



Career transitions

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Introduction

Everyone in the workplace experiences career transitions at some point, so you're not alone. It's when you shift to a new position often within the same company, sometimes to a different division or region. A move might be within the same job family or a more dramatic career change from one occupational category to an entirely different one, perhaps to a new function or with increased seniority or responsibility.

This Cranfield whitepaper provides an overview of career transitions, looking at potential blockages and where you might seek help. Based on our extensive experience in career development, this paper outlines three key career transitions and how to successfully adapt to these:

1. Early career or high potential talent looking for promotion,
2. Moving up to become a general manager or head of a business unit,
3. Transitioning to a role as a leader, or organisational director.

Your internal HR or learning and development teams can help you to decide what programme might be the right one for you, and we are here to have an exploratory conversation with you anytime too.

Transitions

Overview

Organisations are a conduit of people and careers. Good employers make that journey something smooth, a rolling motion of high performance and rewards; the rest leave their employees to pick their way over all the inevitable bumps and holes of working life.

Critically, the success - or otherwise - of the flow of people depends on how organisations deal with the key moments of transition, the leap from one set of expectations to another.

All employees go through these kinds of transition challenges, to reach the level that works for both them and the organisation: our early career (when it's a case of understanding the strategic context and how the role contributes); moving up to become a head of a business unit (translating the strategy into meaningful direction for the unit); then to a role as organisational director (leading and formulating strategy); and finally into senior leadership (when it becomes a question of wider purpose in terms of personal contribution to the sector and wider society).

All transitions, whatever the stage, follow a similar pattern. An employee is promoted and they're on a high, there's a spike of energy and motivation from the recognition being awarded, from the thought of having a new level of status. They've enjoyed telling the news to friends and family. But it's not long until effectiveness and productivity takes a dip: when the reality of their duties and meeting new expectations takes effect, when they somehow have to re-align themselves and who they are. Some push through and make the new role work - with all the benefits to the organisation of harnessing fresh internal talent, increased engagement, loyalty and retention, a powerful model of the possibilities for others - and some don't.



The most challenging step up comes with the first functional management role

Where are the blockages?

The risks and opportunities of transitions are well-known. Especially since the work of Ram Charan, Stephen J. Drotter and James Noel, who drew on 30 years of consulting with Fortune 500 companies to develop their six-step 'Leadership Pipeline' model in 2000.

But that doesn't mean transitions, and how to support them, are well understood and managed. HR will see the problem, if only eventually, when it comes to performance reviews, in absence due to stress, in 360 degree feedback, in rumbling problems expressed through employee engagement surveys. It'll also come out in exit interviews. When people are promoted beyond what they're capable of - or at least believe they're capable of - the fall-out is felt by line reports, bosses and the organisation more widely. There's a loss of faith and trust that's insidious. Who wants promotion when all they see is the problems?

The most challenging step up comes with the first functional management role - moving from delivery to strategy, juggling technical expertise with the need to provide direction for others. Despite their importance as the engine of organisational performance, it tends to be the middle management that receives less attention from HR. Early talent management gets the focus and investment, as does looking after the senior leaders who provide the vision. Meanwhile the middle are under pressure to get things done - and end up with the majority of the blame for disappointing results.

The particular issue for middle roles is that people are promoted because they had strong technical abilities, the expertise to deliver; that's where all their respect and recognition was rooted. Moving into management means leaving those safe places behind. A leader needs some fundamental expertise, but it needs to be used more strategically. And typically people can't bring themselves to let go of that old, strong identity. They want to do the old jobs, because they know they'll do it better than anyone else.

What can HR do?

The pipeline can be kept flowing with some attention to the key stages. First of all, transitions need to be explicit in an organisation's capability and development frameworks. They need to be part of the language and dialogue of HR strategy and its delivery, something articulated beyond the standard role summaries, to be reflected in what's expected from behaviours. HR need to take a lead and be involved with execution, but smooth transitions depend on how the thinking is lived, experienced and expressed in the organisation.

Transitions are the focus of the General Management Portfolio. Programmes are targeted to those critical moments that are the difference between new impetus and new obstacles. Anyone taking on new responsibilities needs to have the right combination of hard skills (finance, strategy-making, HR) and soft skills (self-awareness, Emotional Intelligence, relationship-building) to break free from old roles and their sense of safety.

It's about immersion, being part of an experience that leads to long-lasting behaviour change; seeing and feeling what's right for them, and actually going to make a difference when they're back at their desks; becoming comfortable with a new identity and leaving old habits, limiting habits, behind them. And programmes need to be a mix of the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social, the full package, to make this happen.

