



# Enabling performance in leaders during their transition into a new role

*Ph.D. Research by Ty Wiggins*

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## RESEARCH OVERVIEW -

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### Leadership Transitions - still a significant challenge

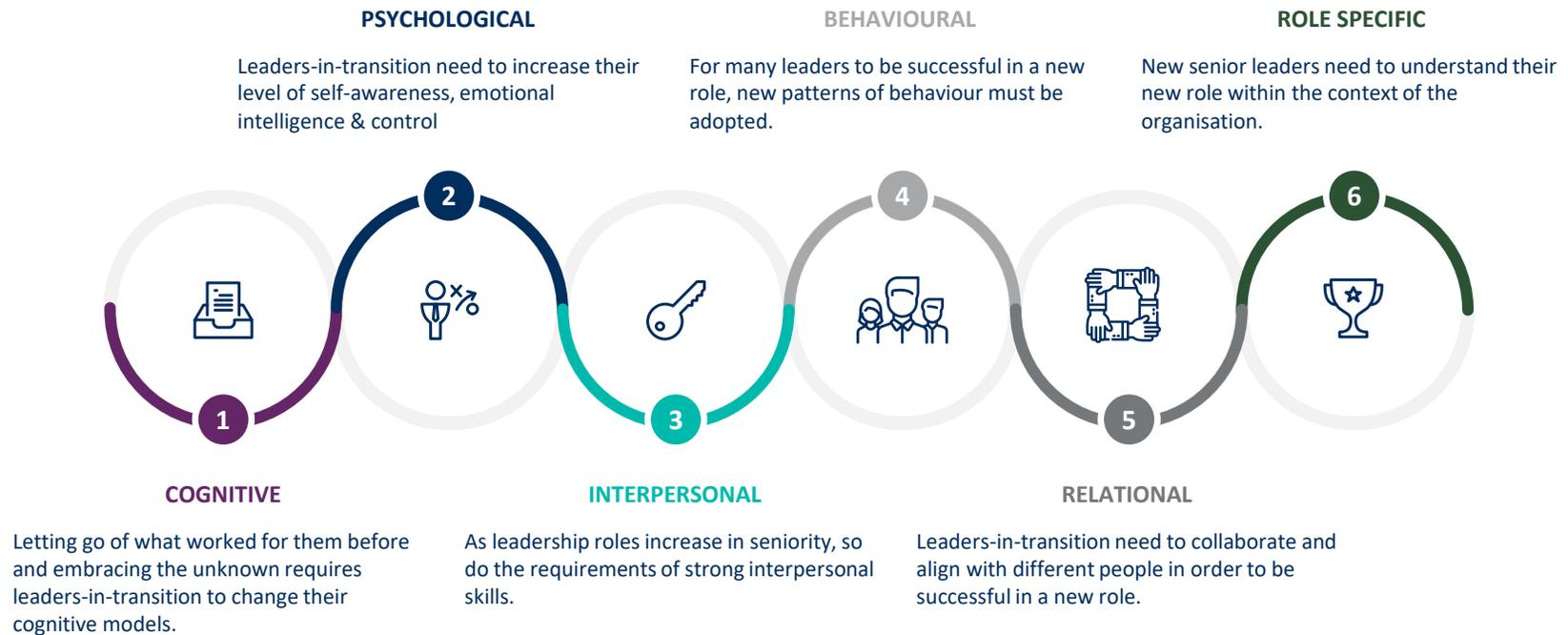
In the first study of its kind, the research qualitatively explored leadership transitions in the Australasian business community, specifically the aspects that promote or inhibit success during a leader's transition. This research examined how leaders and organisations typically measured success during (and post) the transition period and the impact that a leader's understanding of the organisations' strategy had on the new leaders' performance during the transition.

