An excerpt from *The Dynamics of Taking Charge* by John Gabarro

John Gabarro is UPS Foundation Professor of Human Resources Management in Organizational Behaviour, Emeritus at the Harvard Business School. His research has focused on professional service organizations, managerial effectiveness and executive succession.

He is the author or co-author of eight books including *Breaking Through* which won the George Terry Prize, given by the Academy of Management for outstanding contribution to management theory and practice, and *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*, which won the New Perspectives in Leadership award and was named one of the best business books of the year by the *Wall Street Journal*.

Gabarro is also a recipient of the McKinsey Foundation Prize and the Johnson Smith Knisely Foundation Award for research on executive leadership. Most recently he has served as faculty chair of Harvard Business School’s Executive Education Advanced Management Programme. His consulting clients have included Citigroup, Ernst & Young, IBM and General Electric.

The pressure on managers to hit the ground running upon beginning a new leadership position has never been greater, and the cost of failure is high, both to the company and the executive’s career. Transitions into new jobs are critical times when small differences in action taken can have a major impact on results. Because they lack detailed knowledge of the challenges they will face, leaders are most vulnerable in their first few months in a new position, and the question arises what it would be worth to companies if managers entering critical new jobs could take charge faster.


Taking charge – the process by which a manager establishes mastery and influence in a new assignment – is one of the least understood activities in management. Mastery means acquiring a grounded understanding of the organization, its tasks, people, environment, and problems. Influence means having an impact on the organization, its structure, practices and performance.

**Stages of taking charge**

The taking-charge process is not one of steadily increasing learning or action. Rather, it consists of a series of stages in which the new manager’s emphasis alternates between learning and action in a sequentially predictable fashion. In a wave pattern incremental learning builds to periods of active change as managers progress through five stages.

**Stage One:** The taking-hold period. This is a period of intense learning during which the manager develops a cognitive map of the new situation and takes corrective action on the problems that he or she understands and knows how to address, be they as immediate as cutting the product line or as far-reaching as conducting a strategic business analysis.

**Stage Two:** Immersion. The new manager has already acted on whatever problems were apparent in the first stage and now begins to look more closely at issues that were either below the surface or not so obvious earlier. The fine-grained and more probing learning of
this period is a natural outgrowth of the interactions, problems, and conflicts that the new manager has to deal with on a day-to-day basis. The manager should begin to ask questions like: Is the basic structure right? Are our channels of distribution wrong? Why do we continue to have problems in manufacturing despite improvements in production and inventory control?

Stage Three: Reshaping. The new manager’s principal activities should now be directed at reconfiguring one or more aspects of the organization to implement the concept developed during the Immersion stage.

Stage Four: Consolidation. The new manager and key colleagues should now assess the consequences of the changes made in the earlier wave of action and take corrective measures based on that learning.

Stage Five: Refinement. By now the manager will have taken charge. If they are still uncomfortable with their situation, it is likely to be because of pressing business environment problems such as a recession or mounting interest rates, rather than newness to the job.

The organizational work of taking charge

The tasks a new manager performs in taking charge fall into three broad categories. In practice, these three tasks are not dealt with sequentially, but simultaneously. They are: the interpersonal work of developing effective working relationships with key people; the business-analytic and strategic tasks, which are beyond the scope of this discussion; and organizational work. This last category includes the tasks involved in assessing, developing, and improving the organization.

Learning, assessment and diagnosis

During their first three weeks on the job, new managers should conduct a series of meetings to provide an initial opportunity for orientation and preliminary assessment. This should include reviewing performance data, five-year plans, touring facilities, and meeting with new employees. Since assessments based on this first round of meetings tend to be impressionistic, new managers are well advised not to make too much out of first impressions, particularly concerning people.

In diagnosing organizational problems, new managers should use and examine existing information and control systems. If the initial assessment shows that the system is inadequate in yielding the information needed to do so, the manager should respond by initiating the necessary changes.

Critical to the organizational work at this stage is assessing key people – their relative competencies, strengths, and weaknesses.

Developing shared expectations

Working out an increasingly concrete and specific set of expectations often requires tacit or explicit testing and sometimes negotiation of differences. Much of the actual work of developing a set of shared expectations about how the organization should function occurs with more modest issues. In many cases the reviews that are a normal part of running a business – budget reviews, capital allocation approvals, operating reports – provide natural arenas in which this work is accomplished.

