing product management. But in any case,

#### **Figure 1:** **Four Leadership Transitions**

- A. Survival
- B. Supervision
- C. Entrepreneurship
- D. Organizational designer

they're now running a business within a business, and need to understand how to succeed as an internal entrepreneur.

And finally, executives at the top of an organization are responsible for multiple lines of business. Since they can no longer personally manage everything, their success depends on building organizations under them which, by nature, guide people to succeed *with or without them*. At this stage, they need to learn to be organizational designers.

Of course, the lessons of the transitions are cumulative. For example, a leader who's running a line of business has been through transition C, but needs all the lessons of A, B, and C to succeed.

## Four Lessons at Each Transition

Each of these four transitions challenges people to learn four new things:

- Paradigms: the way we view the world.
- Competencies: skills, knowledge, and tools.
- Political strategies: how to work with others who represent different stakeholders.
- Personal power: self awareness, internal skills, and maturity.

The specific lessons of these four types differ in each transition. These are summarized in Figure 2.

## Development Plan

The *Transitions ABCD* framework is used to help leaders assess their own development needs – the things they'd like to study to leverage their careers.

It's also used as a communication vehicle and guide for executive coaching. This is more effective than the unstructured sounding board alone that many coaches provide, or a simplistic focus on supervisory skills, another common coaching mistake.

### Figure 2: Lessons at Each Transition

#### A. Survival

- Paradigm: you are the product.
- Competencies: time management, project management, collaboration, presentation skills.
- Political strategies: reporting to a boss, earning empowerment, your "brand," recognizing politics, role of a "godfather."
- Personal power: inner motivation, communication styles, work/life integration.

#### B. Supervision

- Paradigm: getting things done through others.
- Competencies: resource management, delegation with empowerment, motivation, giving feedback, servant leadership, diversity.
- Political strategies: relationship boundaries, strategic relationships.
- Personal power: emotional intelligence, personality types.

#### C. Entrepreneurship

- Paradigm: business within a business.
- Competencies: defining internal lines of business, customer focus, entrepreneurship, contracting, peers as customers, risk management.
- Political strategies: better to buy than make, defending your domain, consolidation processes, uses/risks of internal monopolies.
- Personal power: creative thinking, conceptual structure, business sense.

#### D. Organizational designer

- Paradigm: organizations as programmable systems.
- Competencies: transformation planning, culture, structure, governance processes, metrics and rewards.
- Political strategies: triage versus systemic change, change management.
- Personal power: visionary leadership.

Its third purpose is as a basis for leadership development programs.

To build a personal development plan using the *Transitions ABCD* framework, there are three steps:

1. Assess what level you are at.
2. Self-assess what lessons you may have missed along the way, i.e., what you'd like to develop.
3. Build a custom development plan tailored to meet your unique needs and interests.

The resulting development plan gives new leaders a roadmap to success, and enables seasoned leaders to validate and fill in any gaps they may have missed on their journey thus far.

## Delivery

The delivery of that development plan is best done through a *coaching* approach which includes both training (the structured delivery of information, with interactions and exercises) and coaching (collaborative problem solving).

The coaching approach is more effective than traditional training alone because it induces deep behavioral and technical insights, and links topics to real-life challenges to ensure sustainable performance. Unlike a trainer, a coach becomes a partner in the process of performance improvement.

To manage costs, delivery can include a tailored combination of one-on-one sessions (where affordable) and cohort-groups. Using cohort-groups (where appropriate) to train and coach is very cost-efficient, and the exchange of experiences among peers makes it highly effective. Also, developing a common language of leadership facilitates ongoing collaboration and mutual support in a peer group.

## The Bottom Line

Developing an organization's leaders, at all levels of the hierarchy, improves performance and results, while enhancing employees' satisfaction and retention. People are always a high-payoff investment.

The *Transitions ABCD* framework provides a basis for a thorough, tailored, and deeply effective leadership development program that integrates both coaching and training.

### About the authors:



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