

# HOW NEW DISTRICT MANAGERS CAN HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

*by Lynda McDermott*



Photograph by Getty Images

Today you're a trainer, but tomorrow you could be a new district manager. You'll have a new leadership job, an inherited team of sales reps wanting your guidance, and a regional manager eager to see what you can do. You'll have more authority, visibility, and accountability than you've ever had before, along with a lot more to win—and a lot more to lose.

Will you be ready? New leaders are expected to get up to speed quickly and reap rapid results. Organizational effectiveness studies, however, repeatedly show that it normally takes about six months for new leaders to gain sufficient knowledge to begin making critical strategic decisions and invoking substantive changes.

If you're tapped to become a DM, you can take steps to improve the effectiveness of your leadership transition. You can plan and execute an accelerated leadership transition that helps you identify and carry out both short- and long-term goals. You can do much toward that end on your own initiative, and even more with the support of your organization. But the key is this: You have to navigate your transition—not just allow it to pull you through its uncharted waters.

### **MAKING THE TRANSITION**

It's critical for new DMs to target their energies and resources in a planned direction to accelerate successful leadership performance. Specific objectives for their transition include:

- Clarifying performance expectations of their regional manager, sales team, and other key stakeholders (such as customers and suppliers)
- Assessing their organization's strengths, opportunities, and issues
- Aligning their sales team around the major priorities and goals of the organization
- Identifying competencies and practices that must be cultivated among their team
- Establishing a new network of collaborative relationships
- Developing leadership action plans designed to realize short- and long-term goals.



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QUESTION	BOSS	DIRECT REPORTS	PEERS	CUSTOMERS
<i>Organization Relationships</i>	Who are my stakeholders (besides you)?	What should I know about you?	How would you describe yourself as someone to work with?	With whom do you most enjoy working with in our organization?
<i>Goals and Expectations</i>	How will you measure my success?	What are your current priorities?	What should we start, stop or continue doing?	How could we exceed your expectations?
<i>Opportunities and Issues</i>	What are the dangers or problems facing us?	What are our greatest strengths/weaknesses?	How is the work/output of this organization perceived?	What needs my attention to serve you better?
<i>Culture and Values</i>	How would you describe the culture?	What is it like to work here?	How does the organization respond to new ideas/ change?	What do you most respect about our organization?

One program oriented to achieving these and other critical objectives is the Sudden Impact Leadership Transition Process,<sup>™</sup> which we have used with new executives in several pharmaceutical and biotech companies. The process encompasses six distinct, yet overlapping, phases that a new leader goes through from day one to year two on the job. It also delineates specific actions, activities, questions, concerns, and expected results typical to each phase. As a training model, the program is applicable to various types of leadership transitions and can be tailored to a particular leadership position, such as new DMs.

## PHASE I: LEADERSHIP ORIENTATION

The Leadership Orientation Phase generally lasts from one to three months. It is a period of intense action and learning. The tricky part is trying to keep the business running at the same time you're learning about it. While tackling day-to-day situations and

problems, you're also assessing the organization and its long-term requirements. Balancing assessment with action is crucial to establishing credibility. By acting too slowly, you risk appearing indecisive and may lose valuable time. By acting too hastily, you risk making poor decisions due to inadequate knowledge.

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## PHASE II: RESEARCHING THE STAKEHOLDERS

This is a time to investigate. Along with studying past plans and programs, you will want to meet and learn from the people and parts of the organization (internal and external) who have a stake in your success. These include your regional manager, sales team, other DMs, key customer accounts, suppliers, and so forth. They can get you oriented, give you history, point out potential allies

and foes, and spell out the unwritten norms of the organization. They all have their own specific needs and expectations of you as the new leader, and your success will depend on their perception of your performance.

This phase generally involves a lot of listening and evaluating. You'll ask your customers how you can best be a resource to them. You'll ask your team what's happening in the field, what knowledge or skills would help them do their job, and what expectations they have for you and the organization. Whatever methods you use—one-on-one meetings, team meetings, written reports, etc.—pay attention to what people choose to tell or show you first. That will indicate what they think is important for you to know and give you useful insight about their concept of your job, their job, and any major organizational issues.

## PHASE III: MAKING A GAME PLAN

Now you begin to more formally conceptualize and articulate how you intend to shape your new organization

and start to establish what we call your long-term Sudden Impact Game Plan.<sup>™</sup> During this time, you direct your attention toward reconfiguring one or more aspects of the organization to implement ideas you developed during the last phase.

