



Personality and the Leadership Pipeline: Managing Transitions from First-Level Leaders to Senior Executives

“The wicked leader is he who the people despise. The good leader is he who the people revere. The great leader is he who the people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

– Lao Tzu

Organizational leaders pursue results that bring short-term success and enable long-term viability of the enterprise. They continually strive to align the collective needs and goals of the organization with the motivations and skills of their people. An enterprise leader once said, “Leadership is the process of helping others get what they need and want, while at the same time the leader and the larger organization get what they want and need.” These thoughts are not new. Lao Tzu’s quote suggests that 2,600 years ago he saw great leadership as symbiotic, where the visibility of the leader was secondary to the emergence of shared leadership in influencing, inspiring, engaging, and galvanizing people to accomplish things that were mutually beneficial.

As a leader, you face increasing demands to redefine leadership and embrace twenty-first century challenges in ways that are not command and control, but are collaborative, inspirational, and provide meaningful work for your direct reports. Although the ideal continues to evolve, leaders still embody common traits as their roles expand in scope and responsibility. As you look toward the future, it is important to understand the impact that these traits have on your current role and how they will change as your role becomes increasingly demanding.

What does it take to be a successful leader at the next level? PDI Ninth House has been addressing this question for more than 40 years, building an extensive database that allows us to examine and define aspects of leadership, and how they vary across levels, cultures, and industries.

In this paper, we will focus on how leadership traits differ across four levels of leaders. Understanding what is typical at the next level will help you focus your own development and that of other leaders within your organization. You won’t change by altering your personality (which is impossible) but by leveraging your strengths and being aware of areas that are more challenging.

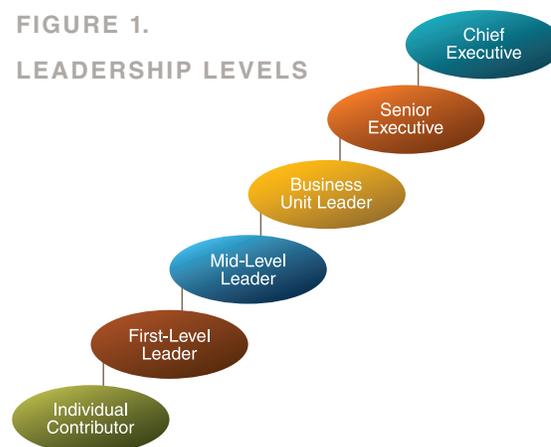


Leadership Traits

Every leader is an individual with a unique personality. However, there are leadership traits characteristic of successful leaders that remain similar despite inherent differences. Our research analyzed 14,045 individuals to assess how leadership traits change between the major steps of leadership advancement. We reported the statistically¹ and practically² significant differences between these levels as measured through the Global Personality Inventory (GPI)³.

The PDI Ninth House leadership model describes six major levels of leadership: individual contributor, first-level leader, mid-level leader, business unit leader, senior executive, and chief executive. The leadership path has four associated career steps inherent in advancement, as illustrated in Figure 1. Understanding how the changing demands of each role require you to adapt your leadership style is important to your continued success.

FIGURE 1.
LEADERSHIP LEVELS



STEP 1: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR TO FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

The first step in leadership advancement occurs when a professional or individual contributor is given a management assignment. This level, commonly labeled “supervisor,” typically consists of daily monitoring of employees’ work, delegating tasks to the group, and acting as a coach or mentor. First-level leaders also may retain several of the more complex or challenging individual contributor duties.

The transition from individual contributor to first-level leader may be the most challenging of all leadership transitions. The change in traits (Table 1) shows how first-level leaders must expand their immediate frame of reference and relinquish the daily details of work to others. They must be in charge while recognizing the importance of working with their team and peers.

Interestingly, first-level leaders largely are less considerate of others than individual contributors. They have directives and opinions, and seek to get the work done rather than form strong social ties. Their increased competitiveness may be indicative of new tasks, such as competing to be recognized and promoted to first-level leader or needing to be competitive in their industry. Conversely, first-level leadership duties may encourage competitiveness. Regardless, first-level leaders are more likely to have competitive streaks than individual contributors.

TABLE 1. CHANGE IN TRAITS FROM INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR TO FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Increase	Decrease
+ Take charge and give direction	- Need to be socially accepted
+ Look toward the future and anticipate issues	- Consideration of others’ thoughts and feelings
+ Be willing to depend on others	- Attention to daily details
+ Seek competitive situations	

¹P < .05

²d > .10; given the large size of this set of data and issues of range restriction, this is considered practically significant.

³A personality measure created by SHL Previsor that has been validated cross-culturally (Schmidt, Kihm, & Robie, 2000, *Personnel Psychology*)



STEP 2: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER TO MID-LEVEL LEADER

The second major transition is from first-level leader to mid-level leader. Mid-level leaders manage supervisors and are a step removed from the actual work being done. They engage in more planning and are increasingly responsible for executing the plan. Mid-level leaders have departmental goals to fulfill and are responsible for translating these goals for the benefit of their groups.

Traits that differentiate mid-level from first-level leaders (Table 2) depict a more pronounced drive for promotion and achievement, and a “bullish” personality. To achieve their goals, mid-level managers are more willing to take risks. They increasingly utilize their ability to solve problems through analyzing and summarizing information, identifying trends and supporting evidence, and seeking cause-and-effect relationships. Mid-level managers, while appreciating autonomy of choice at work, increasingly recognize the importance of the team. They remove themselves further from the daily details of work, and begin to exert influence on others to direct efforts, performance, and workflow.