Building a cohesive management team is critical to a successful succession, since it is through the team of employees that a manager has the highest leverage in influencing the larger organization.

“A new manager with prior industry experience will make more changes earlier than industry outsiders, taking hold more quickly.”
A new manager is dependent on both his employees and his director to assist him in doing the learning, diagnosis, and action-taking necessary to take charge. The new manager must also be prepared to confront and resolve pre-existing conflicts within the management group.

The new manager’s expectations will be communicated symbolically by actions taken. Employees search for clues, observing even the smallest nuances in behaviour and interpreting them. The manager can also communicate expectations to the wider organization by coining a phrase that captures one or more beliefs about what they believe the organization requires. The phrase serves as shorthand to signify what the organization should focus on, becoming a rallying cry. Of course, this cannot substitute for the detailed day-to-day tasks of working out and developing shared expectations; but it can be effective in reinforcing and communicating these expectations.

The interpersonal work of taking charge

We’ve already pointed out the importance of team building in determining a new manager’s effectiveness. Now let’s focus on the importance of developing one-on-one working relationships with key people within the organization. The quality of a new manager’s working relationships at the end of the first year is perhaps the most salient difference between successful and failed transitions. Interpersonal problems including unresolved issues of rivalry, conflicts over goals and conflicts in management style all evolve from a new manager’s failure to develop shared expectations about performance, roles or priorities with key employees and with the boss.

Three qualities have emerged as being particularly salient to the development of effective relationships:

1. The degree to which the new manager and his employees work out mutual expectations about performance goals, priorities and roles.

2. The degree of mutual trust that develops in the relationship, the areas this trust covers, and the extent to which it has been tested. The basis of interpersonal trust can be grouped into two types: character-based (integrity, consistency of behaviour, openness and discretion) and competence-based (business sense, interpersonal competence, and task-specific competence).

3. The degree to which a new manager and his employees influence each other beyond that which is accorded them by virtue of their roles. A manager possesses positional bases of influence such as the authority to reward or punish through salary or promotions – but these are viewed by neither employees nor new managers as being as important as sources of influence such as credibility and competence.

Factors that make a difference

Prior functional experience is the single most powerful factor determining the changes a new manager will make and the competence of early actions.

A new manager with prior industry experience will make more changes earlier than industry outsiders, taking hold more quickly. Not only will the first wave of changes made by industry insiders be bigger, the changes they will make in this first wave will also tend to be more structural in nature.

Managers in turnaround situations are under substantially greater pressure to improve performance than their non-turnaround counterparts, making more changes while taking charge. They are also given much more latitude in taking action, particularly during the taking-hold stage. Turnaround managers generally start with a larger power base than their non-turnaround counterparts, because of the urgency, and face less rivalry and resentment from key employees who might have seen themselves as candidates for the job.
Conclusion

Of the many transitions that managers make, taking charge of a new assignment is one of the most important. From a corporation’s point of view, the ability to ensure effective executive successions is critical, not only for continuity but for instilling vitality and promoting change. Senior management and corporate staff can do much to influence how successfully managers take charge in executive successions: in how they choose managers, in the clarity of the going-in mandates they give them, and in how they manage the transitions.

The taking-charge transition is also critically important to managers who are taking on new executive assignments. A bad start in an important assignment is costly – in performance and in profoundly personal ways. It can stall a career, damage a track record, and inflict the worst pain of all – failing to do what one does best. The managers who fail pay dearly in disappointment and frustration, and in the self-questioning and disorientation they experience as a result of failing to take charge of an important executive assignment.

The taking-charge transition is also very personal. How a manager takes charge carries his or her own personal mark. Every manager is unique in background, skills and personal style. Individual situations and the organizations that comprise them also vary greatly, so if no two managers are alike, neither are any two situations.

The fact that every taking-charge situation is unique makes it a difficult process about which to generalize. The all-purpose general manager who can be slotted into just about any organization, function or industry exists only in management text books. While no one can offer definitive answers on a transition as multifaceted as the taking-charge process, we’ve described a number of the dynamics involved in the transition, and their implications for action. In the final analysis, however, the success of such transitions rests in the hands of managers themselves.

November 2008.

This article is an excerpt from The Dynamics of Taking Charge by John Gabarro.

You can order The Dynamics of Taking Charge from amazon.com

“Critical to the organizational work at this stage is assessing key people – their relative competencies, strengths, and weaknesses.”