The Structure of Role Transition: A Phenomenological Study of Successful Executives from Five Countries

Sheri S. Bebb
Kimberly-Clark Corporation

Previous studies exploring how leaders make successful promotion transitions overlooked the turn from mid-level to functional management. Little research exists that describes this transition from the experience of successful executives. The goal of the present study was to examine the essential structure of managerial role transition. This article discusses the transition strategies of successful executives from multiple countries who work in a Fortune 20 global technology corporation. Drawing upon previously untested models and conducting qualitative research the writer argues that leader effectiveness in making the transition into executive management requires shifts in four domains: cognitive, relational, behavioral, and role perspective. Within and pertaining to each transitional domain, transitional leaders combine four approaches: releasing, learning, adapting, and adjusting. The researcher provides a testable theory and model of managerial role transition.

Despite ongoing interest in leadership development (Charan & Colvin, 1999; Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Council, 1997; Drotter, 2002; Fernandez-Araoz, 2001; Rothwell, 1994; Sessa & Taylor, 2000; Treverton & Bikson, 2003) and the potential risks and benefits to companies and investors, researchers know little about how leaders develop as they ascend organizational hierarchies. Charan et al. and Kaiser and Craig (2004) claimed that the failure of leaders often results from failing to effectively "turn the corner" at critical transitions in their career. Mahler (1986) identified four critical career transition points as manager's advance into higher-level management positions. Leaders progress through a series of job roles, beginning with managing self, moving to managing others, being a functional manager, and then moving on to a business manager, moving through increased levels of management responsibility (Charan et al.; Mahler, 1986). At each ascending level, management positions require particular focus, moving from short-term, tactical deliverables, to strategic, long-term horizons, with more focus on the external environment and cross-enterprise management (Kotter, 1982a; Kraut, Pedigo, McKenna, & Dunnette, 1989). Failure to make these shifts can prevent success at higher levels.

The research focused on the leadership transition from manager-of-managers to functional manager. The phenomenon explored was the essential structure that contributes to a

person making this career transition successfully. The functional manager level was chosen because it is a critical turn within the progression to becoming a senior executive (Charan et al., 2001) and there is little research about this transition. While some research has been conducted on the transition of individual contributor to manager (Hill, 2003) and from mid-level manager to general manager (Kotter, 1982b), very little research exists about the transition to a functional manager level. Kaiser and Craig (2004) attributed the lack of success in transitioning leaders to the next level: (a) to a lack of understanding of the nature of level differences, (b) to the fact that promotional decisions are usually made on the basis of past performance, (c) to the reported experience that individuals receive little support during transitions, and (d) to the finding that strengths can become weaknesses over time, causing people's careers to derail (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1989). A paucity of theories and models exists concerning how managers make the transition to functional manager. To fill the gap, this article extends previous leadership frameworks by presenting a theory to explain and model to show how managers navigate the turn between two important roles.

This article focuses on the construct of transition in the form of promotion, which, according to Mahler (1986), creates a *career crossroads*. Mahler defined *crossroad* as "a change in position which requires a drastic change in behavior" (p. 257) and that a significant turn must be made by the newly promoted leader in order to succeed at the higher-level role. Mahler identified four career crossroads, or critical turns, from one level of contribution to a higher level in a large decentralized organization. According to Charan et al. (2001), "Each passage represents a major change in job requirements that translates to new skill requirements, new time horizons and applications, and new work values" (p. 7), referred to as the leadership pipeline (TLP). The TLP framework was used in this study because it clearly delineates the roles associated with each level of the management hierarchy (Charan et al.).

Leadership Ascendance

In large organizations, several levels of management hierarchy exist through which individuals may ascend. Career advancement for individuals who want to develop into senior-level managers is usually established by progressively increased responsibilities along the hierarchy (Mahler, 1986). At the individual contributor level, the focus is on competence, intelligence, organizing skills, and ability to perform and achieve results on individual or team-based tasks.

At the first turn in the management hierarchy (Charan et al., 2001), competent individual contributors move to front-line management, requiring a shift in focus from individual performance to leading through others. The manager must focus on placing people in jobs, planning and assigning work, and motivating and coaching direct reports (Hill, 2003). The second turn involves moving from managing individual contributors to managing managers, requiring an additional shift in thinking and focus to empowering and coaching first-level managers. The third turn shifts from managing managers to taking on the role of functional manager, requiring an effective leader to value work outside his/her specific experience area and achieve outcomes through two levels of management. A functional manager is usually a member of a business team and reports to a general manager or a business manager (Charan et al.). At this level, a manager must move to a broad, long-term, strategic perspective. The fourth turn, from functional manager to business manager, requires a manager to integrate multiple functions and to determine a suitable business model to create revenue growth (Charan et al.). Kotter (1982b)

