

## Enhancing the Likelihood of Success for New Leaders

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### Abstract

Educators who are appointed to formal leadership positions for the first time are likely to experience a variety of psychological reactions before assuming these positions. The transition to leadership model systematically guides new leaders through the psychological maze by building their confidence for success through *planned forethoughts* for their first-time formal leadership position. Two attributes of positive psychology—optimism and mindset—are presented that supplement the content of the transition to leadership model and help new leaders to experience successful beginnings in their first leadership positions.

*Keywords:* new leaders, transition to leadership model, optimism, mindset

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### Introduction

The readiness of educators to effectively assume their initial leadership position is essential to their career success, the services they provide to students and other stakeholders, and meeting the needs of the school district. All of these factors are critical to the overall success of not only the individual, but the organization as a whole. Of equal importance to new leaders in getting ready for their first leadership positions prior to the job's start date is having a successful beginning during the initial months in performing their new roles. We review how the transition to leadership model can psychologically prepare new leaders before assuming their first formal leadership position. Also addressed is the application of optimism and mindset in their

preparation of assuming the position and the development of positive behaviors during the crucial initial several months in the first-time leadership position.

### **The Traditional Role of University-Based Preparation Programs**

Most states require licensing, certification, or endorsement for educators to assume formal leadership positions such as assistant principal, principal, or special education coordinator. Some states, such as Illinois, issue a teacher leader endorsement from approved university programs that prepare educators for positions such as content coaches (e.g., literacy and mathematics), instructional specialists, and department heads. While some states have alternative paths to meeting requirements for non-educators to assume public school leadership positions, most training for prospective educators being prepared to assume leadership positions is university-based.

Larger public school districts (e.g., 10,000 plus students) sometimes have in-house training programs that supplement university training for prospective leaders. We advocate that school districts supplement university-based training with experiences for new leaders prior to assuming the position based on the content of the transition to leadership model. Delivery of this training may necessitate districts to band together to deliver the transition to leadership model training, use regional educational units, or obtain assistance from a state's department of education.

### **The Transition to Leadership Model<sup>1</sup>**

Educators assuming first-time leadership positions face many challenges in being prepared to confidently and competently assume their new roles in the proper frame of mind. The anticipated change of roles and position can cause prospective new leaders' feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty. Leadership positions include, but are not limited to: assistant principal, principal, dean of students, department head, teacher leader, content coach (e.g., literacy and mathematics), lead counselor, special education supervisor, and instructional specialist. Newly-appointed leaders usually experience initial *psychological* reactions, such as discomfort, to their appointed position and all of the responsibilities and accountability accompanying them. These added responsibilities may, at times, change confident teachers into professionals unsure of their new job expectations.

The transition to leadership model presented in Figure 1 depicts psychological stages that a first-time prospective leader often experiences. This model represents the phenomenon of role transition encountered by educators changing from a non-formal leadership role to a formal one. It focuses on an educator's self-awareness of psychological feelings experienced prior to transitioning to a formal leadership role and induces self-reflection that benefits him/her to face the realities of the new leadership role. Effective application of the model increases the new leader's probability for success in the first-time leadership position and will enhance job performance and satisfaction.

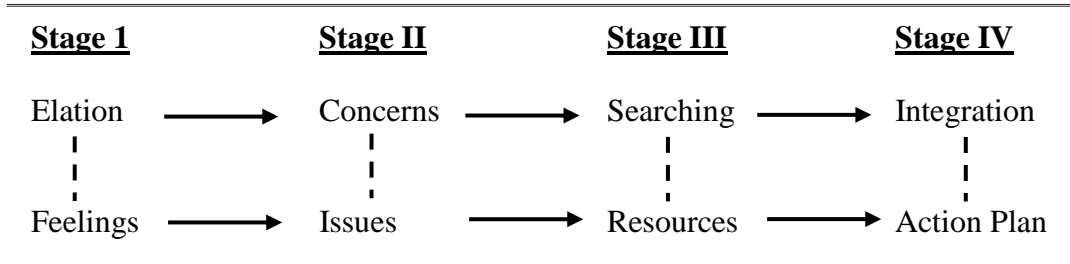


Figure 1. Transition to leadership model (United States General Accounting Office, n.d.).

The four stages of the transition to leadership model depict what usually goes through a new leader's mind concerning her/his feelings about assuming the new role in a formal leadership position. The transition to leadership model's stages can be thought of as the *self-talk* and conscious reflections going through the mind of the first-time newly-appointed leader. Remember, people likely talk more to themselves through their conscious thoughts than anyone else. There are the subconscious feelings—often emotional—that also have a significant impact on a person's thoughts and planned actions. While the model is designed as a continuous four-stage flow, in reality an educator occasionally moves back and forth between the four stages.