TABLE 2. CHANGE IN TRAITS FROM FIRST-LEVEL LEADER TO MID-LEVEL LEADER

Increase	Decrease
+ Continue to be more competitive	- Continue to attend to daily details
+ Continue to rely on others and let them work independently	
+ Continue to take charge and give direction; adopt a more direct communication style	
+ Continue to be future oriented	
+ Be willing to lead and take risks	
+ Identify trends and themes in information	
+ Desire to perform well and be promoted	
+ Tolerate high expenditures of energy	
+ Act independently and autonomously	
+ Be able to persuade and negotiate	
<i>Items that begin with “Continue to” denote a change seen in the previous level as well as in the current step.</i>	



STEP 3: MID-LEVEL LEADER TO BUSINESS UNIT LEADER

The third major transition is from mid-level leader to business unit leader. Business unit leaders manage a company within a company, and are directly responsible for contributing to the overall profitability of the organization. Business unit leaders set their unit’s goals in the context of industry and organizational business indicators. Their jobs increase in complexity as they manage processes and systems within their unit. Table 3 summarizes the traits that change during this transition.

TABLE 3. CHANGE IN TRAITS FROM MID-LEVEL LEADER TO BUSINESS UNIT LEADER

Increase	Decrease
+ Continue to be willing to lead and take risks	<i>None</i>
+ Continue to identify trends and themes in information	
+ Continue to be future oriented	
+ Continue to tolerate a high expenditure of energy	
+ Continue to persuade and negotiate	
+ Continue to communicate directly; be more honest and straightforward	
+ Continue to let others work independently	
+ Have a positive outlook on the future	
+ Weigh new data and alternatives before making a decision	
+ Generate new ideas	
+ Possess an aptitude for change and flexibility	

Business unit leaders increasingly invest energy and effort in their work. At this level, they may feel more positive about the future, which may be related to closer proximity to organizational decision making or to increased autonomy and control in their decision-making process. This optimism also could guide self-selection into a more powerful role; perhaps a positive outlook allows them to believe that they make a difference. Regarding leadership style, business unit leaders continue to influence decisions and direction, but in an increasingly direct manner.

Business unit leaders demonstrate fewer propensities for the details of business, indicating a further removal from daily operations. This change could indicate a movement towards a results-oriented management style in which business unit leaders care less about how the work is done, and more about goal attainment at the business unit and organizational levels.



STEP 4: BUSINESS UNIT LEADER TO SENIOR EXECUTIVE

The fourth and final transition is from business unit leader to senior executive. At the top of the organization, senior executives focus on the future of the business within the context of their industry. At this stage, they spend time networking externally, managing constituents, and collaborating with the board of directors. They are concerned with market share, time-to-market metrics, organizational innovation, and competitiveness within the industry. Ultimately, senior executives are responsible for the profitability and overall strength of the organization.

The traits that increase for senior executives (Table 4) demonstrate both a future orientation and pragmatic responses to movement within their industries. Senior executives continue to provide fearless, strong direction. However, acting independently decreases, which may be indicative of the increased reliance on the executive team, a more encompassing perspective of organizational systems, and/or a stronger personal tie to the organization’s identity.

This transition requires greater willingness to invest energy in work and the ability to handle stress, which indicates that senior executives are heavily invested in their work and take their ever-increasing responsibilities very seriously. They are more likely to believe in following the rules, most likely because their group makes the rules.

Again, we see that leaders’ propensity for detail decreases as they ascend. They take charge and give succinct direction. Senior executives care less about what people think of them, which perhaps is useful as they make tough, sometimes unpopular choices.

TABLE 4. CHANGE IN TRAITS FROM BUSINESS UNIT LEADER TO SENIOR EXECUTIVE

Increase	Decrease
+ Continue to tolerate a high expenditure of energy	- Attend to daily details
+ Continue to be willing to lead and take risks	- Try to keep other people happy
+ Continue to persuade and negotiate	- Act independently and autonomously
+ Continue to weigh new data and alternatives before making a decision	- Demonstrate open mindedness and acceptance of other’s values
+ Continue to be future oriented	
+ Continue to communicate directly; be more honest and straightforward	
+ Continue to let others work independently	
+ Desire to perform well and be promoted	
+ Seek competitive situations	
+ Remain calm in stressful situations	
+ Place value on following the rules	



Summary

As we have seen, several traits increase significantly across each level of leadership. For example, leaders increasingly need to devote higher levels of energy to work. This upward trend of drive, initiative, and a willingness to take risks solidifies the “fearless leader” ideal. Leaders know that responsibility for performance and other important outcomes begins and ends with them.

As leaders transition into roles with a wider scope, they must sift through progressively more complex information to solve problems, make decisions, and ensure results. They must advance in traits such as trend spotting and future orientation as they ascend the leadership ladder. Leaving the details to direct reports, leaders focus on more integrative and holistic issues.

What can you do to prepare for the next level? Become aware of the types of demands and challenges that you will face in your next role, as well as the personality traits that will be needed to succeed. Although every leader is different, research shows that successful leaders have more in common than not. As you prepare to advance your career, seek out development and stretch assignments that allow you to gain skills and practice the traits you will need in more advanced roles.

PDI Ninth House can help executive leaders at your organization gain insight, prepare for new roles, and successfully transition into senior levels. For more information, call your local PDI Ninth House office or visit www.pdinh.com.