

Chapter Five: Project Findings

This chapter provides an analysis and interpretation of the project findings.

The findings in the main are drawn from the data from the 12 senior leaders. Perspectives from the executive search and recruitment consultants will be identified as such.

5.1 The Experience and Significance of Career Transitions for Senior Leaders

These findings provide the foundation for the interpretation in the later sections. The data were collated in the following themes that emerged from the interviews:

- Significance of the transition to themselves and others
- Anticipating and preparing for the transition
- The experience of the transition

5.1.1 Significance of the Transition to Themselves and Others

Within the research sample all the participants' descriptions of the significance of their transition described below fitted within the range of experiences in paragraph 2.2.3 described by Elsner and Farrand (2006:9) or the examples of leadership passages by Dotlich et al (2004).

- Six participants' transitions to Chief Executive, Executive Director or Head of Service posts were at the same level but with the added complexity or scale resulting from combinations of the following; new geography, a different scale of organisation or management change, a broader portfolio or the developmental stage of the organisation.

- Six participants had moved into different kinds of role including first time Chief Executive or Managing Director, Chair, new corporate responsibilities or moves from a Chief Executive level into different roles.

A number of participants described current or past career transitions that would fall into Dotlich et al's (2004:14) description of leadership development. This is when leaders experienced job and career setbacks and learnt from the combination of adversity and diversity that, together with personal and professional experiences drives leadership learning and growth (Appendix 7).

Some participants were experiencing parallel personal transitions associated with life stage issues such as:

- *midlife* Hudson's (1999b:142) an extract as (Appendix 8) *Decade Orientation in the Life Cycle* shows that typically life re-evaluation takes place in midlife including shifts to balancing life and developing a clear sense of self and what matters
- *the final transition of this kind and thoughts on legacy issues*
- *loss of a family member or loss of valued colleagues*
- *balancing work and family during the transition*, a common theme several participants stressed was the impact on families whilst they served notice in one role and prepared for the next with the consequences of living apart from the family or re-locating the family

In terms of the significance of the transition as perceived by others no participant shared any experience where the person who appointed them articulated this. I will return to this when considering the support for transitions. Some participants did report this significance being identified by family, friends and old colleagues and one could hypothesise that this perhaps reflects the more open conversations where perhaps participants shared their doubts and areas for development.

The ***time a transition takes*** was another theme and the participants expressed a range between 3 months, 6 months and a year (to have

experienced an annual cycle). Those with significant experience of transition at a senior level identified a longer timescale for the transition. The level of complexity is a critical factor here and taking charge of an organisation is complex, particularly an organisation in transition itself.

These findings highlighted the difference between the reality of the time a transition takes and the expectations of others, particularly when there are performance issues for the organisation. What determines the end of the transition is critical in this debate for one participant they described this **“as not being described as the new Chief Executive anymore”**. Another participant’s interpretation was when their first quarter’s performance figures were announced.

Participants with experience of several senior transitions support the view of Elsner and Farrand (2006:39) in challenging the shortening expectation in both the literature and in organisations of transition time reducing from 6 months to a ‘100 days’ to the most recent ‘90 days’ reflecting the increasing pressures to hit the ground running. They dispute the view that if you know what to do and organise it well you can get there within three months, suggesting that unreasonable haste with a human process leads to failed transitions and that successful leaders end the transition with their team or organisation equipped to go forward together.

5.1.2 Anticipating and Preparing for the Transition

Preparation for the transition was identified as an important theme. The responses were variable along a continuum of **“if you don’t plan where you’re going you never get there”** to **“it (the focused reflection of the interview) prompted me to question the relevance or thoroughness of my preparation”**.

The depth and length of preparation was greatest for the Chief Executive participants others reported little or, retrospectively inadequate preparation. As all the Chief Executives were male I did consider if this confounded the findings but from my personal experience as a female Chief Executive and

knowledge of other female colleagues who have taken a planned approach this was not my conclusion. It did however highlight the issue of preference type as a number of participants shared their MBTI preference types and their learning styles with me and, although not part of this study, this area could be of interest to other researchers.