Consistent across the research is a wide acceptance of the risks and challenges leaders face when assuming new roles. Yet in most organisations there is a real lack of effort to mitigate these risks. The research also revealed that the greatest opportunity for leadership growth occurs during times of change. For many leaders, their transition into a new role provided this change. Consistent with US and UK studies, the amount of leaders who derail, struggle and emerge badly bruised is well past 50%.

*\*Research completed 2018*

# Leaders cannot succeed in their transitions if they do not acknowledge the challenges and make the necessary adjustments

## Areas of Challenge in Leadership Transitions



# Learning the culture & politics of a new organisation is still the primary challenge a leader faces, having a strong bearing on the leaders' credibility

## Key Findings – Details (1 of 4)



### Leaders promote, organisations inhibit

The participants had the view that the leader could do more to promote transition success and the organisation more to inhibit it. The majority of promoters were actions and approaches for which the leader has responsibility. Limited promoters were attributed to the organisation. Ultimately, the greatest number of interventions and actions that lead to success are made by the leaders themselves.

### Functional Bias

One clear inhibitor to transition success was a lack of multi-functional experience, or a functional bias towards their specific skill set. The lack of functional experience is an ignorance on how the other functions operate and deliver results whereas a bias is where the leader favours a function over others, typically the one matching their skill set and training. When leaders were given responsibility for other functions where they lacked understanding or possessed a bias, it proved difficult and inhibited their performance during the transition.



### Navigating the culture – biggest inhibitor

Learning, understanding and navigating the culture is highlighted as the major challenge a leader faces when they are transitioning into a new organisation. Learning the nuances of the organisation is critical for an externally recruited leader to demonstrate fit, to begin making decisions and taking action. However this is not just a challenge for externally recruited leaders. Several of the internally promoted leaders in the research noted that changes in the culture between the different hierarchy levels created similar challenges for their transition.



### Fail to plan, plan to fail

Using a transition plan is a significant promoter in transition success, even if they are completed at a basic level. This view is held by both the leaders and the organisations. Transition plans give the leader structure, task direction, prioritisation and deliverables. All of which increase the level of confidence that the leader is achieving. Externally recruited leaders were twice as likely to use a transition plan than internally promoted leaders.

# The responsibility within the organisation of the leaders' successful integration falls heavily on the direct manager.

## Key Findings – Details (2 of 4)



### The Boss

**The responsibility within the organisation of the leaders' successful integration falls heavily on the direct manager.** In examples where the manager acted as a promoter, they would demonstrate support, patience, promote the leader across that organisation, freely give their time, access to information and a degree of freedom. When they acted as an inhibitor to success, the manager was more inclined to abandon the leader, be unavailable, controlling and in some cases, restrict the leader's ability to access key stakeholders.



### Plug the knowledge gaps

**A common inhibitor was the knowledge gap leaders experience when they take on a new role.** The gaps leaders found most challenging during transitions were generally in regard to the technical aspects of the role / industry (or the non-transferrable skills). The research supported that an understanding of the industry is considered a positive influence on transition success by the leaders and organisations.



### Team – double sided coin

**For many of the leaders, their team was both a strong promoter and inhibitor of success.** The activities that promote success include acceptance of the new leader, supporting what the leader is attempting to achieve and sharing detailed knowledge to assist the leader to understand the business and culture quickly. Conversely, teams that are underperforming, have poor reputations, poor relationships with other areas of the business or are passive aggressive, can significantly inhibit the new leaders' success.



### Get the right people on the bus - fast

**The vast majority of the leaders commented that they would make the changes to their team earlier if they had this specific transition again.** In several of the cases, the leaders felt that they had made the correct assessments of the staff early and that, either through their hesitation to act or the organisational hurdles to make staff changes, they had left unsuitable people in their team too long. The primary impact of this was that the leader did not perform as early, or as well, as they and the organisation expected.