The transition to leadership model addresses the time period from when the newly-appointed leader is notified of the new role to when the job starts. The purpose of the transition to leadership model is to assist newly-appointed leaders with *psychological forethoughts* for entering their new roles and to help them start the job with high comfort levels. Sometimes newly-appointed leaders believe that because they have the technical knowledge, skills, and abilities for their new roles, nothing else is needed for success. This is a fallacy held by many new leaders. While technical skills are important, new leaders need effective skill sets for establishing confidence and a positive mindset toward a variety of stakeholders and accomplishing the work-related results expected.

### Stages of the Transition to Leadership Model

The four stages of the transition to leadership model are:

#### Stage I—Elation and Feelings

- When educators discover they are going to assume a leadership position, they immediately have psychological reactions or feelings in respect to fulfilling the new role.
- Depending on the time period between when individuals learn that they are going to be in a leadership position and when the position is assumed, Stage I may last a day, several days, or weeks.
- These psychological feelings may result in specific behaviors or actions by the newly-appointed leader. For example, a person may feel a *sense of achievement* and reward himself/herself by purchasing new clothes (or other tangible objects), celebrating with close friends, or going to a special restaurant for dinner with significant others.

#### Stage II—Concerns and Issues (can also be thought of as anticipated problems)

- After prospective leaders have time to think about the new position, they usually pass

from Stage I—elation and feelings—to thinking more about the degree to which they can effectively perform the future role.

- The newly-appointed leader encounters psychological concerns for being effective and successful in the new role.
- This psychological sensing of concerns can cause the individual discomfort and result in questioning one's readiness for the leadership position.

### **Stage III—Searching and Resources**

- Following a sensing of concern—Stage II—the prospective leader usually moves on to searching for resources or ways to resolve her/his concerns or to address issues.
- Examples of sources for the prospective leader to identify in this searching process are: (1) talk to an experienced leader, (2) search the internet for ideas, (3) explore formal E-learning resources, (4) seek advice from a career mentor if one is available, (5) identify sources available through his/her educational agency (e.g., school district), (6) establish a network of resources, and (7) query people in her/his personal support system.
  - A support system composed of friends and professional associates can be especially useful for psychological support because of the trust, credibility, and sincerity usually indicative of support group members. Specific factors that can be addressed through a highly functional support system are:
    - *Trouble-shooting* (assistance with identifying and eliminating potential trouble situations).
    - *Non-Isolation* (show prospective leaders that they are not totally alone; there are people with whom to talk and share concerns).
    - *Sensitivity* (offer an understanding of the prospective new leader's feelings and concerns, while attempting to search for solutions through his/her personal experiences).
    - *Advice* (render opinions and/or offer recommendations for addressing feelings, concerns, issues, and problems).
    - *Objectivity* (not being an actual part of the situation; others can view it more objectively).
    - *Providing encouragement* (psychological support through reassurance and being a *confidence builder*).

### **Stage IV – Integration and Action Plan**

- Following this searching for how to resolve concerns of becoming a new leader—Stage III—the prospective leader realizes the need to *integrate* all of the information collected to have an organized, and manageable, method to approach the new leadership position.
- The new leader needs to establish a written action plan for effectively transitioning to the new leadership position that is *goal driven*, and for each goal identify: (1) a measurable desired outcome, (2) date by which the goal must be completed, (3) specific tasks/activities to accomplish the goal, (4) resources needed for related tasks/activities, (5) completion date for each related task/activity, and (6) evaluation criteria and results for the goal.

## Application of Positive Psychology

The attributes of positive psychology presented—optimism and mindset—will significantly aid first-time leaders in not only the time period before they assume the leadership position but especially during the initial months on the new job. These first few months are critical to the overall success of the new leader. Effective application of positive psychology is motivational to new leaders and builds confidence and job satisfaction. Positive psychology also greatly aids in developing crucial relationships with others, a necessary trait in order to be successful.

Positive psychology focuses on making the lives of new leaders better while enhancing their job performance and satisfaction. It also creates a more productive and satisfying environment for those with whom new leaders work. Positive psychology stresses the use of emotions, driven by meaningful purpose, that results in positive and authentic relationships with others (Seligman, 2008). This contrasts with much of the traditional emphasis of psychology that focuses on negative attributes such as weaknesses of people and mental illnesses.

The components of positive psychology addressed are optimism and mindset. While each component is reviewed separately, it is important to note that there is a synergy between the interactions of optimism and mindset that holistically make for an effective new leader.

