

**Exploring the place and value of coaching
within the range of support available to
senior leaders experiencing significant
career transitions**

Research Abstract

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Context

I established Azurite my coaching practice in 2007 after 20 years of leadership in the public sector personally having experienced a range of significant career transitions. Supporting clients in transition is a special interest and a significant part of what I do.

Organisations are subject to continual change and associated re-organisation. Today's graduates could have in excess of eight career transitions during their career. I was particularly interested in exploring the extent to which senior leaders in transition were aware of the transition as a process that needed focus, an opportunity for personal and leadership development and finally whether coaching was used or considered to support them at this time.

The literature reflects the prevalence of 'the sink or swim approach' to transitions in most organisations but suggests that there are those who see the benefits for both the organisation and individuals from supporting the process of transition.

I was keen to test a number of personal assumptions during this research, which included:

- Transitions are predictable and individuals can learn from previous experiences and develop skills to improve their management of them.
- Accessing support can enable more effective transitions for highly visible senior leaders in unknown territory.
- Coaching can support both the above by providing important reflective learning conversations with appropriate challenge and identified protected time in a safe environment.

Research introduction

The aims of this study were to explore:

- The experience of and learning from the transition.
- The consciousness of the transition as both a process and a learning opportunity.
- The range of support senior leaders put in place to support their transition.
- The role and value of coaching within that support.

Methodology

I interviewed a total of 15 people from the private, not for profit and public sectors organisations all providing services to the public. All had experienced significant career transitions, some along side other life transitions. The senior leaders included Chairs, Chief Executives and Directors or the equivalent. A different perspective was provided by three Search and Recruitment Executives

A range of qualitative mechanisms were used to gather information and evidence for this research including a literature review, guided interviews and post interview questionnaires.

Results of the research

A number of key findings resulted from the interviews and questionnaires:

- Experience, parallel personal transitions, level of preparation, lack of choice and control all affected how the transition was experienced.
- Consistently expressed feelings from participants in the research included being “out of my comfort zone” and “alone”.
- All participants demonstrated learning from the transition but at different times. Learning came through reflection but few prioritised time for reflection or built in opportunities for personal challenge.
- All participants had accessed support of some kind and were retrospectively aware of benefits and gaps of their arrangements. The scale of support was generally in line with their level of preparation and preference.
- The majority of participants had used and valued coaching but only a minority used this to support their transition.
- Lack of choice of coach, approach and the timing of coaching can impact negatively on the relationship.

Conclusions

Only a minority recognised the transition as a process itself needing focus and management and that this process could be used as a positive learning opportunity.

The key determinant in how transitions were experienced was the extent to which the person in transition felt they had a conscious choice and could be in control of the process.

Those who positively chose their transition and those who had significantly more experience had greater awareness of the process and what it meant for them. This enabled those participants to plan accordingly, some working with coaches.

Those participants who were reacting to the transition generally planned less, felt less prepared, prioritised themselves less; and when coaching was used it became a key support mechanism particularly through the “letting go” phase of the transition.

For some participants a greater awareness of the need to manage the transition process and the associated learning would have resulted in the use of coaching at that time.

Organisations failed to acknowledge that leaders in career transitions are often managing the consequences of parallel personal transitions.

Recommendations

Leaders of organisations, mentors and coaches need to actively promote awareness of the transition as a process for focus and an opportunity for personal and leadership development.

The transition is something that needs to be managed and supported so highly visible leaders in career transitions which are often in 'unknown territory' can thrive rather than "sink or swim".

Coaching should be valued as a learning partnership that can provide the protected time, space and appropriate challenge to support leaders in transition.