

5 Bad Habits That Snare New Leaders - The Quick Wins Paradox

New leaders must prove themselves quickly, but the quest for rapid results is inherently dangerous. Where are the traps, and how can managers avoid them?

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What are the keys to success for a leader transitioning into a new role? A few years ago, the Corporate Executive Board's Learning and Development Roundtable—a group of executives mostly from large firms who are responsible for cultivating leadership talent—sponsored a research project to find out. Working with 22 of the Roundtable's member organizations as research partners, our nine-member team surveyed 5,400 leaders new to their roles and their managers to discover what these individuals were focusing on, what behaviors they were exhibiting, and how they were doing in their first months on the job. We also asked the leaders to rate the overall performance of their teams, and we asked the leaders' managers to rate their performance on a 10-point scale. We then looked for the patterns that distinguished the leaders who were thriving in their new positions from those who were struggling.

Among the high-performing new leaders, one attribute stood out: a strong focus on results. In fact, most of them had managed to secure a “quick win”—a new and visible contribution to the success of the business made early in their tenure. Those who had achieved a quick win scored on average nearly 20% higher than those who hadn't. This was a forceful but unsurprising finding; management experts often advise newly promoted executives to put points on the board fast. A quick win is a crucial form of reassurance to the leaders' bosses, who hope they have made the right promotion decision; to team members deciding whether to place confidence in their new manager; and to peers trying to determine whether an equal has joined their ranks.

Our findings became more interesting when we examined the struggling leaders. In that group, we saw a high incidence of five problematic behaviors: focusing too much on details, reacting negatively to criticism, intimidating others, jumping to conclusions, and micromanaging the people reporting to them. Looking over this list, we realized these are traps that leaders could fall into if they were hell-bent on securing quick wins.

What confronts us, therefore, is a paradox. The relentless pursuit of a quick win is what ultimately prevents new leaders from benefiting from it. Knowing that they must rack up quick wins to prove themselves, new leaders often trip up during the quest for early results. In some cases, they manage to get the outcome they were seeking in a narrow sense, but the process isn't pretty, the fallout is toxic, and their ability to lead is compromised.

Having identified this paradox, we were all the more impressed with the feat the high-performing leaders had pulled off. Looking closely at the patterns in that group, we found that there is a right way to go after quick wins, and it taps into another of the strengths these leaders shared: excellent change-management skills. As new leaders, they may have wanted to shake things up, but they also understood that, as a consequence of their promotion, their new teams had to deal with transitions of their own. The solution we propose in this article offers more than sound advice to individual leaders on the move—it also has implications for how organizations should invest in leadership development. It's important first to explore what many leaders are doing wrong.

Five Traps on the Way to a Quick Win

Companies typically take great care in selecting new leaders and have high expectations for them, but within two years, our research shows, two out of every five transitioning leaders fall short. This

underperformance affects more than the new leaders; it drives down the performance of everyone around them, including direct reports, who underperform peers who are not working under new leadership by as much as 15%. More than 60% of underperforming leaders have fallen into at least one of the five traps we've identified. We have all seen such tendencies in colleagues and perhaps have succumbed to some ourselves. We found that the traps were almost equally common among first-line, middle, and senior managers. (See the exhibit "Quick Win Traps.") Clearly, the wisdom to avoid the quick wins paradox does not automatically come with experience.

Quick Win Traps

Trap 1: Focusing too heavily on details.

The most common behavior we found associated with failure in a new leadership role was a tendency to get bogged down in minutiae. In looking for the quick win, the transitioning leader tries to ace one component of the new job. Focusing intently on this goal, she doesn't pay enough attention to her broader responsibilities.

Consider Loretta, a restaurant manager in a fast-food chain, who, after three and a half years, was made manager of a newly formed district. Worried that some colleagues might question her readiness to oversee 20 restaurants, she was eager to prove herself. (Loretta, and our subsequent profiles, is a composite of managers we studied.)

As a store manager, Loretta had increased sales with her ideas for in-store displays and advertising, so she decided to try to replicate that success at the district level. When she discovered that no two stores under her management were laid out in the same way, she devoted herself to understanding each store's color scheme, amount of open counter space, and square footage available for window ads. It's easy to see how she became mired in such fine points, but the consequences were extremely damaging. Because she personally attended to the details, the rest of her team saw no role for themselves in this effort. She didn't create the shared understanding that would enable store teams to apply any of her display and advertising ideas to their locations. Most confusing to them, she ignored many of the performance issues they considered to be higher priorities. Within nine months, her bid for a quick win had produced some quick losses. Although traffic increased in a few restaurants, year-over-year sales dropped in most of them. She was eventually moved into a nonmanagement position in marketing.

Trap 2: Reacting negatively to criticism.