**Without clarity, a new leader will struggle to make assessments and decisions with confidence. Failing to feel or display confidence can have a negative effect on the leaders' perception of themselves & the organisations' perception of them.**

### Key Findings – Details (3 of 4)



#### Clarity breeds confidence

A very common & significant inhibitor is **ambiguity, or a lack of clarity, around the role, responsibilities, authority, scope & performance expectations.** The efforts of new leaders to understand the business and its people quickly is hampered where there is a lack of clarity. Leaders commented that it regularly took months for them to truly understand the extent of the role & what was expected of them. Without clarity, a new leader will struggle to make assessments and decisions with confidence. Failing to feel or display confidence can have a negative effect on the leaders' perception of themselves and others' perception of them within the organisation



#### What gets measured gets managed & supported

The study confirmed there are very few **formal measures for performance during the transition.** The majority of the measurements that are utilised occur post transition and are often simply related to retention. Largely there is a lack of structure around measurements for leaders in transition. There is no adjustment for the transition period, with most organisations using the general role performance measures. The research indicated that organisations have different expectations from leaders during, and post, the transition. These expectations should be articulated in terms of specific performance measures for the transition period.



#### Engaging stakeholders

Stakeholder management is a key performance criterion for leaders. So **identifying who they are early, seeking to understand what is important to them and establishing good working relationships was seen as a pathway to transition success.** Better stakeholder engagement was a popular response in terms of what leaders would change about their transition. This challenge of stakeholder engagement is greater for externally recruited leaders who lack the understanding of who the key stakeholders are, who holds the power and influence and because they have no established relationship with these key people.

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# Leaders are wary of who they can access early for objective and ‘safe’ support within the organisation.

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## Key Findings – Details (4 of 4)

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### Gender Differences

**There were only subtle differences between the genders in the promoters and inhibitors that impacted leaders-in-transition.** Female leaders were twice as likely to use a transition plan and were less likely to list their direct manager as a promoter than male leaders. It was also observed that when the leaders were asked about how effective they felt after three months, female leaders rated themselves lower at an average of 46% effective, compared to their male counterparts who averaged 62%. It is a potential area of further research exploring how male and female leaders assess their effectiveness during and post transition, and in leadership roles generally.

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### External Support

**Another popular promoter was access to external support during the transition to help the leader manage the challenges of the transition better.** The support mentioned included coaches, mentors, past colleagues, friends and family. The participants felt that there were areas of doubt, ambiguity, understanding and action, that were well suited to assistance from someone external to the organisation. Not understanding the business, and feeling uncertain of who they could confidently talk with, made it difficult for some of the leaders interviewed to access advice and counsel. Many felt that this gap was best filled via external support.

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# Key Findings – Rethinking Executive Onboarding

**The purpose of onboarding is not to make great leaders but rather to make great leaders for a particular organisation.**



## To Onboard or Not to Onboard

In the majority of transitions discussed in the research there was no onboarding process, and where there was, it was poorly delivered failing to meet the expectations of the leader. This created a disappointing start for a leader joining the new organisation. The recruitment process has often poorly communicated the realities of the role and/or organisation. The disconnect appears to be in how the leader and the organisation define the requirements of onboarding. Organisations build competent orientation and induction programs, but these programs are not sufficient to meet the needs of leaders and senior executives. This research clearly identifies the lack of onboarding programs for leaders as a significant inhibitor to transition success.

### EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING IS NOT DONE WELL

**70% of the organisations studied in this research had no formal onboarding process for their senior leaders. Of the ones that had a formal process, only 35% were rated as effective.**

Surprising, considering that research has shown that organisations with effective onboarding programs have 2.5 times more revenue growth and 1.9 times greater profit margin than those without (BCG) and new leaders who achieve full productivity two months quicker than those who do not (TI). For the leaders in this research, the lack of an onboarding program or any structured transition support was a major disappointment and caused many of them to second guess their decision to join the organisation.