One participant, a supporter of Watkins (2003) *First 90 Days*, described how his plans were developed systematically for the 1st day, week and month. Others described experience from earlier transitions and the need to carefully research the new patch for example its culture **“as earlier approaches cannot just be transposed“**. There was only one participant who differentiated formal support for **“me”** and the **“business”** as a conscious decision.

All the Chief Executives had experienced senior level transitions before and all were well placed to determine how they spent their time prior to actually taking up post. One participant spent 22 days in the new patch before taking up post but commented on the toll this can take personally on health, friends and family as it is essentially fulfilling two roles. A search executive participant described this as an excellent opportunity for deputies to take a lead supported by the exiting person as it provide safe experience for them but allows the post holder to plan their exit well.

Of the other groups of participants some described very little preparation in one case because it was made clear to the participant that 100% focus should remain with current the organisation. This lack of preparation clearly impacted on the start of the new role. Participants that had had internal transitions or were in merger situations described some challenging experiences. These included renegotiating relationships with old peers and new peers and the disappointment and cynicism of colleagues. The sense of the emphasis of this latter group had been on managing feelings and emotions.

5.1.3 The Experience of the Transition

One Search and Recruitment Executive in the study described the most significant aspect influencing a career transition as the extent of choice and control the leader had in the transition. This factor was evident in the study. Where transitions were as a consequence of mergers the depth of residual feelings was strong despite the participants attempt to rationalise the policy determining the merger.

Letting go was a key theme for those leaders who had come through merger. Bridges (2003:23) describes transitions as starting with endings but ‘the problem being people don’t like endings’. The failure to identify and get ready for endings and losses is the greatest difficulty for people in transitions. Providing help with this is crucial for the success of the transition. Some participants in this study described the emotions caused by letting go and how this was heightened by the approach the new leaders were taking to implement their new direction.

Letting go was also difficult when there was a significant investment in events still to come to fruition in their previous organisation. Chapter Two described Bridges three-phase process of transition (Appendix 9). Understanding the process of transition itself is critical to managing it but this awareness was not evident in this study.

Feeling out of their comfort zone was a familiar theme but was combined with recognition that this was to be expected through the transition period. One participant said **“that some anxiety should be expected if you were to be stretched – paralysis probably meant the transition was too big”**. Dotlich et al (2004) suggests that ‘you cannot expect to evolve as a leader without placing yourself in unfamiliar situations or experiencing pain. It means making a habit of exposing yourself to situations where you feel uncomfortable and confronting your feelings and flaws’. A participant said that a first time Chief Executive would **“need to recognise that they need help to cope with change and emotions”**

A common theme identified was one of *isolation* or *being alone*. Both these participants and the literature describe this as losing a team of familiar, trusted people that provide both personal and professional support. In any transition new relationships have to be developed. Externally appointed Chief Executives in this study described the time needed to develop the new team and find out whose judgements to trust. For those new to corporate roles, working out the dynamics of the corporate team and developing their own teams was an issue and for internal appointments, also establishing new relationships with existing colleagues.

The following adjectives reflected a wide range of feelings expressed by the participants: “**excited**”, “**overwhelmed**”, “**frustrated**”, “**abandoned**,” “**at sea**,” “**fine**” “**watched**”, “**anxious**,” “**uncomfortable**,” “**am I up to it?**” and commonly “**alone**”. A number of these experiences will be developed in the later sections.

5.2 The Learning the Transition Provided for the Senior Leader

The data from interviews and questionnaires focused on:

- What and how they learnt
- How they changed personally and
- Leadership style changes

Participants described personal learning in terms of their resilience, self-confidence and self-awareness. They also described different applications of their leadership styles in different situations and opportunities to try different approaches in areas that had previously caused them difficulties e.g. being less open and trusting than before, clearer with staff about their development needs, developing toughness where this had previously been an issue and for a first time leader, the need for respect as opposed to being liked.

A consistent learning theme from those more experienced at senior level transition was the need to see every transition as different particularly issues of pace, culture, size of management change all impacting on the approach that would need to be taken.

The following themes were developed from the data:

Reflection & Personal Reflective Space all the participants described reflection as how they learnt but less than half of the participants had arrangements in place to support this with either personal or supported time. The focus of the reflection had in the main been as described by one participant. **“I think it is fair to say that I have reflected on the last six months rather than assessed any learning for myself during this transition process”**. Another, reflecting about the interview experience, **“it helped me understand more about my learning style and how I approach new challenges and projects”**.