argued that the general manager role requires strategic focus in the midst of ambiguity and the ability to achieve outcomes through a large group of people without direct control over them. The fifth turn, from business manager to group manager, requires a leader to run multiple businesses (Charan et al.). In the last turn, from group manager to enterprise manager, a leader becomes a long-term strategic thinker and the leader of the entire company, linking to external constituencies such as board members and shareholders (Charan et al.). For a functional career path, such as Human Resources or Information Technology, the framework remains the same for the first three turns but changes for leaders on the turn from functional manager to business manager; instead of moving to a "business manager" role, leaders move to a group functional manager level.
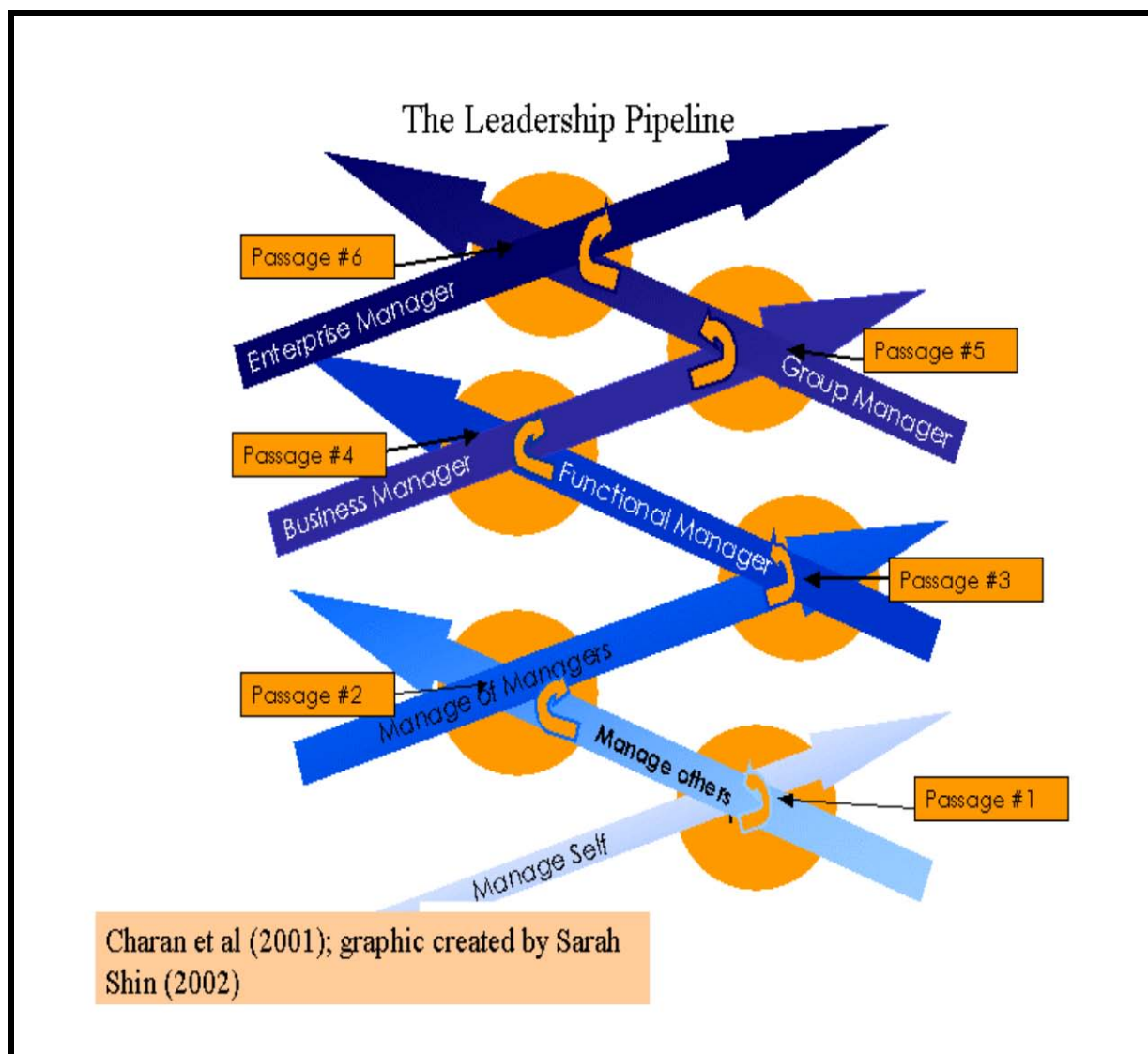

Figure 1. The leadership pipeline.

In many companies, the functional manager level is the beginning of an executive hierarchy, in which the leader is seen as a part of a leadership cadre directing the future of the organization (Charan et al., 2001). Functional managers typically have an expanded area of responsibility and budget, often with a multi-area focus. At this level, the manager must focus on leading managers of managers and on creating a strategic direction (Charan et al.; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). The functional management role has increased emphasis on negotiating beyond boundaries, dealing in a political environment, and focusing on the business strategies as opposed to functional strategies. Lombardo and Eichinger (2002) presented differentiated and detailed competencies for managers and executives based on their studies of 300 leaders; the executive competencies are similar to the description of the functional manager role in Charan et al.'s work. They include managing vision and purpose, possessing business acumen, dealing with ambiguity, being political savvy, being comfortable around higher management, managing through systems, and driving for results (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002).

Leader Transition

While there is abundant literature describing the characteristics of effective leaders, (Bennis, 1984, 1989; Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996; McCall, 1998a), there is less research on the nature of the transitions leaders experience as they ascend the leadership hierarchy. A few studies exist on managerial transitions with differing research foci. Hill's (2003) work profiled people during their first year as manager, experiencing the career transition moving from individual contributor to first-level manager. Lombardo and Eichinger (2002) profiled individual contributors, managers, and executives and developed a competency model. However, these studies did not track the specific transition between the levels studied, nor did they examine how leaders made the transition successfully from their perspective.

Hyatt (1990) conducted a study of people undergoing a career change and found that people progressed through a series of stages. This sequence involved a trigger event, a downtrend (being stuck), and two stages involving defining oneself and one's path, followed by starting over. Gabarro's (1987) study of ascending general managers and functional managers focused on the construct of *taking charge* which is defined as the process by which a manager establishes mastery and influence in a new assignment. Gabarro's study focused on the segments of work that a new general manager addresses in a sequence, rather than the adaptations of leaders to higher roles.

Based on anecdotal evidence, Mahler (1986) and Charan et al. (2001) asserted that a major promotion creates a shift in job requirements, which translate into changes for the leader in skill requirements, time horizons, and work values. Neither specified what it is that enables individuals to navigate such a transition successfully. Kotter (1982a) conducted an in-depth study of general managers without studying other transitional aspects such as attitudinal and behavior shifts. While each study adds to the extant literature, little research exists that explains the transition from manager-of-manager to functional manager, and no research was found that identifies the essential structure of change that may contribute to a successful transition to functional management.

Methodology

A phenomenological case study (Gummesson, 2000) was used to explore the essential structure of managerial transition (Charan et al., 2001; Drotter, 2002; Bebb, 2004) from manager-of-managers to functional managers within a global, Fortune 20, high technology organization. The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding and describing human experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gummesson). Phenomena can be understood in terms of its figure and ground relationship within various or discrete contexts (Moustakis, 1994). The participants' stories of experience, rather than observed behaviors, are the data collected (Bogdan & Biklen). From a hermeneutic analysis of the interviews, themes emerge of participants' experiences. Themes begin to emerge after six or seven interviews have been subjected to detailed interpretive analysis (Colaizzi, 1978). Analysis was halted when no new themes emerged.