### MORE THAN ORIENTATION OR INDUCTION

**Orientation and induction is not onboarding. As one senior leader stated, “if it contains a section on where the bathrooms are then it is not onboarding”.**

Onboarding is a process designed to help leaders learn the behaviours, skills and knowledge to succeed in their new organisation. It acts like an insurance policy for the organisation against executive derailment. Executive onboarding should be a distinct process to general employee onboarding, Onboarding programs are designed to address the critical areas of weaknesses for leaders, align their leadership style with the culture of the business, help develop effective relationships and optimise the most desirable skills for their new role.

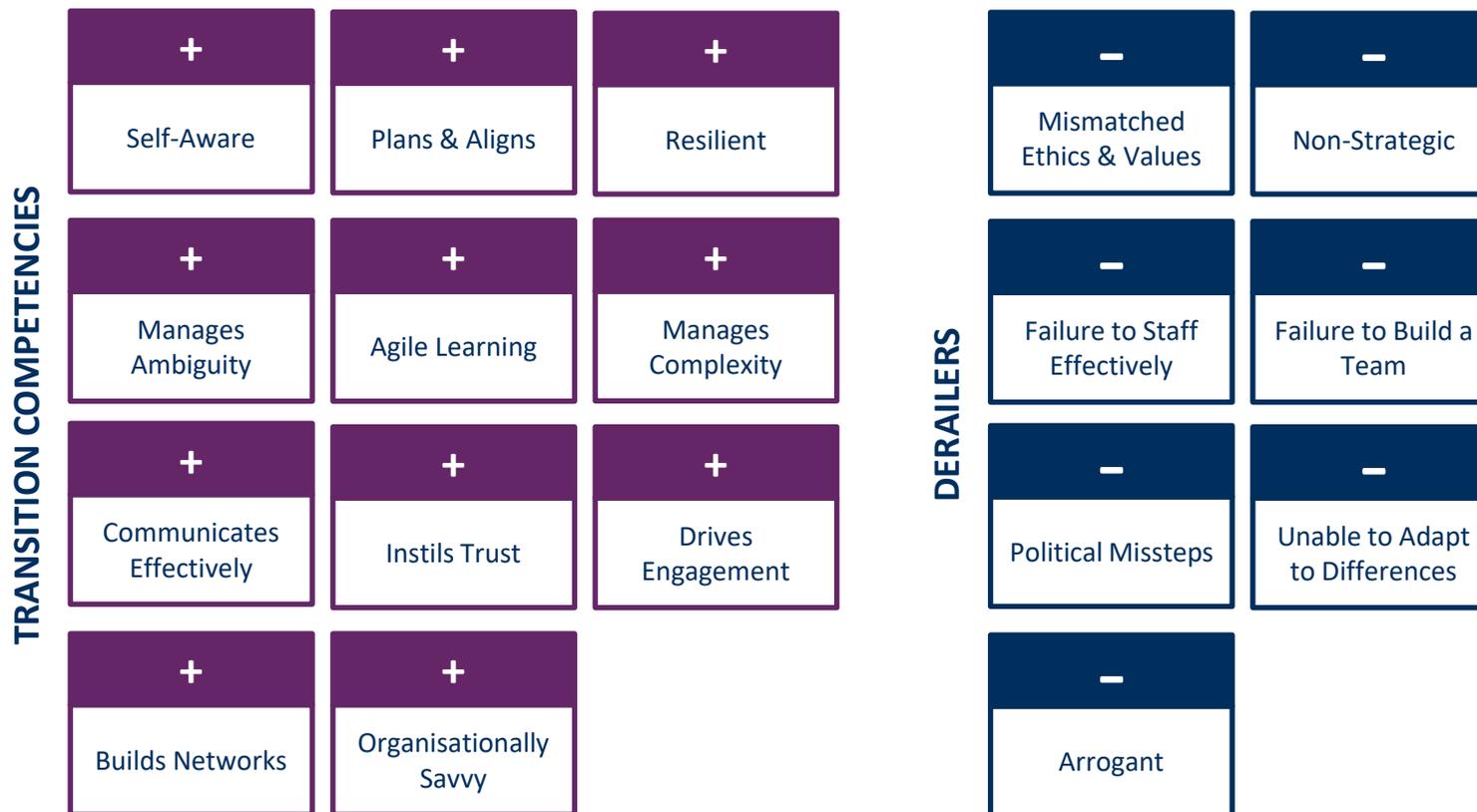
### ONBOARDING SHOULD DELIVER THE FOLLOWING

