Negotiate for What You Need to Succeed

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Strategies to help you thrive in your new leadership role

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What happened the last time you faced a new leadership opportunity? Whether you were called on to head a team, a unit, or a company, chances are you negotiated the salary for the appointment and its perquisites—your title, vacation, and bonus. But did you negotiate for what you would need to succeed in the new role?

All new leaders will be tested in their roles and need to negotiate to improve their odds of success. Yet people often fail to address issues critical to their ability to perform on the job: their fit with the role, support in legitimacyating their appointment, and the resources to get the job done.

In researching our book, Her Place at the Table: A Woman’s Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success (Jossey-Bass, 2004), Judith Williams, Carol Frohlinger, and I found that new leaders often overlook valuable opportunities to jump-start their leadership because of three faulty assumptions: (1) “My choice is either yes or no,” (2) “My appointment speaks for itself,” and (3) “I can pick up the slack.” Before you can build a strategic campaign to negotiate the conditions you need to perform well in a new role, you must learn to overcome these flawed assumptions.

Assumption #1: Either yes or no

Suppose you’ve been asked to consider taking over an underperforming unit that has great potential. You’re interested, but given some complications in your personal life, you don’t think it’s feasible. Reluctantly, you turn it down. Or maybe you’ve been asked to lead a task force on performance management. You aren’t crazy about the particular assignment, but there are so few leadership options in your department that you feel you have to accept.

This assumption about choice frames your decision in categorical terms: “Yes, I accept” or “No, I don’t.” In the process, it forecloses other possibilities: “Yes, but…” or, even better, “Yes, and…” However constrained your decision may seem, there are multiple points you can negotiate to make the role a better fit with what you want and who you are. But to recognize those possibilities, you have to view yourself as well positioned to negotiate. How? By gathering good intelligence about your value and your areas of vulnerability.

Strategy #1: Negotiate the “fit”

You’ve been offered a leadership opportunity because you offer value. When negotiating the terms of your acceptance, communicating the value you bring to the role is a prerequisite for getting what you want. That clarity can come from gathering good intelligence about why you were tapped for the position in the first place. It also helps to know what gaps others may perceive in your skill set or resume. From this data, you can begin to identify changes to the job description that would make it a better fit for your skills, experiences, and interests.

Helen James, a sales executive, was offered a promotion she didn’t think she could refuse; at her level, few other opportunities would come up. But with young children at home, she knew she could not take on the travel that went with the position. By gathering intelligence from her network, James learned that her superiors viewed her as the right person for the job because of her experience in global channel distribution. Armed with that knowledge, she negotiated a restructuring of the unit. Two deputies already in place would take on new responsibilities and devote time to global customers. At headquarters, James would develop strategy and meet with customers only when her expertise was needed.

Too often, people assume that their appointment speaks for itself.

By negotiating the terms of an ostensibly nonnegotiable offer, James produced an alternative that worked for everyone: customers received hands-on attention, key staff members gained important experience, the company put its channel distribution in capable hands, and James’s home life remained stable.

Assumption #2: My title speaks for itself

It’s rare when someone is the perfect fit for a specific leadership position. You may have the operational experience required for a new role, but what about the contextual prerequisites? For example, you’ve led the merger of several large groups in the past, but not following an acquisition. Or you’ve managed branches where the company has an established presence, but not in this new region.

Will people focus on your value or your vulnerabilities? Given the elusiveness of a perfect fit, you can expect that some will be cheered by your appointment, while others may mount a quiet—or not-so-quiet—opposition. They might think your credentials don’t stack up against theirs.
or those of a valued mentor. Perhaps they enjoyed productive relationships with the previous incumbent and worry about the disruption.

Negative or ambiguous first reactions are perfectly natural. But if left unchecked, they can easily undermine a new leader’s ability to command authority and promote an agenda. The task of providing a rationale and support for an appointment would naturally fall to those making the hiring or promotion decision, but you can’t assume that those reasons are self-evident. Visible support needs to be negotiated.

**Strategy #2: Negotiate for an introduction**

New leaders need powerful introductions from key leaders to create a compelling rationale for their appointment. When the CEO of a growing medical-supply company appointed the first senior vice president of administration, there was concern that operational department heads, who preferred the loose way the company had been run, would resist new policies and procedures. The senior VP negotiated with the CEO over the support needed for the new role. The CEO agreed to meet with each operational leader individually to provide the strategic rationale for the appointment. By doing this, he not only lent support to the new VP but also made it clear that any resistance to the change would interfere with growth plans.

All too often, people assume that their appointment speaks for itself. In so doing, they fail to anticipate the questioning and covert resistance that can make it difficult to lead in a new role. Negotiating with key leaders for public support can reinforce your new authority.

**Assumption #3: “I can pick up the slack”**

In the early stages of a new leadership role, you need resources—money, personnel, and time—to get the job done. In today’s organization, the challenge is to do more with less. New leaders in resource-constrained contexts have a natural tendency to want to show that they can meet tough standards. But doing so not only trains others to expect that you will continue to do without, it also overlooks the symbolic importance of garnering resources. In the time between an appointment and clear evidence of results, your colleagues and superiors will watch and decide whether you carry influence in the organization. One indication of influence is the ability to secure resources.

What’s more, respecting resource constraints can carry unintended consequences. Suppose you agree to grow a new line of business with only your boss’s vague promise of funds to support the initiative. You charge ahead, figuring you can get what you need later on. But even when the line proves to be a huge success, no additional resources are forthcoming. Chronically understaffed and underfunded, your team struggles to stay afloat. Resentment grows, and the project and relationships suffer.

**Strategy #3: Negotiate for small wins**

The ability to garner resources can position the new leader as someone who gets things done. Even when resources are scarce, don’t rule out the possibility of negotiating creatively for them. Resources determine what can be accomplished in a new assignment, but their effect is also symbolic. Staff members attach themselves to effective people, and the capacity to procure resources is good evidence of that ability.

The fact that people have multiple interests at stake means that you can negotiate for high-value yet inexpensive resources. For example, the new deputy branch chief of a large government installation discovered that her department had a much smaller travel budget and much less computer equipment than a comparable unit. In negotiations with the branch chief, she made a pitch for a modest budget increase as well as for greater equality between departments. Her minor victory demonstrated to her unit that she was a go-getter with their interests at heart.

Sometimes your allies may be in a better position to secure resources for you. After a series of layoffs, for example, the director of client services at a strategic-consulting firm was finding it difficult to staff engagements. The functional leader was unwilling to incur hiring costs before revenues accrued; as a result, the few people on each job were overworked and stressed. When a major client was unwilling to sign a contract without specific staff commitments, the director enlisted the relationship manager to help make the case to the functional leader. The relationship manager, who had a clear stake in meeting the client’s needs, was able to persuade the leader that revenues would cover hiring costs. To the team’s relief, the director got the resources necessary for the engagement.

New leaders fail at impressive rates. Although your pre-hiring negotiations are no substitute for on-the-job performance, you can boost impressions in the early stages of a new role by making sure that you’re a good fit, that support is strong, and that you have sufficient resources committed to the task.

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