Sample

Fourteen functional managers were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) from a population of 138 exceptionally performing functional managers without restriction to global location, gender, race, age, or any other demographic characteristic (Table 1).

Table 1: Total Eligible Candidate Population

Region (in HRMS system)	Number eligible	%	Gender	Number eligible	%
Americas	104	75.4	Male	119	86
Europe and Mid-East	28	20.3	Female	19	14
Asia-Pacific	6	4.3			
Total	138	100		138	100

Participants were from Germany, France, Peru, Italy, and the United States. The ethnicities of the participants were European, Euro-American, Latin-American, and Native American. Twelve were male and two female, and they ranged in age from 36-55. Fifty-seven percent of participants had been functional managers for 1-5 years, 29% had been functional managers for 6-10 years, and 14% of participants had been functional managers 11-15 years. For several participants, English was a second language. Managerial levels of the participating organization were charted to the appropriate levels on the leadership pipeline (Charan et al., 2001). Table 2 presents the demographic data of the participants.

Table 2: Participant Demographics (*N* = 14)

Demographics	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	12	86
Female	2	14
Years as Functional Manager		
1-5	8	57
6-10	4	29
11-15	2	14
English as a Second Language		
Yes	6	43
No	8	57
Age		
36-45	10	71
46-55	4	29
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	6	43
European or European Caucasian	5	36
African American	1	7
Native American	1	7
Other	1	7
Country of Origin		
United States	8	57
Germany	2	14
France	2	14
Peru	1	7
Italy	1	7
Region (in HRMS system)		
Americas	3	21
Europe and Middle East	11	79

Note. All values other than gender were self-reported by participants.

Six vice presidents were asked to identify exceptional performers based on the criteria (Patton, 2002) of exceptional performance as defined and established by Charan et al. (2001) and by their performance rating. The criteria for exceptional performance was based on Charan et al.'s definition of exceptional performance. The criteria included:

1. Results: consistently exceeded operating, technical and professional results requirements
2. Management effectiveness: effectively planned, organized and controlled area of responsibility and communicated to required parties
3. Leadership and relationships: demonstrated excellent leadership ability, including establishing strategic direction, enabling direct reports, and building constructive working relationships with many constituencies
4. Value: their manager would fight to keep this person, rehire them, and consider them for the toughest assignments. (p. 149)

To address the reliability of the identification of exceptional candidates, at least two of the vice presidents had to agree that a person was an exceptional performer in order for the participant to be included in the study (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). These participants were confirmed by being rated at one of the top two rating levels in each of two years of company management performance ratings (Mohrman & Mohrman, 1998) to ensure that they were considered the highest-performing functional managers. Nominated employees who only scored highly in performance ratings in one of two years, or were only nominated by one vice president, were not included in the final participant list.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure was semi-structured, behavior-based, in-depth interviews conducted onsite, audio taped, and transcribed by an independent transcriber (Maxwell, 1996). The interview format involved asking direct questions and interaction between investigator and participant (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991), allowing both relevant and comparable responses and fuller replies (Bradburn, 1983) producing more self-revelations by participants. The Mahler and Gaines (1983) and Drotter (2002) interview protocols, as well as findings from the literature, formed the basis for the Management Transition Interview (MTI) (Bebb, 2004) developed and used in this study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began after each interview was completed, and the process was replicated throughout the data collection. The process included listening to the recordings and reading the interview notes from which themes and observations were noted (Symon & Cassell, 1998). From this output, a summary for each participant with observations was generated (Fetterman, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984), and then a preliminary coding scheme was developed.

After coding each interview, an analysis of each question for all 14 participants was completed, then responses were categorized across each question, and finally the frequency of answers was noted. After completing the coding of each question, the categories or themes that had the highest frequency of answers for each question were determined (Ely, 1991). After identifying the strongest themes for each question, the underlying themes that ran across all questions were determined by their highest frequency (meta-level) and labeled. Then the themes were segmented and a structural pattern of factors emerged from the participants' self-reports of the job shifts and their adjustments. The factors included: (a) preparation for the new executive role, (b) awareness of work requirement changes, (c) shifts in focus and execution, and (d) shifts in approaches and attitudes.

To provide a testable framework of the transition domain associated with the managerial transition into executive level, I developed the transition domain model (Table 3) to represent the multi-factor approach to their successful transition. From the data analysis, the participants seemed to transition along four domains: cognitive, relational, behavioral, and role perspective, as they moved to the (executive) functional manager role.

Table 3: Transition Approaches

Domain	Releasing	Learning	Adapting	Adjusting
Cognitive	Relinquishing old assumptions	Inquiring and learning	Forming new cognitive models	Checking and verifying
Behavioral	Realizing deficiencies	Experimenting with new behaviors	Requesting feedback	Consciously improving
Relational	Giving up old biases	Valuing different perspectives	Forming partnerships that build agreements	Checking in with network
Role perspective	Realizing new work requirements; giving up familiar work	Taking on new work	Consciously managing time and priorities to make time for new work	Correcting

Table 3 depicts the four domains and illustrates how the functional managers shifted (their approaches) on these four levels simultaneously. For instance, in the cognitive shifts, participants realized that the work required them to think differently. It challenged their previously held assumptions and required replacing them with new beliefs. In the relational domain, participants realized that they had to align with peers with whom they had previously opposed, in order to form alignments to accomplish their objectives. In the behavioral domain, the participants practiced new skills that were required, such as presenting to large audiences. In the role perspective shifts, the functional managers changed the amount of time they spent on different types of work, reducing the time managing tactical aspects, and increasing their time on strategic planning. Each of the approaches used by the participating managers is interesting and significant. The fact that participants combined approaches and used them at different times indicates a strategic ability to select approaches situationally.