An overall impression from my findings was that the participants in transition were focusing on what they were doing, some in a more planned way than others, but not at that time consciously assessing personal learning. This was consistent with the findings of Dotlich et al (2004:13/16) in that companies generally don't allow this time and space but he argues that working through transitions requires time and space for reflection. ‘Specifically it is the leader's willingness to reflect, face into and talk about what they are going through that facilitates his or her development’.

One participant said **“I was not conscious of it as a learning process. What did become clearer was that the transition needed to be managed”**. Dotlich et al (2004:29) agrees, ‘Typically you're so caught up in the excitement of a passage or the complex issues it raises that learning is the last thing from your mind’. Three of the participants well used to transitions easily moved from one transition to another reflecting on learning experience from earlier ones. Where there had been problems or ‘failures’ there was

evidence of in depth reflection which had been supported by mentors, coaches or other supportive networks. Further benefit from the interview process itself was expressed as “**it was useful to recap or focus in on something in more detail, it does conjure up more issues for you**”.

Developing Resilience “**I felt very tested by the transition at a professional and personal level and I think that professionally I’m a lot tougher**” and “**I also learnt more about how I deal with change on an emotional level**”. Participants all described the development of resilience from previous experiences. Dotlich et al (2004:203) supports this finding in their research where leaders had found ‘leverage’ and learning from disappointments but none the less the strength of emotion was still evident and expressed by some of the participants “**it (the interview) helped me name the emotions**” and “**I probably need to find another outlet for getting that (the emotion) out of my system**”.

5.3 The Support Senior Leaders Access for their Transition and the Rationale for this Choice

There was little expectation or experience of others arranging support. Only two participants spoke of support being advised or determined by others. This finding relates back to the lack of the significance of the transition being identified by employers and that there was an overall sense that ***the sink or swim mentality*** as described in the literature review was prevalent.

One public sector participant’s assessment was that at Assistant Director level and above you should expect to put your own support and development arrangements together and secure commitment to them. This approach would be consistent with the sense of personal responsibility that underpins the philosophy of Self Organised Learning, Harri–Augstein and Webb (1995) but it also requires recognition that this is more effective if this personal responsibility is part of an organisational commitment to learning as critical to

personal development, organisational development and improved performance, Senge (1994).

Elsner and Farrand (2006:28) challenge 'the myth of independence' and argue that the professional, personal and organisational demands are far harder to survive and flourish in without appropriate help but support means different things to different people. They suggest drawing on inner support self-belief, self-confidence, stamina and resilience and also the outer resources available when one is prepared to balance the myth of ones own vulnerability and independence with other characteristics such as curiosity and challenge to ones own mindset.

Recruitment and Selection Executives identified a dilemma in terms of getting some one in post and making sure the employer is aware of development needs, but guided by their need for the placement to be a success. Where there was a close relationship with the employing organisation there was a sense of encouraging the employer to work with the newly appointed leader to support the transition while recognising that this was rare and very dependent upon the style of the appointing Chair or Chief Executive. Two of the participants had transitions that could be interpreted as through succession planning but no specific issues emerged in this study.

The range of support arrangements that the participants had put together was consistent with the range identified in the literature:

- Technical/industry support sourced from mentors (unpaid), networks or the professions
- Support, encouragement and reassurance from friends and family
- Supported places for reflection, learning and personal development from learning sets and professional coaches or mentors

A participant from a small national charity experienced adversity in the previous transition to a first time accountable officer in a small not for profit

organisation with no experience or networks to draw on and no identified funding to support leadership development. An individualised, personal learning programme, which coaching could have provided, was later identified by the participant as the support that would have met this need.

Looking back at the level of preparation participants made for their transitions it is possible to see a relationship with the lack of a proactively developed support network. Again this perhaps reflects the benefit of experience of similar level of transition and therefore greater insight into what might be needed. One possibility here is that the lack of preparation and planned support networks goes back to the letting go phase of the transition. If the thinking and planning for the new role was reactive and not prioritised this would support the experiences described as being 'overwhelmed', 'at sea' and, for participants who had also 'lost' supportive and encouraging bosses, 'abandoned'.