### Optimism<sup>2</sup>

Optimism is having positive expectations for the future. It means that new leaders maintain a positive perspective, even when events go against them. Optimism is a strength as opposed to a trait. This means that optimism for a new leader can change over time, either positively or negatively. While optimism has some commonalities with hope, it is more concrete and realistic than hope because optimism has clear expectations and a path to actualize them. While hope anticipates success, it is often not accompanied by an action plan for actualizing variables needed for that success (Bartz, 2017).

Optimism and its counterpart, pessimism, can be habit-forming and self-perpetuating (Seligman, 2006). Regarding optimism and pessimism, Bartz (2017) notes:

There are two fundamental ways to look at adverse events that happen. The manager [new leader] can: (1) imagine the worst and wallow in self-pity; or (2) view such events as temporary, surmountable, and challenges to overcome. Pessimists believe that an adverse event will last a long time, make the person helpless, and is her/his fault. Optimists view an adverse event as only a temporary setback that does not permeate all aspects of their lives and, in most situations, is not their fault. (p. 4)

Optimism in managers can be increased through developmental activities, assuming there is a desire to do so (Seligman, 2002). Table 1 summarizes the benefits of new leaders being optimistic as compared to being pessimistic.

Table 1

*Benefits of Optimism Compared to Pessimism for New Leaders*

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- Have overall better emotional and cognitive well-being in times of adversity or difficulty.
  - Have “flexible engagement” for making changes to stressful circumstances and accommodate those circumstances that cannot be altered such that negative personal effects are neutralized or minimized.
  - Have the confidence that working harder to solve problems will alleviate the negatives of a situation and even create positive outcomes. (optimism → confidence → working harder to solve problems).
  - Possess the resilience to “stay the course” for actions needed to overcome adversity and are *not* likely to go into denial or give up.
  - Likely display the “expectancy value model” of motivation by identifying important goals that have the greatest value in achieving the outcomes needed to overcome the difficulties caused by adversity.
  - Display a higher level of engagement skills for effectively coping with adversity and have a lower level of avoidance behaviors that cause disengagement from dealing with adversity.
  - Take proactive actions to prevent physical and mental health problems; and when illnesses happen, take aggressive steps to get well.
  - Are energetic, goal oriented, and pursue tasks to actualize goal accomplishment which often enhances socio-economic status.
  - Are persistent in education, training, and personal development pursuits that often lead to higher income.
  - Are likable and good at building meaningful relationships with others.
  - Are good at social networking (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010).
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### **Mindset<sup>3</sup>**

New leaders can believe that factors such as intelligence and personality are unchangeable (fixed mindset) or believe that these factors can be nurtured and developed (growth mindset) for professional and personal enhancement (Dweck, 2016). This represents the proverbial *Nature* (fixed mindset) vs. *Nurture* (growth mindset) debate that has been discussed for centuries (see Table 2). Both impact new leaders, but the growth mindset will likely enhance their expertise, performance, and job satisfaction (Bartz, 2016). New leaders challenging themselves to develop existing attributes and being willing to put forth the needed effort is key to

maximizing the growth mindset. Purposefully engaging in developmental activities indicative of the growth mindset is essential to new leaders maximizing potential and enhancing achievements. To nurture the growth mindset, new leaders need to focus on: (a) having purpose drive their work; (b) dealing head-on with deficiencies instead of hiding from them; (c) viewing setbacks as learning opportunities for future successes; (d) viewing stakeholders as collaborators and stressing the team approach; (e) nurturing a burning desire to keep learning new knowledge and skills; (f) finding inspiration from successes of others and learning from them; (g) understanding that everyone can change and grow through passion, effort, application, and experience; (h) being ready to take risks, confront challenges, and keep working to get better, even when feeling distressed; and (i) when relationships with people in the work environment go wrong, viewing this as a learning experience and identifying positive actions for future relationship-building.

Table 2

*Examples of Dweck’s Mindset: Fixed vs Growth*

<b>Fixed</b>	<b>Growth</b>
<b>ability is static</b>	<b>ability can be developed</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● avoids challenges</li> <li>● gives up easily</li> <li>● sees effort as fruitless</li> <li>● ignores useful criticism</li> <li>● is threatened by others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● embraces challenges</li> <li>● persists against obstacles</li> <li>● sees effort as necessary</li> <li>● learns from criticism</li> <li>● is inspired by others’ success (Dweck, 2016)</li> </ul>

Dweck (2016) cautions that new leaders can inadvertently fall into the *false growth mindset* via two misunderstandings: (1) new leaders identifying attributes they like about themselves and calling them collectively a growth mindset (if these attributes are, in fact, indicative of a fixed mindset, adhering to them is counterproductive to acquiring a growth mindset); and (2) that a growth mindset for new leaders is solely about effort and praising effort. New leaders putting more effort into present fixed-mindset attributes will not lead to a growth mindset. New strategies are needed. Dweck (2016) reminds us that, simply put, “growth mindset is about believing people can develop their abilities” (p. 214-215).