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the essential structure of managerial transition from the experience of successful functional managers. Analysis of interviews revealed that the essence of the transition includes a four domain, four-approach structural schema. The schema demonstrates the complexity of each person's process as she/he navigated the transition from manager-of-manager to functional manager. All participants made shifts in each domain, and all used each of the four approaches as part of the transition into the higher-level role. From the data analysis, the participants seemed to transition on four domains: cognitive, behavioral, relational, and role expectation, as they moved to the functional manager role. Within and pertaining to each transitional domain, the transitional manager used combinations of four approaches: releasing, learning, adapting, and adjusting. To provide a better frame of the transition domain, the researcher developed the transition domains model. Table 3

shows the four transition domains and four transition approaches used by the transitional manager ascending to functional manager

The experience of navigating the transition between the manager-of-manager and functional manager role presents significant challenges for promoted leaders. To meet the challenges, the participants in this study appear to have succeeded by employing a multidimensional, multi-approach strategy. The combination and sophistication of approaches participants used to make these shifts is remarkable in their complexity. The results indicate that successful leaders use techniques indicated by several different models simultaneously. They demonstrated self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), an openness to feedback, reporting an ability to reflect on their current and desired performance, and an ability to adjust over time (Bennis, 1989; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). They demonstrated numerous learning styles, including learning from experience, from observing others, and from trial and error (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Risk taking, willingness to fail, performing badly at first and improving over time, and adjusting to feedback, allowed these leaders to learn the new skills required at the executive level.

All of the participants (100%) indicated that what prepared them for the functional manager role were specific challenging assignments they had assumed or a series of different job experiences prior to their current position. Moreover, all the participants advised people who aspired to become executives to take the most challenging jobs so that they would be forced to adapt.

> When you're making transitions from manager to manager-of-managers to functional manager, you can't be afraid to take the tough assignments. You need to step up to the jobs that most people may not want because there's a high chance of failure just because people may not want to change or people might not be open to particular ways of thinking or to this particular change that's being recommended.

Dimension One: Cognitive

The first domain focuses on experiences that participants identified as being important cognitive shifts necessary in assuming the role of functional manager.

Approach 1.1: Releasing. Requirements of previous jobs compelled participants to create certain assumptions and cognitive models. Participants had to throw out old cognitive models, accelerate their learning curve, and adjust the boundaries of their learning context (cross business in nature, and large scale with urgent time pressures). Their new roles forced them into a new way of thinking.

Thirteen of 14 participants (93%) reported that one transition in mindset they made was from focusing on a smaller portion of the organization, such as their own organization or region, to a pan-company perspective. One hundred percent of participants reported that the focus of work had expanded significantly beyond their previous domain, which was a single IT asset, such as supply chain in a specific business or region, to a pan-company perspective and area of responsibility. Many gave examples of leading projects that were transforming work across the company, integrating organizations, and consolidating systems to have consistent cross-company approaches. The participants reported that the drivers for cross-business collaborating were corporate initiatives to link products and services, the need to provide integrated solutions to

customers, or the need to reduce costs. Participants reported they became focused on broader organizational problems, and their focus could no longer be just on their own organization.

The participants changed their understanding of the "playing field" they were operating in: previously it was only their domain, now they began redefining the area of responsibility to include the entire company and releasing previously held notions. One participant noted:

> At the functional manager level, the view of the universe, I look at the holistic system across the company. Viewing the GO or BCO (my organization) as a microcosm of the broader. What I've tried to do is instead of optimizing my little piece of the universe, is to realize it's a system, and try to understand the other dimensions, the other influences, what the other organizations need, and see if we can get together and work toward a common set of goals. . . . What I've tried to do as functional manager is more look at the entire ecosystem.

Approach 1.2: Learning. The one theme that emerged consistently through all of the participant interviews was that these functional managers had developed an open, flexible, inquiring approach to problems that allowed for a deeper understanding of complex situations. For example, one functional manager discussed an approach of entering new situations with an attitude of inquiry, trying to understand from others across multiple levels in the organization what their view of situations were, and learning from them before moving toward decisions. Another functional manager confirmed the importance of inquiring with other leaders about their needs, interests, and thinking on issues:

> If you want to create collaboration and trust, and you really want to hear what's on and you really want to figure out what's in somebody's head, you have to ask them. You have to ask them in a way that you really are sincere about hearing what they have to say. My approach has always been to do that in a, "Hey, I'm here to help you. What do you think we should do? What would you do if you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

Approach 1.3: Adapting. Another major transition that 12 out of 14 (86%) participants identified was the move to focus more on building business capabilities, as opposed to building technical capability. One said:

> The transition that I've had to make from being a manager to a functional manager is, I'm not the technical expert anymore. There's not a need for me to be as close to the business or to the problem or to the technology, but to allow the experts to bring me the data and for me to provide some sense of guidance to what it is they need.

Many also acknowledged having to shift consciously from their area of competence, their technical expertise, to a more business orientation: "You have to become more of a business manager. There's a transition in mindset where I had to be more engaged with business and business direction and less concerned about the technology and platform we were using." However, several leaders also noted that they had to stay current with the technical area in order to understand their team's direction and to be able to manage their team. Therefore, they had to balance their new business perspective with retaining at least some of their technical edge.

Approach 1.4: Adjusting. The functional managers talked about their acceptance of change, and all spoke about the need to make adjustments:

You just need to adapt. If you don't adapt, I don't think you're going to make it. If you agree and if you recognize that the change is everywhere, then you need to adapt your mental process, your perception, your focus, your philosophy, your belief. Because it's a new world. At some point, you have your own internal body and mind that is catching up with that, verifying, and adjusting.

Additionally, participants discussed the ever-increasing speed of change and the need to have an ability to adapt and adjust. One described the affect the merger had in shifting his thinking about change:

The business of the merger really forced me into a different mode of thinking. How could you be so comfortable with IT solutions, then a simple announcement on one Monday morning can completely change your whole IT architecture, structure, solution, culture, everything. How business now is the driver of everything.