**Executive onboarding has several super and subordinate goals based around the integration and socialisation of the new leader.**

These include increasing a leader’s understanding of the role demands, avoiding opportunities for the leader to make mistakes and decreasing time to productivity. It should also include reducing the chance of derailment, mitigating the risks of terminations and the resulting costs of replacement. Onboarding also helps leaders build alliances with their teams, helps the leader develop a sense of belonging and provides the leader with support and feedback during the transition period.

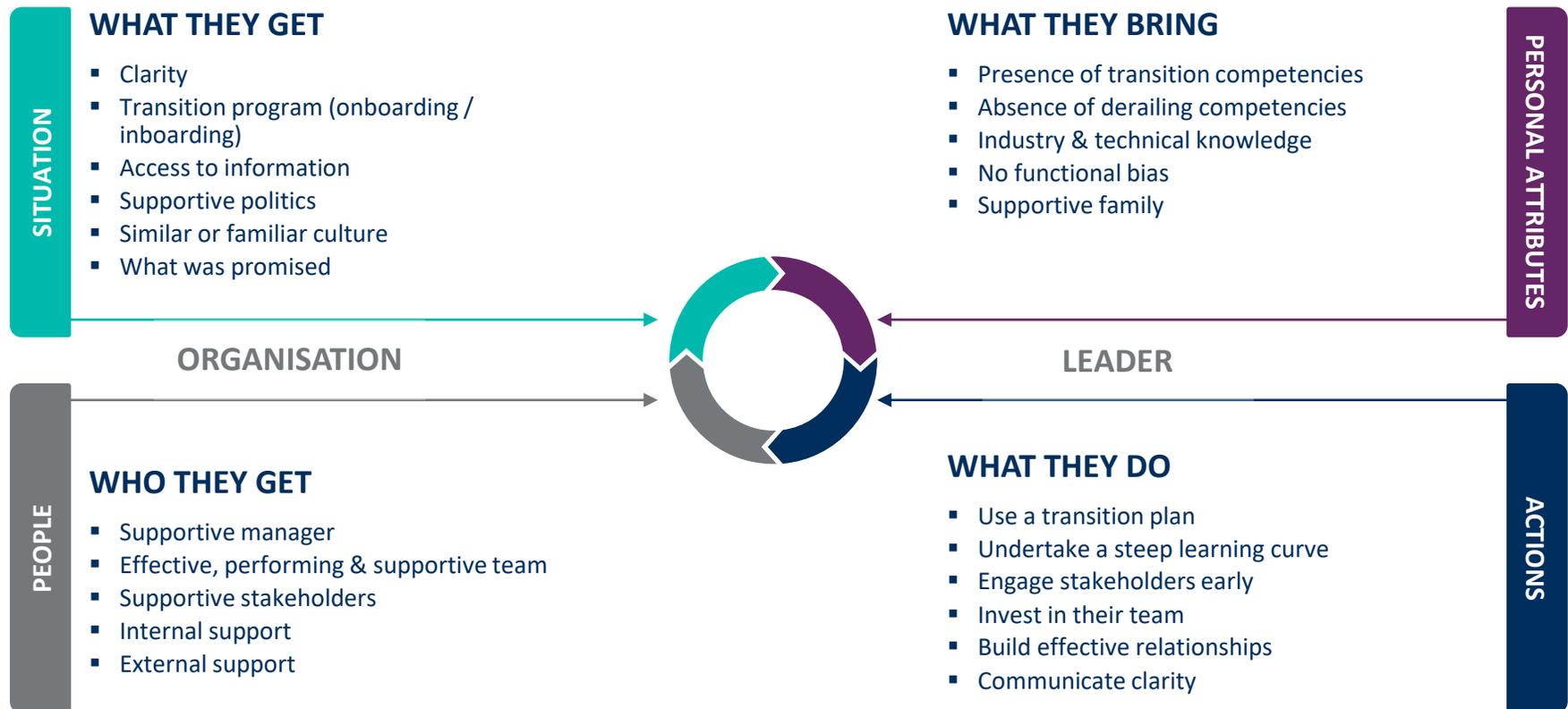
# Transition Competencies & Derailers

Leaders with the presence of these transition competencies, and the absence of the derailing competencies are far more likely to be more successful in their leadership transitions.



# Ideal Transition Model

Based on the list of promoters and inhibitors, the following is a model of an ideal transition. The model categorises all of the promoters and inhibitors into four categories: what they get, who they get, what they bring and what they do. All four categories are dependent on each other, and must work in concert for the leadership transition to be best practice. The model is divided into two areas: the organisation (what they get and who they get) and the leader (what they bring and what they do). The figure below shows the four areas, listing the key aspects that would make a transition best practice based on the research.