Your initial game plan should include:

- Reviewing the operational elements of the business vision you identified as being most important to the success of your leadership transition
- Heeding relevant learnings drawn

## IT'S CRITICAL FOR NEW DMS TO TARGET THEIR ENERGIES AND RESOURCES IN A PLANNED DIRECTION TO ACCELERATE SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE.

from the first few months of working with your sales team, regional manager, and other stakeholders

- Deciding which results or events represent milestones for your leadership plan
- Developing a vision for, and selecting the milestones most crucial to, the success of the next 100-200 days.
- Organizing the milestones on a realistic time line, starting today and extending out at 30-day intervals.

### PHASE IV: EXECUTING TO WIN

This phase involves bringing about a great deal of organizational change. One study of new bosses showed that 32% of personnel changes and 29% of structural changes were made during their second six-month period on the

job. After six to 12 months, most leaders we've worked with had reached the "reshaping" stage, eager to act on the exploration and analysis they had experienced to date.

At this point, you are engaged and operating from a more informed perspective. You can see patterns you didn't see before. Small problems previously masked by larger problems typically emerge. Issues of competence loom more obvious and you can better gauge whether you have the right people in place.

In making changes, aim toward successive waves. The goal of the first wave is to secure early wins and short-term improvements. The second wave should address more fundamental issues of strategy, structure, systems, and skills

to reshape the organization. This is when the real performance gains are achieved. However, you won't realize these gains without securing early wins in the first wave.

### PHASE V: MAKING A SCORECARD

When you are ready for this phase, it's time to call a "time out" to assess your progress. The assessment may be done informally, like former New York City Mayor Ed Koch periodically asking: "How am I doing?" Or, you can take a more formal approach, such as holding a series of individual meetings with your sales reps and other stakeholders, or engaging a consultant to conduct surveys (such as 360° performance feedback) or facilitate a "diagnostic" meeting.

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The focus is to gauge progress against the broad vision and milestone events developed in Phase III. What gets measured becomes important. Track where initiatives may be bogging down and where pockets

following through on changes made or initiated during Phase IV. Significant external developments—within the industry or the larger economy—may disrupt the calm. Yet because you are

### MANY FACTORS SHAPE HOW EFFECTIVELY NEW DMS MOVE THROUGH THEIR LEADERSHIP TRANSITION PROCESS AND SUPPORT FROM THEIR ORGANIZATION IS DEFINITELY AMONG THEM.

assimilated into the organization and aware of its

of resistance lie. Garner specific feedback. Acknowledge and reward good results, and use poor results like a spotlight to expose areas or individuals that need attention.

inner workings and dynamics, you can carry out a fresh study and diagnosis of problems, then set about correcting them.

#### PHASE VI: CELEBRATE SUCCESS AND INTEGRATE

The last stage is one of both celebrating and integrating your leadership transition. By this time (usually after the one-year mark), you are no longer considered “the new DM.” By now you have either established credibility and a power base—or not. You have had ample time to shape your situations and you will be judged by the results of your actions.

This is a relatively calm phase. Most of your actions center on consolidating and

#### RUNNING SHOES REQUIRED

Many factors shape how effectively new DMs move through their leadership transition process and support from their organization is definitely among them. Clearly communicating expected performance results is essential. Further, new DMs should be encouraged to conduct transition meetings to discuss mutual expectations and nurture strong working relationships with their key stakeholders.

Then there's training. When new DMs come aboard, they need more

than a guided tour of their territory to facilitate their leadership transition. Programs based on a “Sudden Impact” strategy can be done in various formats, such as using a self-study workbook, through an on-line course, via coaching and mentoring, or a combination of the above.

The fact is, the quicker you hit the ground running as a new district manager, the quicker you can demonstrate the ability to think strategically and influence the direction and achievements of the organization. Reaping the benefits of an accelerated leadership transition requires a disciplined, but ultimately rewarding, effort on the part of the DM—and a solid commitment to his or her success on the part of the organization.

*Lynda McDermott is president of EquiPro International, Ltd., a leadership and team development consulting firm based in New York City. Learn more about the Sudden Impact program by contacting her at <lmcdermott@equiproint.com> or (212)573-9046.*

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