The Arbinger Institute (2016), in *Outward Mindset: Seeing Beyond Ourselves*, describes mindset as being inward or outward. A new leader’s mindset is paramount to enjoying the job and performing exceptionally well. According to the Arbinger Institute (2016), a mindset is how a new leader views oneself, stakeholders, and others. With the inward mindset, new leaders are usually self-centered and pay little attention to the needs and wants of stakeholders and others pertaining to what should be changed and improved in the work settings (Bartz, 2017). New leaders with an outward mindset see stakeholders and others as similar to themselves, whose efforts and work matter to everyone.

With the outward mindset, the approach to establish and meet job targets is viewed as a

collaborative effort that considers the creative and innovative ideas of all stakeholders involved and causes an environment in which staff members eagerly share ideas. Table 3 provides specific comparisons of the inward and outward mindsets for new leaders in the context of working with stakeholders and others.

Table 3

*Comparing Inward and Outward Mindsets for New Leaders Toward Others*

<b>Inward</b>	<b>Outward</b>
1. Strives to control people	1. Strives to cause others to be fully responsible and engaged in work
2. Often blames others when things go wrong	2. Takes responsibility for actions of oneself in the work environment
3. Is narcissistic	3. Displays modesty toward others
4. Consistently defends one’s position	4. Works collaboratively with others to solicit their opinions and collectively develop the best solutions for problems
5. Focuses on protecting oneself in interactions with others	5. Focuses on building positive relationships with and among people in interactions with others
6. Uses behaviors that sometimes try to manipulate others in an attempt to improve one’s own image	6. Strives to facilitate “committed behaviors” collectively with others to improve work produced and achieve objectives
7. Shows minimal regard for how to create “collective results” among others	7. Is motivated about how to work with others collaboratively and for others to collaborate with each other and oneself
8. Views others in a context as to how they can help oneself achieve goals	8. Focuses on the needs and challenges of others that foster a work environment that prompts individual and team cooperation
9. Assumes that to simply change one’s behavior is the best way to enhance work productivity with others	9. Understands changing how oneself views the assets of others is beneficial to everyone in comparison to merely changing one’s behaviors toward others
10. Focuses on how to make oneself “look good” for work produced, even at the expense of others	10. Sees, thinks, and works on how to improve job performance through collaboration with others that incorporates their needs and wants, and gains them recognition



<b>Inward</b>	<b>Outward</b>
11. Often creates competition between others and causes them to work independently of each other	11. Focuses on other staff members as an entity having a collective belief of working with each other for the common good of the work unit and organization
12. Focuses mainly on the job responsibilities of oneself	12. Supports others in identifying their interests and being motivated to successfully achieve what they need for the betterment of the work unit and organization
13. Focuses on getting the work “out the door” with little identity for benefits	13. Focuses on the meaning and purposefulness of the work and the positive impact it can have on the work unit and organization
14. Is inclined to step in, take over, and direct the work of others when things go wrong	14. Understands and helps others to do so, regarding working together when things go wrong
15. Creates conflict that keeps people embattled with each other (divide and conquer for control)	15. Focuses on preventing and resolving conflict among others and self
16. Focuses solely on personal and professional goals and behaviors to protect and advance oneself	16. Focuses on the goals of the work unit and organization, and objectives and behaviors that take others into consideration
17. Advances one’s agenda at the expense of others	17. Focuses on working together with others for “collective” results to benefit the work unit and organization
18. Identifies what can be taken from others to achieve objectives for oneself	18. Identifies what can be given to help others successfully achieve their work objectives
19. Frequently tries to control the behavior of others for self-benefit	19. Strives to empower others to be their best (Bartz, Thompson, & Rice, 2017)

### Concluding Thoughts

Newly-appointed educators to formal leadership positions need to possess the proper psychological forethoughts regarding their new positions *prior* to assuming them. The transition to leadership model addresses this needed psychological preparedness in a logical and organized

manner. Effective application of the transition to leadership model enhances the likelihood of success for the new leader once the leadership position is assumed. The positive psychology principles of optimism and mindset furnish the new leader with perspectives and skill sets that are beneficial to their development, both before and after assuming the first-time leadership position.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Based in part on:

United States General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office). (n.d.).  
*Managing the transition to supervisor* (developed by D. E. Bartz).

<sup>2</sup>Based in part on:

Bartz, D. E., & Rice, P. (2017). Managers using positive psychology to maximize productivity and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(8), 1-7.

<sup>3</sup>Based in part on:

Bartz, D. E., & Rice, P. (2017). Managers using positive psychology to maximize productivity and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(8), 1-7.