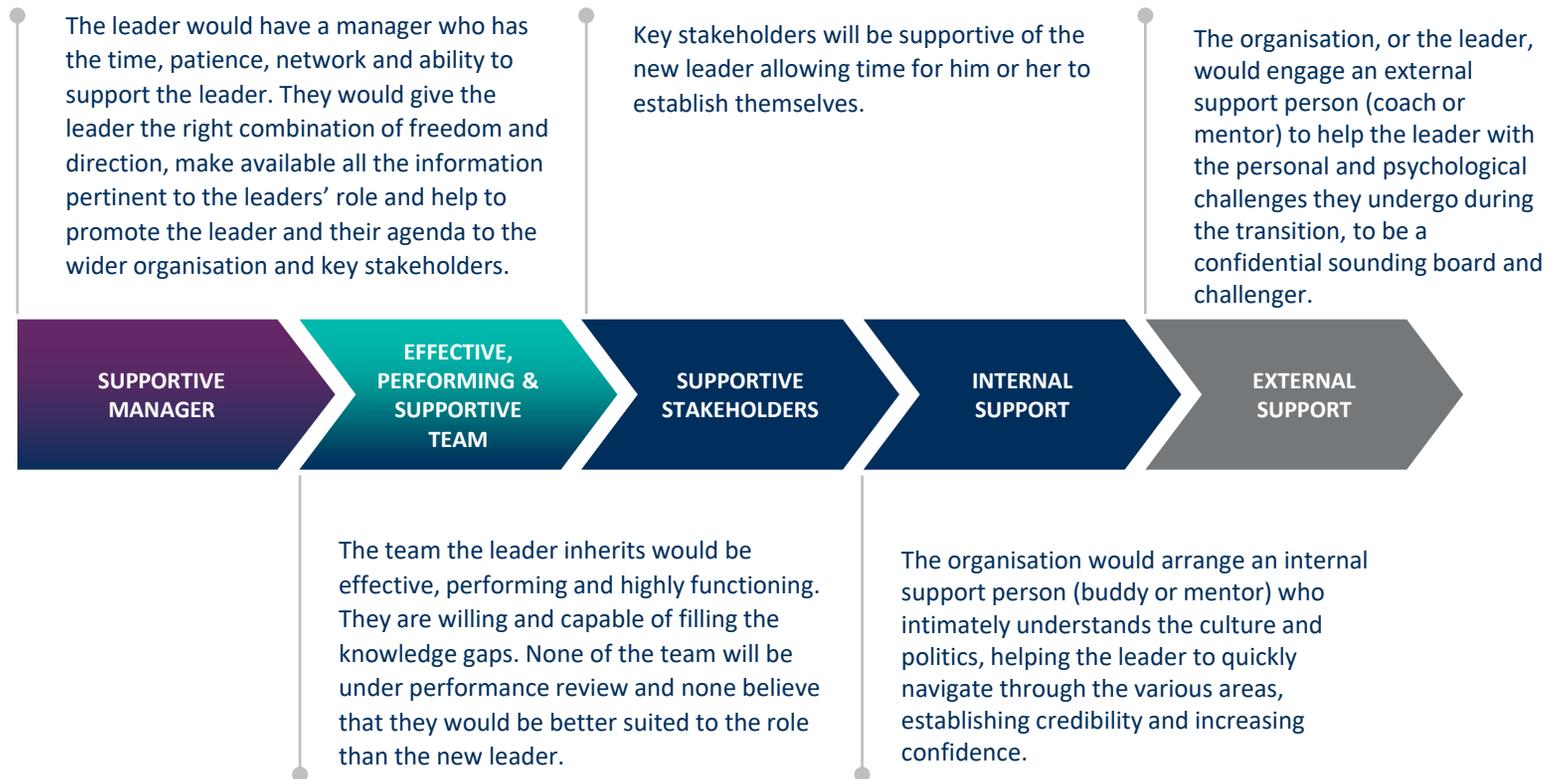
# What They Get

When a leader assumes a new role, there are certain aspects that form the general situation they encounter. The participants identified some of these aspects as promoters of their transition success.



# Who They Get

**A leader's relationship with the key stakeholders across the business is important for their success. When leaders assume new roles, they often experience changes in these relationships. How effectively the leader can establish and develop these relationships will have a strong bearing on their short and long-term success.**



# What They Bring

Many of the participants associated certain personal attributes as either promoters or enablers to success during the transition. These personal attributes are typically characteristics, personality traits or experiences that the participant felt aided the leader or themselves early.



# What They Do

As part of the ideal transition model, these are decisions and actions the leader undertook during the transition that were viewed as promoting early success.



# Transition Tools

## The research findings led to the generation of two tools that may assist organisations better manage their executive onboarding and leadership transitions.

This model highlights the key factors from the research that leaders and organisations should endeavour to reduce, remove, increase and introduce to improve the likelihood of success in their leadership transitions.

Reduce	Increase