5.4 The Role and Value of Coaching within the Support Arrangements

Coaching in this context refers to Executive Coaching provided by professional coaches. Some coaches differentiate between coaching and mentoring when they are providing a longer-term developmental alliance. None of the participants used the term mentoring in this way. They all referred to mentors as people working in the sector or business who regularly, or periodically, acted as a sounding board, offering support, advice and experience. Table 1 provides a summary of both the approach to transition and the previous and current use of coaching.

Table 1 - Summary of Responses

| | Approach to Transition | Use of Coaching | Use of Coach for this Transition | Has a Coaching Credential | Notes |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|---|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Pre-planning | Past career planning Supports for others | None | No | |
| 2 | Pre-planning | Past career planning Supports for others | None | No | Has long term mentor |
| 3 | Pre-planning | Promotes a coaching and mentoring style of leadership. | None | No | |
| 4 | Pre-planning | None | None | No | Sees no value in coaching |
| 5 | Pre-planning | Ongoing -business and personal | Throughout | Yes | |
| 6 | Some pre-mostly reactive planning | Past transition | None | No | Used learning set, now investigating coaching |
| 7 | Reactive planning | Past leadership development | Throughout | Yes | |
| 8 | Reactive planning | | Assigned post-appointment | No | Coaching continued after transition |
| 9 | Reactive planning | | Post-appointment | Yes | |
| 10 | Reactive planning | Past leadership development | | No | |
| 11 | Reactive planning | Past leadership development | | Yes | |
| 12 | Reactive planning | None | None | No | Now investigating coaching |

The following were the responses to what the value of coaching was to the participants for them or for their organisation:

- **A safe place to talk providing 'me time'protected time for reflective space with a person who I trust out of the systembut who understands the complexity of the system who listens, challenges, focuses and supports**
- **"Where both the personal and professional can be worked through together"**
- **"Listening"**
- **"Held a mirror up which was enough"**
- **"Play it back and helps cohesion"**
- **"Challenges looks for blind spots"**
- **"Helps to synthesise"**
- **"To get through change, confidence building, reassurance, reflecting"**
- **"A fast-track through the transition"**
- **"Reconnect with my values"**
- **"To do a better job"**
- **"Help me find some direction"**

The following were from the participant's reflective follow up questionnaires:

'The session highlighted it (coaching) as probably the most useful way to enable someone in my position to capture new learning and problem solve'

'On reflection coaching was my rock during the transition process and I would have been more vulnerable without it'

'I have in the past taken advantage of a Personal Development Advisor more of a coach than a mentor I have not put this in place since taking up my current role and will now give consideration to doing this'

Issues and concern about coaching:

- Two participants had experiences where coaching was put in place for them with no choice of timing, coaching approach or choice of coach. One participant said that despite the initial resentment the coaching proved useful. The other terminated the coaching as the relationship did not gel and the coach drove the agenda, which was not acceptable to the participant.
- One participant's view of coaching was that it perpetuates an unacceptable dependency.
- One participant stressed how important it was to find a coaching style and approach that fits the issues you want to work on. This participant found a task-focused approach was fine in the beginning but it didn't address the connection between the personal and the professional which became increasingly important to her.
- One organisational leader planned to ensure senior leaders had access to 1:1 off line support but would require a clarity of purpose for the coaching programme .
- Coaching needs to be explained and promoted by the senior leaders who have good stories to tell.
- Offering coaching support through the transition could be used to promote the organisation in its recruitment.

In summary the majority of participants had used and valued coaching but only two acquired coaching to support the transition they had made and both of these were instigated at others suggestions some time after the appointment was made. Two participants were in coaching relationships prior to the transitions and used the coaching to support the transition. I participant had previously used a personal development consultant in each of the transitions made at chief executive level but not on this occasion.

5.5 Opportunity for Further Learning Provided by the Focused Reflection of the Interview

9 of the 13 reflective questionnaires that were completed, 100 % considered that the focused reflection of the interview had provided further learning and provided some examples of those. 5 of the 13 Identified specific action they intended to take to support further reflection, learning and planning as a consequence. Specific examples provided by the participants are integrated into the analysis and interpretation above.

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