The second most common behavior among the low-performing leaders we studied was a tendency to respond negatively to criticism. Based on success in a previous role, a manager may believe she has a mandate. She may also suspect that not everyone welcomes the changes she plans to usher in. As a result, she may tend to view any criticism as an act of aggression and may even find ways to retaliate. At the very least, an inability to deal with criticism means that the leader takes much longer to improve in areas of relative weakness—if she improves at all.

If a new leader has this tendency, a campaign for a quick win will bring it to the fore. The initiative will probably target an area the leader believes she understands, and, because it is her first major assault on business as usual, she will be on the lookout for naysayers. That was the case with Denise, who started her career at a Silicon Valley start-up as a member, and later on as the leader, of the original sales team. In the seven years since its founding, the company had grown to more than 5,000 employees, and Denise was promoted from sales leader to director of the middle-market direct sales division. Because she managed to grow her division much more quickly than the firm's other divisions, she was promoted again, this time to global head of sales and marketing. Her mission: to get all divisions to increase their

growth rates by 30% within six months. The executive committee approved her aggressive plan, and she began to implement it immediately.

When she received her first performance feedback, after three months in this new role, the news wasn't all good. Members of her new team criticized her for pushing products that didn't match the preferences of their business customers, and for not listening to their informed objections. Rather than entertain the idea that she might have something to learn, Denise saw the criticism as evidence that a change-averse group was digging in its heels. She chided them for not standardizing their sales strategies and pressed on with her plan. By the time she was six months into her role, two of her five directors had left the company, and sales had plummeted in all but one of the five divisions. Seeing that she would not achieve her goals, she decided to leave the organization.

Trap 3: Intimidating others.

When leaders come to new roles convinced of their brilliance and the inevitability of their rise in the organization, they can be intimidating to those around them. Confident of their plans' success, they can mistake their employees' compliance for agreement and endorsement.

Yun Lin, for example, was a supremely self-confident, fast-rising star. Even as a teenager, he'd envisioned himself as a highly paid CEO at the helm of a large multinational company. A lifelong high potential, Yun Lin was always on a mission. He had served for eight years as vice president of his financial services firm's Asia-Pacific commercial-credit business unit, where profits had doubled. Promoted next to general manager, he was charged with improving profitability, particularly in the company's European operations. Yun Lin felt he had already proved himself and was excited that the top managers of the firm would be watching him do so again. He was now only one step away from becoming an officer of the company. After one round of meetings with the executives now reporting to him, Yun Lin was confident he knew enough to address all possible obstacles. Within two months of assuming his new role, he had laid out a transformation plan that would enable regional directors to reach their year-end goals—a quick win.

Unfortunately, his certainty and ambition intimidated his team. He adopted a supercilious, commanding tone with his direct reports. As a consequence, Yun Lin had little support to draw on when the European commercial real estate market took a downturn and his group missed its year-end goals by 20%. Yun Lin drew up a strategy for turning things around, but his team was unenthusiastic. His career stalled. After nine months without any progress, and with no other promotions on the horizon, he left the company.

Trap 4: Jumping to conclusions.

Some leaders hoping to score a quick win jump into its implementation too quickly. To the people around them, it feels as if these leaders have arrived with the solution already formulated instead of engaging others in its design.

This was the charge against Dan, a team leader at a defense contractor. Before his promotion, he'd been an engineer on a high-profile client project team. After that team won a number of accolades, he moved into a supervisory role on a different team, tasked with developing customized versions of the project for three other clients.

The deadline for the new versions was ambitious, and Dan worried that his new team would take too long to get up to speed. He conducted a quick analysis of the clients' needs on his own, extrapolating from the previous project instead of gathering new data. That analysis convinced him, conveniently, that the original product design would need only minor modifications and that the three new versions could be developed in half the time originally forecasted. He proceeded to draw up the new designs himself and

told the rest of the team to focus on the technical documentation, supplier contracting, and client management.

What Dan delivered was quick, but it wasn't a win. Because he had locked in on a solution before thoroughly understanding the clients' needs, two of the three ended up rejecting his team's work. Dan was laterally reassigned.

Trap 5: Micromanaging.

Leaders new to their roles often make the mistake of meddling in work they should trust others to do. Unwilling to take the time to get direct reports on board with an overall vision or goal—but afraid their decisions and actions won't align with it—they second-guess and micromanage.

Jane is a good example. After working for 18 months as a customer service representative, she was promoted to the role of call center supervisor. She decided that by meeting an aggressive goal she could prove herself in this stretch role, so she chose to try to improve her group's monthly first-call issue-resolution rate by at least 10%. Determined to make that target, she began scrutinizing the daily productivity of each of her direct reports, and she asked them to run all situations involving a service problem or irregularity by her.

Her direct reports soon began complaining that they didn't have any freedom to make decisions about service issues. They felt underappreciated and, worse, uninspired by the goal Jane had set for them. Within five months, the first-call resolution rate dropped 15%. Each issue took longer to resolve, and the call center reps were less and less motivated to address the more difficult calls. In the end, rather than being seen as a rising leader, Jane was placed on a performance correction plan.