Which factors should you reduce to improve your leadership transitions	Which factors should you increase to improve your leadership transitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reliance on the direct manager as primary transition support</li> <li>Conditions that lead to functional bias</li> <li>Restrictions for dealing with poor performers early</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarity of role, responsibilities, accountabilities, &amp; strategy</li> <li>Use of transition plan</li> <li>Access to stakeholders</li> <li>Access to internal &amp; external support</li> </ul>
Remove	Introduce
Which factors should you remove to improve your leadership transition	Which factors should you introduce to improve your leadership transitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure on leaders to act early in their transition</li> <li>Belief that induction or orientation equals onboarding</li> <li>Sink or swim attitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structured onboarding &amp; inboarding program designed for leaders</li> <li>Separate success measures for the transition period</li> </ul>

This tool is best used as part of an audit or review process on an organisation's executive onboarding program and leadership transition support procedures.

The research identified two key criteria that strongly influenced the potential success of a leadership transition: change in skills and change in culture.

Change in Skills	Significant Change	High 7	High 8	Extreme 9
	Moderate Change	Medium 4	Medium 5	High 6
	Current Skills	Low 1	Medium 2	High 3
		Existing Organisation	Similar Org/Industry	Different Org Industry/Country
<b>Change in Culture</b>				

This tool should be used as a three-way discussion between the incoming leader, the direct manager and HR. It helps to identify and agree high risk transitions, so the organisation can deploy appropriate support.