Dimension Two: Behavioral

One interesting finding is that while developing the strategy for a particular area of IT (such as supply chain) was an important role for the IT functional manager, the participants reported that the development of strategy was not enough to be effective at this level. Participants said they needed to develop strategy and make sure their team delivered results. They had to combine strategy development with the execution of that strategy leading to the delivery of IT results. In order to bridge from strategy to implementation, the participants realized they needed a broad range of skills and began to realize their deficiencies. In doing so, they actively experimented with new behavior even when that meant taking risks. Part of the risk-taking was actively seeking feedback on performance from multiple perspectives.

Approach 2.1: Releasing. Participants said that self-awareness was a critical asset in their ability to shift. One said that accurate self-awareness was a key attribute in executive effectiveness, enabling a person to have an accurate perception of how his or her behavior was being perceived. Several of them mentioned recognizing a weakness and designing an action plan to address that area. Many told stories of how they realized something about themselves; being too task focused, not being assertive enough, and how they had to begin consciously to shift, working to change their behavior in order to be more effective. Their ability to assess accurately where they were currently performing relative to their goal allowed them to monitor their progress and keep adjusting and improving their behavior in specific targeted areas.

Approach 2.2: Learning. One way that participants said they shifted was by trying new approaches or learning by doing. Twelve out of 14 (86%) said they tried new things and analyzed what worked and what did not work. Many participants reported that they lacked effective presentation skills to speak to large audiences, as this skill had not been needed in their earlier manager-of-manager's role. They reported the need to improve their effectiveness in presenting to large groups and struggled to gain confidence and skill in this area. Many had to learn to design their messages carefully for employees and managers at different levels. Building and leading a successful organization also involved learning different approaches to engaging employees in the work of the organization, through personal relationships, managing by wandering around, and holding informal forums for talking with employees.

Approach 2.3: Adapting. Six (43%) of the participants mentioned mentors or coaches who helped them prepare for future roles. Four of them described in specific detail how mentors had taught them specific knowledge and had coached them on specific ineffective behaviors. Another supported the personal support that she received from a long-term mentor who had been influential for several years in her career. Several spoke of specific leaders who gave them feedback about a specific area of weakness. Proximity and exposure to senior leaders enabled participants to observe those leaders in a variety of situations: with customers, with other leaders, and in decision-making and communications sessions.

Another way the leaders shifted successfully to the functional manager job was by responding to feedback. Several discussed getting and responding to feedback and observing both the successes and mistakes of other leaders as ways they learned to shift their behavior. Some of this feedback came from their direct manager:

> In some cases, I think it was somebody clearly setting an expectation, by itself. An example is, working for [person A]. So [person A] has a reputation that, some people would say is deserved and some people wouldn't. But [person A] is very straightforward. So as I'm cruising along doing my work, he would come and say, "You're totally doing exactly the opposite of what I expect you to do." He was very clear. So that's how I learned I wasn't doing the right thing.

Approach 2.4: Adjusting. One of the behavioral shifts that seemed to require conscious attention and monitoring was in trusting others to do work that the manager-of-managers may have done him or herself before. One functional manager explained his shift in this area:

> You have to delegate. One hole you can fall into if you don't make it up to the functional manager level is you tend to try and take on everything yourself. Now you have six or seven managers to do that work that they should be doing. You've got to be careful not to get involved in everything too deep. There's a fine line there. Nor can you sit up in your functional manager chair and throne and say, "Well my managers are going to handle all this."

Study participants focused regular attention to monitor whether they were finding the right balance between leading and delegating, and it seemed to need their focus to be in what they considered an optimal zone.

Dimension Three: Relational

All participants (100%) agreed that they had to shift their focus to collaborate and align with other people in order to be successful in cross-business initiatives. In order to ensure the success of their teams and initiatives, the participants spent much more time than they had in their previous role aligning, or linking with people, their strategies that needed to build a greater willingness to understand opposing viewpoints, let go of old biases, form new partnerships, and verify with others.

Approach 3.1: Releasing. All participants (100%) agreed that they had to shift their focus to collaborate and align with other leaders in order to be successful in cross-business initiatives. The need to build alignment with cross-organization constituencies forced functional managers to focus more on their influence skills to build sponsorship with senior executives, partnerships with peers, and find common interests to move initiatives forward. Several participants explained

that they had to move out of the comfort zone of their technical competence and work on their relationship-building efforts, which for many, was not their strongest area. One described this shift in the following manner:

> So I would say in a manager-of-managers role my interactions, with the executive level, tended to be more status reporting and issue escalation, where at a functional manager level your interaction is more of a dialogue, and sort of thought sharing. It tends to be more of a two-way conversation.

They quickly learned that they needed to influence up in order to get projects and budgets approved, or to get sponsorship for key projects. One described the shift as follows:

> When you start to make the shift of functional manager, you realize that you have to also influence up. So if you're spending all of your time with people that are at your level or below you, versus spending some of your time with people that are at your level or above you, and are you able to influence? And if you're dealing with people that are above you, you have to show sensitivity, to know how to speak in their language, to influence them.

Approach 3.2: Learning. Nine out of 14 (64%) of the participants agreed that a main focus of work in the director job was to create alignment between often competing organization entities, including business units, departments, and cross-business initiative teams. Obstacles to getting work accomplished at the director level were based on a lack of agreement between the competing constituencies.

> I would say the biggest challenge at the functional manager level is alignment. It's very hard to align your plans, your people, your objectives in a complex world, because you have this multi-interest role. You cannot just stand up and say, "this is what we do and this is where we go." In a more complex environment, on a functional manager level, in a multi-business environment, this alignment is not there naturally. So it doesn't come naturally because you have these different interests. You're in a constant state of improvement.

Approach 3.3: Adapting. Another transition that these leaders made was to focus on leading the people in their organization to accomplish their objectives. The functional managers discussed different aspects of leading an entire organization and aligning it with the company's goals. The focus became much less on their contribution or their project team, but much more on building agreements across the organization.

In order to accomplish this, the functional managers spent more time working with and coaching their managers. They spent time trying to engage and retain the few critical leaders on their teams. They increased their focus on working through and coaching their managers, who are often managers-of-managers, and being less directly involved in the tactical work of individuals and teams.