In each of these profiles, we've turned the spotlight on a certain type of failure, but it will not surprise readers to hear that many of the struggling leaders we studied fell into more than one trap at a time. We noted, for instance, that leaders who were overly focused on details were also more likely to jump to premature conclusions and to micromanage. It's easy to surmise that many of them felt unsure of their readiness for the role—we think of them as "much to prove" leaders. We also observed that leaders who reacted negatively to criticism tended to be intimidating to others, as well. We think of them as the "nothing to learn" type.

Breaking the Paradox

How can transitioning leaders avoid the quick wins paradox? Not by abandoning the quest for early results. Our analysis demonstrates that leaders who make the most successful transitions do, in fact, focus relentlessly on quick wins. But they focus on a different kind of achievement. Rather than riding roughshod over others to prove *themselves*, they pursue what we've termed "collective quick wins," accomplishments that make their entire teams look good. (See the sidebar "The Power of Collective Quick Wins.")

The Power of Collective Quick Wins

Collective quick wins are achieved *with* teams, not in spite of them, but they aren't just team-building exercises. Like other quick wins, they add measurably and meaningfully to the success of the business. If the win does not translate into cost reduction, revenue growth, or some other tangible business outcome, it doesn't qualify. Nor is a quick win collective unless it features substantive contributions from members of the transitioning leader's team. Symbolic acts on behalf of the team don't count, no matter how high-profile they might be. The team must make real, direct contributions. Two simple litmus tests prove useful

here: Can key players on the team see their fingerprints on the outcome? Would they cite their contributions with pride? If the answer to either question is no, the win is not collective.

To help transitioning leaders identify opportunities for collective quick wins, we developed a diagnostic tool. (See the exhibit “Targeting the Right Quick Win.”) A leader should not use this tool by himself but should engage a respected member of the team to help (in part because she may have more credibility with the team than he does, so her early endorsement will quickly alleviate the skepticism of other team members). Any opportunities identified should then be thoroughly analyzed in terms of their value, cost, risk, and feasibility. The same rigor should be applied to a collective-quick-win proposal that would be applied to any business idea.

Targeting the Right Quick Win

The best transitioning leaders approach the management of collective quick wins through the lens of leadership, not simply project management. Certainly, they know how to keep a project on track, but they also recognize that the lasting value of their accomplishment will be the way they manage their teams. Adept leaders recognize that their enthusiasm for a quick win may be matched by their new team’s wariness and that achieving the win will depend on actively engaging team members, rather than hoping for their acquiescence.

If this sounds like advice from a change management handbook, that’s no coincidence. Successful quick-win projects and, more generally, the settling-in period for new leaders, are similar in many ways to change management initiatives. Both require the leader to build teams and develop people. Both require clear objectives that rally everyone around a common cause and ensure that people know what’s in it for them. In fact, the leaders we studied who benefited from quick wins attended to change management basics: They communicated a clear vision, developed constructive relationships, demonstrated empathy, played a hands-on role in developing team capabilities, and pulled everyone together. As a result, their quick win projects succeeded.

Our emphasis on leading change during a leadership transition may be unsurprising. Nevertheless, it’s both surprising and dismaying to realize how little emphasis leadership-development programs place on change management capabilities. Most companies promoting someone to a leadership role are quick to shore up that individual’s domain knowledge and technical skills. But the best talent developers recognize that it’s essential to equip leaders not just with the skills they need in their new roles (“position” capabilities) but also with the skills required to manage the transition into those roles (“transition” capabilities).

Setting Your Leaders Up to Succeed

The Importance of Collective Achievement

The quick wins paradox is real, and its consequences are far-reaching. The leaders we studied who avoided the traps performed 20% to 30% higher than their peers who stumbled; those with the greatest team-building and people-development skills went dramatically further, performing nearly 60% better than those peers. For companies, the benefit of helping transitioning leaders avoid the quick wins paradox is clear.

The pressure on new leaders to show quick wins will not go away, nor should it. The right kind of early achievement—a collective quick win—enhances the credibility of the new leader. But, in the final analysis, the measure of a quick win’s success is not the size or speed of its impact on the bottom line. It’s the wisdom acquired in the process. Did the new leader gain a firmer grasp of her direct reports’ strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and aspirations? Did she master the dynamics of the team’s working relationships? Does she better understand the leadership challenges she is likely to confront? If these

questions can be answered in the affirmative, then the leader can move her team into territory where the victories come harder and take longer.

Organizations that learn to appreciate the power of collective wins—and the perils that attend quick wins pursued unilaterally—can make them a cornerstone of their leadership training. Rather than seeing a large percentage of the talent they've promoted wash out, they can begin to realize the full return on their leadership investment.