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Early Career

You're great at your job. All you need to do now is keep going, doing more of what you're best at, and the promotions will inevitably come.

In reality that's not true. Following the same track, just driving forward with delivery of more results won't get you very far at all. Going further depends on switching tracks completely. Becoming the manager of a small team or heading up a business area, means being seen as a different kind of person at work: a leader, someone able to influence other people, who has credibility among their line reports, peers and more senior managers.

The challenge here is that people in the early part of their career, whether they've come from university or worked their way up through the organisation, need to start taking charge of their own development if they're serious about reaching senior positions. So far it's been a case of looking to their line manager for direction. They've set the targets, provided the feedback on progress, then flagged opportunities for training. We can become dependent on this kind of guided framework that makes sure we're always following the right route. It becomes both reassuring and motivating.

At the same time, by getting stuck in this mindset, we're not thinking the way we need to: how to become self-directing, take back control and make the transition onto the management route.



Take back control and make
the transition onto the
management route



Old you

Working day-to-day in an organisation, people tend to grow a strong sense of hierarchy. We start to believe in a natural order of things, where those who have been with the organisation the longest are rightfully in positions of control, will have a more perfect understanding of what's happening, and have all the best ideas and solutions.

It feels like the only way to make progress is to depend on what we already know - and what has worked in the past in terms of keeping our line manager happy - taking on more and more work and responsibilities, delivering more and more. And in the meantime it seems right to simply defer to more senior staff. Instead it's important to learn how to do less. That takes a great deal of confidence, because it's contrary to everything we've seen in our experience so far. It means overcoming a feeling of not really deserving a place in the higher order, the fear that eventually you're going to be found out as 'not belonging'.

Not making the transition to management means the risk of being stuck in a functional delivery role. In turn this can lead to a cycle of a lack of motivation, lower levels of performance, and a deterioration in the relationships within a team - not because of a lack of ability, but from inertia. Often people will look to move on to another employer, and then only repeat the experience of high performance, eventually narrowing into frustration and another move. The employer loses talent from its pipeline of potential managers and has to recruit externally - all as a result of the missed opportunity of supporting people through the transition.

New you

First and foremost, making the transition means not just being busy. Adding value is what matters. In practice that requires the ability to think more broadly about the organisation, how your function joins up with and has an impact on other parts of the business; getting out of the silo mentality to think more strategically: how does the external environment - political, technological, social changes - affect the business? what are competitors doing? what are the implications for me, my team and other managers?

The Cranfield programme is designed to provide a practical toolkit to make the transition happen, tools and techniques, and most importantly of all, give you the confidence to use them. One part of the transition package involves gaining the breadth of understanding of how organisations work at a strategic level, the context for strategy-making, using business simulations to demonstrate how your role contributes and impacts on the organisational mechanics; learning how to switch into the strategic-thinking mindset, so it's a habit, and allows you to anticipate the need for change and be agile in response.

The other is the personal side and soft skills: better understanding of yourself and how you come across to other people; what you need to do to have more of an influence on others, delegate and add value; how to increase your visibility in the organisation and build credibility with your team and the top management; how to be resilient and deal with the power politics that goes along with any work environment.

Making the best of early career development isn't only about promotion. Critically, though, there is the need to not become caught in circles of delivery, chasing targets - to step back and look at your career direction, whether that's moving into management or sideways into other functions in the same organisation. Having the control and confidence to make choices is what matters.