Approach 3.4: Adjusting—this is more of a role or cognitive section. As IT functional managers they often began discussing future IT architectures and gaining agreement across the company. Sometimes this involved choosing the IT platform or software vendor that the company would use in a particular domain, a commitment that would determine the direction of an IT capability for many years to come. Participating in such collaborations required

experimentation and feedback. One participant discussed how a cross-boundary initiative came into being:

> My work for C___, for customer-to-cash work that was done, was a huge accomplishment. For the first time we were able to create a company-wide strategy and architecture around how we served customers. We created a governance process on the business side that paralleled that, which was not easy, given the company culture at the time. We all had to open up and really talk.

Taking the time and interest to participate in large teams that had many different viewpoints required additional patience, inquiry, and checking in with other task force members in order to ensure that all perspectives and needs were being addressed. Because of the attention and adjustment to members of the task force, a new company-wide strategy was approved and finally implemented.

Dimension Four: Role

Most of the findings related to the role requirements shift confirm previous theories (Charan et al., 2001; Gabarro, 1987; Kotter, 1982a; Mintzberg, 1979). To clarify the distinction between the manager-of-manager's role and the functional manager's role a work requirements table was created. In this table, various elements of the two roles are contrasted to illustrate the changing work requirements (see Table 4). In every domain, there are distinct differences illustrating the changes the functional managers were required to adapt to. This demonstrates that this leadership turn was not simply an amplification or extension of work previously done at the manager-of-manager's level, but instead required different work. Table 4 shows the difference in work requirements between manager-of-managers and functional managers in IT.

As the work requirements changed at the functional manager level, the participants shifted their work priorities. Dimension four focuses on what functional managers did differently at this level. In navigating the role requirement shifts, the functional managers shifted through releasing old cognitive models and behaviors, adopted an inquiring attitude, formed new cognitive models, self-assessed, and verified their performance.

Approach 4.1: Releasing. Nine out of the 14 (64%) functional managers mentioned the work at the functional manager level had much more emphasis on changing the status quo. Half of the participants stated that change management was a critical work focus at the director level. Participants stated that change management was a critical work focus at the functional manager level and understood that they had to release old ways:

> What's the most important task in my jobs as a functional manager has been around organizational change. The first thing you learn about change is that you have to move out of your own comfort zone with the past; then you can help others let go and move on.

Approach 4.2: Learning. The observation of these leaders was that the job requirements at the functional manager level forced them to think differently, broaden their view, take on new work, and manage themselves differently. Many discussed that what they experienced when they started their jobs as functional managers, they often felt they had the correct answer or were "right." However, because of their responsibilities, requiring them to work cross business and cross-boundary, they reported feeling compelled to rethink their assumptions about how to make things work:

> One thing I didn't talk about that was a big "aha" for me. Right about when I moved into a functional manager's role, I had to change my mindset that I was smarter than everybody else. There's this mindset, and I see a lot of my managers still have it, that "I know the way the work needs to be done around here and these other guys just don't seem to have a clue on what they're supposed to do or how they can be helpful." When I was in the infrastructure job, I had to embrace the rest of corporate. Typically, R&D [research and development] doesn't like IT and thinks they're stupid, the business always thinks anybody at corporate doesn't really have their feet on the ground or know really what needs to be done. And I needed to dismiss that.

Approach 4.3: Adapting. As the work requirements changed, the functional managers reported that they needed to adapt their work focus and priorities. It appears there is a one-for-one relationship between the eight major work requirements changes (Table 4) from the manager-of-managers' level to the functional manager level, and eight of the nine work shifts that these successful performing functional managers made. The participants had remarkable agreement on the nature of work changes and the need to adapt.

Twelve of the 14 (86%) participants stated that the work at the functional manager level had shifted toward strategy and vision setting, as opposed to the operational and tactical focus in the IT manager-of-managers' job. Many talked about developing company-wide IT or organization architectures and setting long-term direction both technically and organizationally. One participant described his experience:

> Over time, then, the role becomes more strategic. We can solve this "one-off" symptom, or we can understand the root cause and say, maybe we need a different strategy to fix this. Most of the jobs I've been in have been brought in to help fix something or improve something if it wasn't broken. So I have spent a lot of time developing a strategy, a vision, getting buy-in, using data in a way and presenting it in a way that maybe other people haven't looked at, which gives the company-wide picture.

As the work shifted to focus more on strategy development, participants reported the amount of time and energy they devoted to strategy increased at the functional manager level:

> You try to identify what your strategic issues are, who you have to work with, what the general obstacles are to get there. This defines to a degree who you need to work with, who you need to influence, what needs to happen, so that you can successfully reach what you're trying to achieve. You have to adjust your focus and attention and you have to check in with your stakeholders.

While functional managers agreed that a primary focus of their job was to develop strategies, many emphasized that even though they were spending a greater percentage of their time on strategy and strategic-level issues, they still needed to deliver results on projects managed within their organization. One described the range of adaptation this way:

> You are part of the strategy plan. You'd better understand your part of the industry, the strategic plan, the product roadmap of the manufacturing strategy, the marketing strategy, the customer strategy. You get exposed as well to being able to shift from, very high-level strategy discussion and process to a rational plan, so I mean it's a combination of getting exposed to [level] of processes or multi-functional manager and processes, but as well being able to fly from a very high level to very low level frequently, or transform the strategic issues into operational plans.

Table 4: Work Requirements

Category	Manager-of-Managers	Functional Manager
Work boundaries		
Time span	Short term	Longer term (12 months-5 years)
Reach	One system, one region	Enterprise-wide, pan-company or multiple regions
Complexity	Medium	High
Size of team	2-50*	20-250*
Annual budget	$.5M-10M	$2M-50M
Work content focus		
Relationships	Focused on team and close peers	Partner with other leaders across company; influence up to executives
Nature	Tactical, problem solving, some IT strategy development	More strategic; involved in developing IT and business strategies
Trajectory	Primarily down into team/group	Out and up—aligning with peers, influencing managers
Level of involvement	Highly involved in day-to-day operations	Reviewer, overseer of operations; manage through management team
Major focus areas	IT systems performance	Optimizing IT budgets and finances
IT focus	Multiple systems	Multiple systems in an IT domain
Employee focus	Developing individuals, connecting personally with employees	Engaging employees in vision and direction
Technical focus	Strong, primary focus	Medium—knowledgeable enough to review systems, but not primary focus
Resources	Resource management	Funding and resource acquisition; Selling value of initiatives to get prioritized over other groups/initiatives
Success Factors		
Knowledge base	IT System	Understanding business capability
Delivery	IT System performance (results)	Delivering IT Strategy *and* results
Leadership	Technical	Business
Team accountability	Managing my team	Driving organizational capability in larger, more diverse team; responsible for employee engagement of entire organization

Category	Manager-of-Managers	Functional Manager
Change efforts	Smaller, more contained changes	Leading organizational change
Change focus	Incremental improvement	Changing nature of how organized and how do business to meet company goals
Accountability	Solve for my team	Solve for company
Organizational identity		
Organizational identity	Business group	Company
Organization responsibility		
Performance	IT systems	Business capability
Success	Business group success	Company business performance success, (stock price, market share, competitiveness)
Approach		
Approach	Telling/directing subordinates	Aligning peers, inquiring

Approach 4.4: Adjusting. The next way that participants said they shifted was by trying new approaches or learning by doing. Twelve of the 14 (86%) said they tried new things, analyzed what worked and did not work, learned by practice, and learned from "bumps and bruises" of experimenting:

> I have a strong belief here. It's learn by doing, meaning that–I think there is no better way to learn than–just go and do. Sometimes, you need to have a little bit of practice and theory if you never had the swim class and you jump in the swimming pool, you may have some trouble. But there is no other way to swim than to go in the pool. I think it's the same here, I learn by doing.

Summary and Discussion

This study contributes to the developing body of knowledge about successful managerial transitions. The opportunity to have in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 exceptionally performing functional managers at a leading global high technology organization offered a valuable window into the essential structure that enabled their effective transition and subsequent successful performance. When challenged with promotion, leaders approached the transition along four domains (cognitive, behavioral, relational, and role) and shifted through releasing, learning, adapting, and adjusting. In making the transition successfully, the leaders developed new performance patterns necessary to ascend the management hierarchy. In moving up the managerial hierarchy, the participants learned that leaders at the functional manager (executive) level are expected to lead by understanding the company-wide business strategy, that they must build strategic alliances across organizational boundaries, ensure that their teams have a plan to implement their strategies, and authorize their managerial staff to lead their teams to successful

execution. They are expected to work through multiple levels of the organization, both up and down, in aligning leaders and employees to their strategic vision, communicating their plans, and engaging their people in carrying them out. Additionally, they need to adjust their style and performance to reflect feedback from other players, constantly changing internal and external conditions and shifting company demands.

Theoretical Implications

This study supports previous research in a number of areas and provides the first empirical research related to Charan's leadership pipeline model and the first examining the transition from managerial to executive levels. Emotional intelligence and learning agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996, 2002) play important roles in managerial success (Kotter, 1982b; Goleman, 1995). The study presents evidence contradictory to perspectives of theorists such as Argyris (1993) that promotion presents barriers that stop the continuance of learning.

Challenging, varied assignments provide important preparation for developing managerial talent, probably most important when role transitions require significant changes in the four domains (Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002; Kaiser & Craig, 2004; McCall et al., 1988). Successful transitioning leaders use multidimensional approaches (Gabarro, 1987; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; McCall et al.). Mentors serve an important role in leader development (Lindsey et al.; McCall, 1998). Becoming adept at gaining alignment and collaborating with other organizational leaders proves to be vital (Connolly & Rianoshek, 2002; Kraut et al., 1989). Creating new cognitive models, challenging assumptions, setting aside biases, and opening to other perspectives was critical to success (Bennis, 1989; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). As Gabarro (1987) noted, in the taking hold and immersion stages of a new role, key tasks are to orient and evaluate the situation, build a cognitive model of the organization, and understand business products, competition, and cost structures. In the immersion stage of taking a new role, the leader seeks to gain insight into a more detailed concept of what needs to be done that is a time of "important continued learning" (Gabarro, p. 29). Making cognitive and behavioral shifts, including stopping old behaviors and being willing to delegate more, was also critical to transition success (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Kaiser & Craig, 2004; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). This work shift is similar to McCall's (1988b) finding that the "overwhelming scope" of the executive job forced leaders to delegate more and rely on the capability of their organization.

Moving up the organizational hierarchy requires leaders to shift perspectives such as moving from a purely functional view to an approach of perceiving the function as it fits within the organization's strategic goals (Charan et al., 2001). Adaptability and a willingness to take risks and having a high self confidence, which was another characteristic of learning individuals (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000, 2002), allows new executives to develop. Lombardo and Eichinger (2002) argued that success and promotions actively work against people retaining their learning agility. However, an opposite pattern emerged in the data of the current study. The successful executives of this study sought out feedback from people at all levels of the organization and tried to adjust their behavior in light of that feedback. They began challenging their assumptions and opening their thinking to see what they did not know, which has been said to be a key capability in effective leaders (Bennis, 1989). The executives seemed to maintain an inner scorecard on many of these factors, noting how they were doing on each of them.

Conclusions

While the number of participants in this study is relatively small, the advantage of this study is that it provided an opportunity to learn in depth from 14 exceptionally performing IT functional managers at a Fortune 20 organization as they spoke about their work, the work shifts they experienced when they moved to a higher-level role, and approaches they used to facilitate their transition. One may be able to assume that the exceptionally performing functional managers at this large global enterprise may be some of the top IT functional managers in the world.

Parts of their story confirm elements of previous research about the importance of learning agility, change heartiness, and adaptability. However, this study details the more specific elements of this leadership transition into the cognitive, behavioral, relational, and role perspective changes. This model is worth exploring and seeing if it applies to leaders of different functions at the functional manager level and helps explain the success of these leaders at this executive level.