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General Management

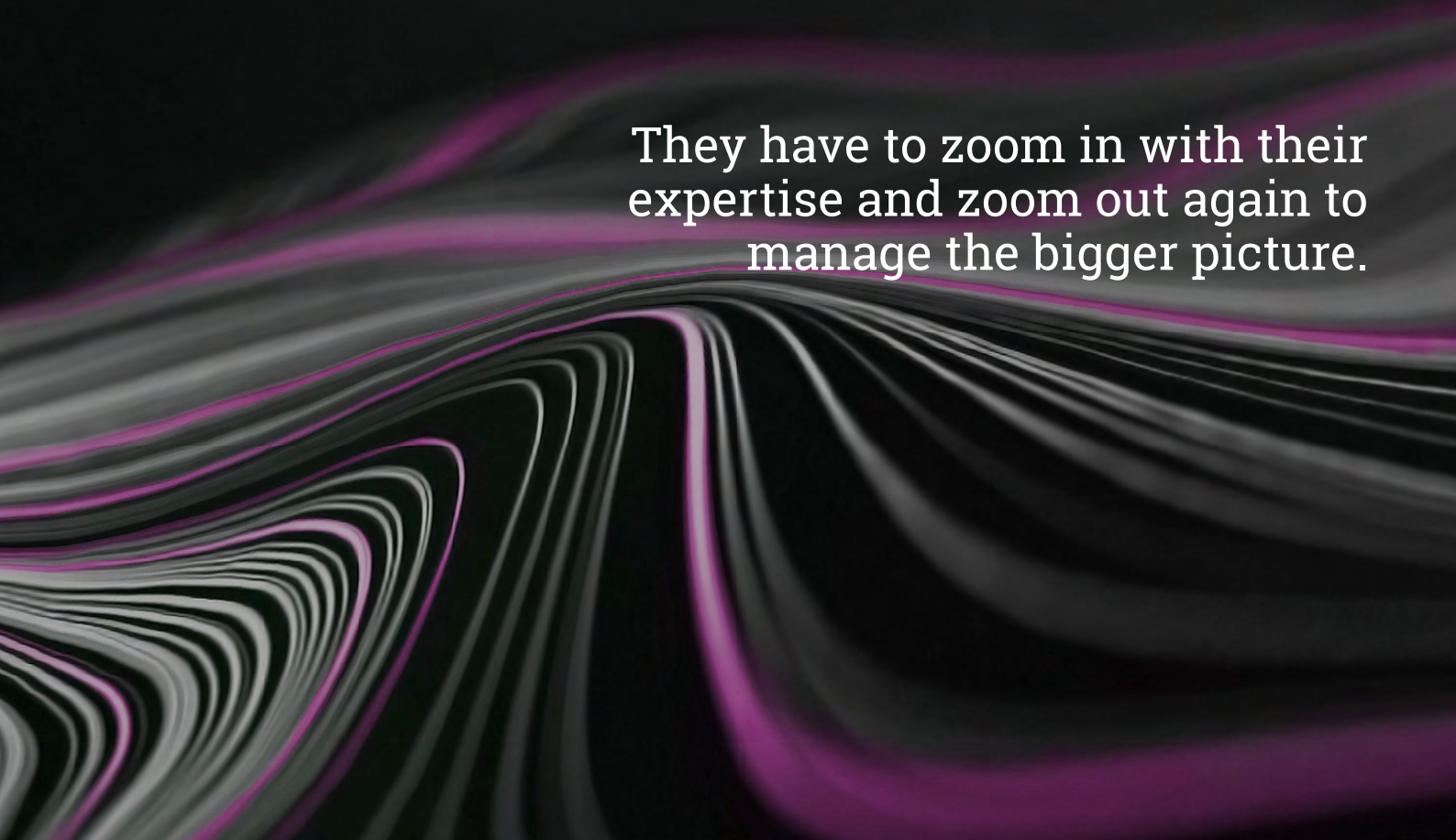
“I must have been promoted by mistake.”

Whether they admit it publicly or not, feeling like an imposter is common among people making the transition to their first general management role, like heading up a business unit. It's the most stressful place to be in an organisation, the middle, where you have a foot in both camps. On the one hand you're still expected to be involved in some of the delivery work, calling on your excellent expertise; and on the other, your experience means you need to be managing and leading others to ensure overall targets are met. Either as new talent or senior director there's more potential to hide - but not here, bang in the middle.

Under pressure it's natural to try to stick to what you know. You've been picked out for management as someone who's been brilliant at their job, so you want to keep that feeling of being in control and stay where everything's rosy. The practical reality - in terms of mental and physical resources - is that you can't keep clearing your Inbox anymore. You can't keep pushing through to deliver all that's needed, working until 2am, going in on Saturdays. It's burn-out territory.

It's the career transition, more than any other, when it's most about letting go. In fact, letting go of some of the things that got you here - which feels really hard. Space is needed to step back and see the fewest things to be done that will make the biggest difference.





They have to zoom in with their expertise and zoom out again to manage the bigger picture.

Facing the storm

The challenge is the most universal of all transitions, one faced by a broad range of people, coming from different disciplines and functions, of different ages and types of experience. That doesn't mean it's the best understood or supported.

What unites these different people is that they've been rewarded for great work with promotion. Now they have to zoom in with their expertise and zoom out again to manage the bigger picture.

It's like crossing difficult, choppy waters. The first time you try, there's the feeling of being out of control. You're feeling queasy. Things are happening to you rather than the other way around. Next time you attempt the crossing you go back to the old ways of doing things, and that gets you a bit further, just because of that feeling of security. Then it becomes clear you're never going to make it to the other side that way - there's just too much to do, you can't do it on your own.

You need to find a better way. That means lifting the gaze from the problems, and realising where you've got to go: recognising what's holding you back, and, critically, learning what you need to stop doing, what other people around you should be taking on. Otherwise you're just adding to your load until you drown.

How to do it

The first step is to understand yourself and what the triggers are that make you go back to old habits and the role you've meant to have left behind; learning how to manage yourself, those triggers and the feelings that go with it. It's then a case of understanding the attitudes and behaviours of those you're working with - why is marketing doing that? Why is that supplier making my life difficult? - and how best to collaborate.

With this new perspective, you're able to look at priorities at what they mean for your role, become comfortable and confident about the new place you've come to. It all looks so much more familiar. Somewhere you can make yourself at home. This is how the General Management Programme works, by making the crossing pain-free. So there are sessions on the bigger strategic picture and how to fit into operations, digitisation and marketing, but it's all integrated into what it really means for you and your role.

Work becomes rewarding again. The sense of control and empowerment comes back. And most importantly, you're in a much better position to help the organisation - knowing when and how to push back and say no. You're a better manager, and the organisation becomes a better place to work.

It's the middle management that are most important for making the strategic vision work in practice. They don't always receive the investment and development needed. Understandably, with limited budgets, it's easier for HR to focus on smaller bands of people in the early talent and top talent categories - but this kind of looking after the 'stars' mindset is wrong. Just because someone shows early promise doesn't mean they're going to be the best person for any role on the fast-track. It's much more about having the right people in the right places at the right time. People change, adapt.

Sticking to a few stars leads to missed opportunities for other talent, a lack of collaboration and an unhelpful 'me first' culture. The ideal would be a stronger, better supported middle management - the real engine of operations - who are in the best position to influence those below and above them, instilling more confidence and positivity. They should be demonstrating all the good that comes with promotion, not what it might be worth trying to avoid.

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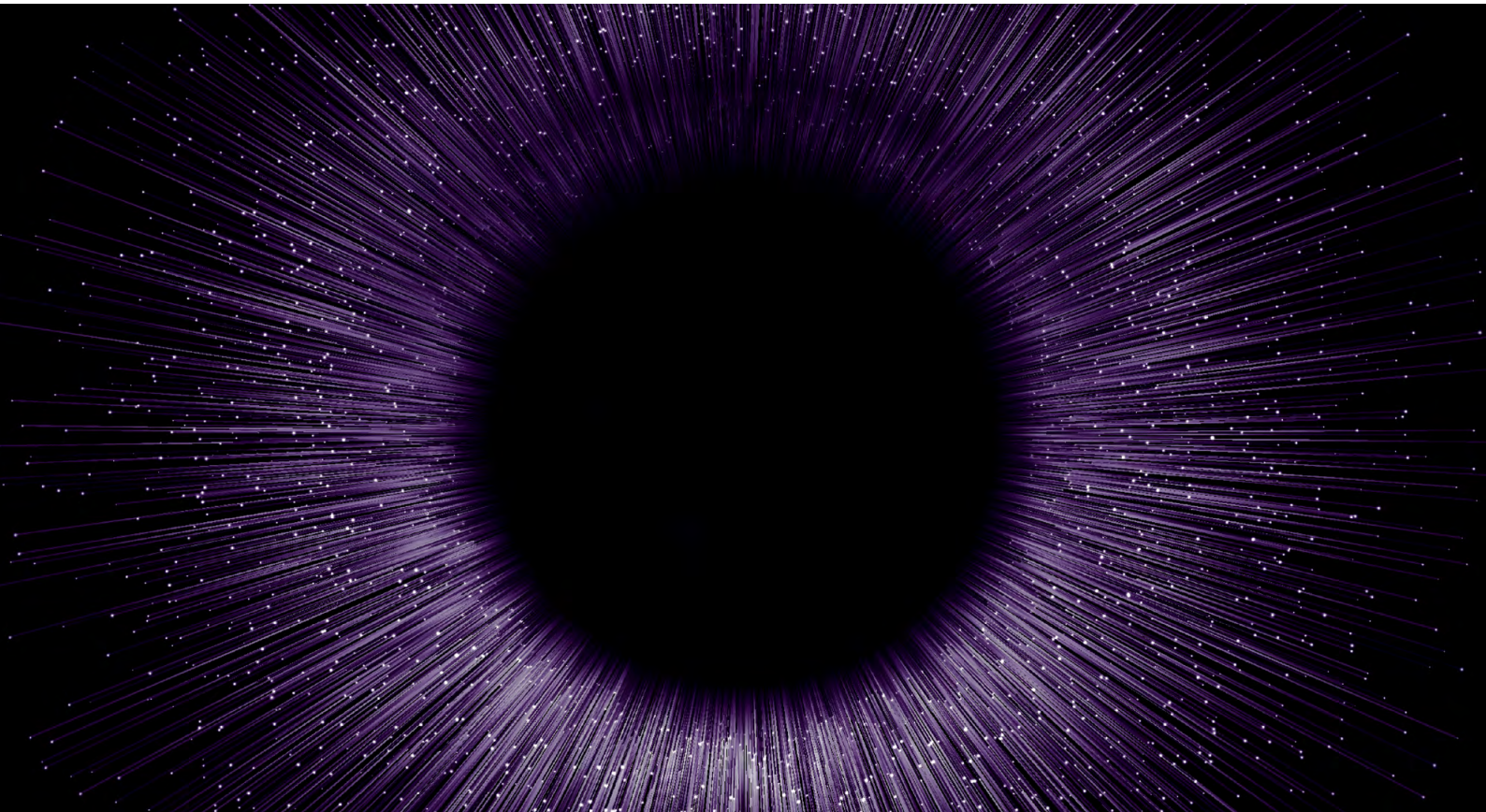
Breakthrough Leadership