About the Author

Dr. Sheri S. Bebb earned her Ph.D. in organizational psychology from Alliant International University. She is currently the vice president, Human Resources Business partner, for the Health Care Business and for Organization Effectiveness at Kimberly-Clark Corporation (KC), located in Atlanta, Ga., United States. Prior to this role, she was the vice president, Human Resources Business Partner, for the North Atlantic Consumer Products Group of Kimberly-Clark, based in Wisconsin. Before joining KC, she was a director of human resources for the Global Operations IT Group of Hewlett-Packard (HP), located in Cupertino, Calif. At HP, she also led global initiatives in talent management, organization effectiveness, and leadership development.
Email: sheri.bebb@kcc.com

References

Argyris, C. (1993). *Knowledge for action: A guide to overcoming barriers to organizational change.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Bebb, S. (2003). *Alliant University protocol packet human participant committee: Transitioning to director: The factors contributing to the successful transition of middle managers to exceptionally performing functional managers*. Unpublished manuscript, Alliant International University, San Francisco, California.

Bebb, S. S. (2004). Management transition interview (MTI). *Transitioning to director: The factors contributing to the successful transition of IT manager of managers to exceptionally performing functional managers*. Dissertation, Alliant International University, San Francisco, California.

Bennis, W. (1984). Good managers and good leaders. *Across the Board, 7*.

Bennis, W. (1989). *On becoming a leader*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Education group.

Bradburn, N. M. (1983). Response effects. In P. Rossi, J. Wright, & A. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of survey research* (pp. 289-328). New York: Academic Press.

Bray, D. W., Campbell, R. J., & Grant, D. L. (1974). *Formative years in business: A long-term AT&T study of managerial lives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Charan, R., & Colvin, G. (1999). Why CEOs fail. *Fortune, 139(12).*

Charan, R., Drotter, S., & Noel, J. (2001). *The leadership pipeline: How to build the leadership-powered company*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. S. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 58-62). New York: Oxford University Press.

Connolly, M., & Rianoshek, R. (2002). *The communication catalyst: The fast (but not stupid) track to value for customers, investors, and employees*. Boulder, CO: Dearborn Trade.

Council, C. L. (1997). *The shortage across the spectrum: New urgency in leadership recruiting, development and retention* (Report to the CEO and Members of the Board). Washington, DC: Corporate Leadership Council.

Drotter, S. J. (2002). Structured career interview. Berwyn, PA: Drotter Human Resources. Assessment Skills at Hewlett-Packard. An unpublished manuscript.

Druskat, V. U., & Wolff, S. B. (2001). Group emotional intelligence and its influence on group effectiveness. In C. Cherniss & D. Goleman (Eds.), *The emotionally intelligent workplace: How to select for, measure, and improve emotional intelligence in individuals, groups and organizations* (pp. 132-155). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ely, M. (1991). *Doing qualitative research: Circles within circles.* London: The Falmer Press.

Fernandez-Araoz, C. (2001, July). Hiring without firing. *Harvard Business Review, 77*(4).

Fetterman, D. M. (1998). *Ethnography: Step by step*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gabarro, J. J. (1987). *The dynamics of taking charge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.

Gummesson, E. (2000). *Qualitative methods in management research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hill, L. A. (2003). *Becoming a manager: How new managers master the challenges of leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Hyatt, C. (1990). *Shifting gears: How to master career change and find the work that's right for you*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Kaiser, R., & Craig, S. B. (2004, April). *What gets you there won't keep you there: Managerial behaviors related to effectiveness at the bottom, middle, and top.* Paper presented at the 18th Annual conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago, Illinois.

Kotter, J. P. (1982a). *The general managers*. New York: The Free Press.

Kotter, J. P. (1982b). What effective general managers really do. *Harvard Business Review, 60*(6), 156-167.

Kraut, A. I., Pedigo, P. R., McKenna, D. D., & Dunnette, M. D. (1989). The role of the manager: What's really important in different management jobs. *The Academy of Management Executive, 3*(4), 286-293.

Lindsey, E., Homes, V., & McCall, M. (1987). *Key events in executives' lives* (No. Technical Report Number 32). Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (1989). *Preventing derailment: What to do before it's too late.* Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (1996). *What characterizes a hipo? Ferreting out the true high potentials*. Unpublished manuscript.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2000). High potentials as high learners. *Human Resource Management, 39*(4), 321-219.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2002). *The leadership machine: Architecture to develop leaders for any future*: Lominger Limited, Inc.

Mahler, W. R. (1986). *The succession planning handbook for the human resource executive*. Midland Park, NJ: Mahler Publishing Company.

Mahler, W. R., & Gaines, J. F. (1983). *Succession planning in leading companies: How to produce a "farm system" to produce needed executive talent*. Midland Park, NJ: Mahler Publishing Company.

Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McCall, M., W. Jr. (1998a). *High flyers: Developing the next generation of leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

McCall, M. W., Jr. (1988b). Developing executives through work experiences. *Human Resource Planning, 11*(1), 1.

McCall, M., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. (1988). *The lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job*. New York: Lexington Books.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Mintzberg, H. (1979). *The structuring of organizations: A synthesis of the research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Mohrman, S. A., & Mohrman, A. (1998). *Designing and leading team-based organizations: A workbook for organizational self-design*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* San Francisco, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. C. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rosenthal, R., & Rosnow, R. L. (1991). *Essentials of behavioral research: Methods and data analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rothwell, W. J. (1994). *Effective succession planning: Ensuring leadership continuity and building talent from within*. New York: American Management Association.

Sessa, V. I., & Taylor, J. J. (2000). *Executive selection: Strategies for success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Spencer, L. M., Jr., & Spencer, S. M. (1993). *Competence at work: Models for superior performance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Symon, G., & Cassell, C. (1998). *Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide*. London, Sage.

Treverton, G., & Bikson, T. (2003). *New challenges for international leadership*. RAND Issue Paper. Retrieved from www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1670?MR1670.pdf