Senior managers often get thrown in at the deep end. Why not? They're great managers, they have more experience and skills than anyone, they'll make great leaders. They're not going to sink, they'll swim.

Making the transition to leader has never been that easy. And the reality is that higher-level decision-making in the 21st century is only getting tougher in a VUCA environment (of Volatility, Un-certainty, Complexity and Ambiguity). Developing a watertight strategy and ensuring teams are motivated and empowered to deliver is not as straightforward as it was even 2 years' ago.

Why should anyone be left to struggle before they find a way to cope, leaving behind a trail of stress, disgruntled team members and wasted time in their wake? Particularly when it's people who are such an asset to the organisation. Getting the right kind of support and development means new leaders, directors, and managers preparing for a promotion, can be set up for suc-cess.

More than ensuring there's high levels of performance and effectiveness, a good transition to leader helps senior people find the way to enjoy work again. Simple as that. Managers tend to accumulate a burden of duties and responsibilities as they move through the ranks, making more and more of an impact, getting more recognition, but also feeling the weight. Making the leap to leader or director level should be the chance to start afresh.





Every senior manager is tempted
to hold onto doing what they've
been known and loved for

Who's a superhero?

A transition from manager to leader means a major break from old habits and old securities. Every senior manager is tempted to hold onto doing what they've been known and loved for - being that great manager who's a problem-solver, who has all the answers because they know every-thing that's going on in every corner of their division, constantly driving the delivery forward; they make every meeting, respond to every email, the diary is always full.

There are people capable of retaining this kind of routine, combining both manager and leader roles. But these are the one-off superheroes - for the rest of us, we're just going to end up being de-railed. A leader has to be able to step back: have the confidence in themselves, and the trust in the people around them, to let others do what they used to do, and immerse themselves in a different world of thinking about strategy and decision-making.

Learning to levitate

It's about making the time and space to look down from above, clear of the day-to-day contingencies and the pressure of being a 'fixer'. Leaders need to be able to look for the significant patterns in terms of what's happening in the organisation as well as the ecosystem it's operating in, what competitors are doing, the national and international context. In this way, they are equipped to focus on how to build a resilient organisation, able to facilitate success over the long-term; give attention to how an organisation's teams function together, how operations and offering can best be adapted to align with the context and its opportunities. The critical importance of getting organisational strategy right, of making the most of the privilege of being able to step back, means that time is also needed for developing personal resilience.

Priorities for development include self-awareness, making sure you're able to understand that unwillingness to let go, and how to deal with it; to focus on personal strengths rather than worrying about perceived weaknesses; and becoming a better observer and listener - not jumping in to fix problems - but be able to ask better questions, convey messages in the right ways, that achieve more for the organisation.

The Cranfield programme provides the all-round environment for learning how to have a good transition, turning leading into something to be actively enjoyed, to have a fresh opportunity to deliver more for an organisation and yourself. There's more immediate payback for both sides, settling into leadership, delivering results. The success for the employer of having grown its own new leader. Given the new detachment from everyday operations and involvement with staff, it can be a lonely place. Which is why there's huge value in learning among people taking on the same challenges, and creating a network of peers outside of the organisation to share experiences and speak the same language.

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