



By Thomas E. Meyer

The United States Military provides an outstanding leadership laboratory to grow yourself and your team. Perhaps the most impressive means of continuing personal and organizational growth is a personnel system that requires leaders to promote out of position and transition organizations. Controlled change breeds innovation and progress. But, change can also bring discomfort and anxiety. Fear not - there are steps you can take to transition well and establish yourself in a new organization.

Over the course of seven years in the Army I have served in six different billets across four different battalion-level organizations and six different battalion command teams. In the

past three years I have transitioned between three different battalions serving as an Assistant Operations Officer in one and Company/Troop Commander in the other two. These transitions were difficult, but outstandingly rewarding. Of the myriad of techniques learned and implemented, some with success and others not, these four prevailed:

1. Be Humble.
2. Have a Plan.
3. Change Your Plan.
4. Own It.

Be Humble

Unless you are being moved for a rehabilitative transfer, chances are you have done well in your previous billets and demonstrated the potential for promotion. Congratulations! However, as harsh as it may seem, your new organization is not as concerned with what you HAVE done as compared to what you WILL do. No organization wants the new guy who has all the answers. Do they want a problem-solver who is motivated and takes initiative? Sure. But, do so with humility. Just because your new organization does things differently doesn't mean they are wrong. Approach perceived shortfalls, capability gaps, and inefficiencies with care and tact. Assume there is more than you initially see by asking disarming questions. Readily admitting what you don't yet know endears you to those around you and shows you are here to be part of the team rather than a critic of the organization.

A few practical steps for putting this into practice:

1. Ask inquisitorial questions rather than accusatorial ones: *"I am sure we have a system for this and I have looked all over but just can't seem to find it. Could you please explain how we accomplish ____?"* By doing this you disarm, demonstrate previous

effort to find the answer, and empower the other party to demonstrate their own knowledge. If there is a sufficient answer – great! If not, set to work finding a solution and providing it to the other party without seeking credit or fanfare.

2. Always use inclusive nouns rather than exclusive nouns. We, our, and us will serve you better than I and me. Using inclusive nouns demonstrates you view yourself as part of the team ready to implement internal change and solutions rather than an outside force exhibiting organizational pressure.
3. Your past experiences are important, but beware of referencing them ad nauseam. “In my last unit...” quickly becomes overused, demonstrating a personal nostalgia for your previous unit and a distaste for your current. We are naturally inclined to believe – due to personal revisionist history – the best unit we ever served in was our last one and the worst is our current one. We are faced with the immediacy of our current condition and apologetic towards the shortcomings of past units. Instead, flip the script – go in believing the best organization is the one you are in and if it is not, then what are you going to do to make it so?

Have a Plan

In his bestselling book, [*The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter*](#), Michael D. Watkins advocates for identifying quick wins. Watkins discusses the importance of identifying popular changes, easily implemented, that will unite those in your organization behind the future plan of action while easing them into changes to come. Having a plan to transition is one of the most critical steps toward success in any change. Before you take over, have a deliberate strategy for the first 30, 60, and 90 days of your transition. These should be prioritized steps, building from easily implemented popular change to the more difficult evolutions of an organization. Take the importance of buy-in into consideration when creating your plan. A few easy steps you can include in your plan are:

1. First 30 Days.

- Introduce yourself to your team by cohort (by rank/position) so they can get to know who you are and what you expect as a leader. Make sure to include what they can expect from you.
- Bring in your leadership team and create your organization's shared values as the foundation. Then build a collaborative vision, creating buy-in for where you are going. Shared understanding of who you are as an organization (shared values) and where you are going (vision) empower leaders to take initiative.
- Pick one easy change that will garner support from all levels of the organization, reinvigorate subordinates, and build trust in your vision for future changes.

2. Second 30 Days (60 Days).

- Having surveyed the organization, developed shared understanding, and created buy-in you can now transition to making some more impactful changes. Capitalize on the trust built in the first 30 days by implementing a more long-term strategy. This is usually centered on your primary vehicle for building culture in your organization. Chances are you have a finite time in your new position - do not get bogged down with an overdeveloped priority appetite. Pick one vehicle for culture change/development (e.g. a fitness program, a leader development initiative, etc.).
- Execute a team building/family event. Make sure this is inclusive and a hit. If you lose on your first team event it will be increasingly difficult to gain momentum in future ones. This can be a barbeque, a potluck, or a fitness event that incorporates competition and builds esprit de corps; just to name a few.

3. **Third 30 Days (90 Days).**

- Vision leaks. You are now a month to two months separated from when your team initially communicated the organization's vision and surely it is leaking out of the minds and the hearts of your subordinates. Vision leaks require constant refilling. Similar to the parent who says something so many times their children mockingly repeat it, your vision and your message should be connected to you in the minds of those you lead. If your top priority/primary message is not tied to an impression of you that your team can readily whip out, you are probably coming up short.
- Take the next logical step in your primary initiative, building on previous gains and the trust earned from your organization. Inspect the communicated standard, correct deficiencies through coaching, and reward success. Ensure you are searching every day for someone doing the RIGHT thing; as leaders we too often focus on what isn't going right.
- Reassess your plan and, as we will discuss next, be prepared to change it.

Change your Plan

As the adage goes, "the plan means nothing, but planning is everything." So you dedicated countless hours building the perfect plan for your first 90 days in your new position. You have considered all known factors and applied a strategic approach to the change you wish to create. Now crumple that plan up and throw it away...just kidding. However, you have to be prepared to change your plan. Unseen factors, changes in the organization, and other forces will always have a vote.

This does not negate the importance of your plan; you need to HAVE a script before you can go OFF the script. The two greatest pitfalls in this regard are:

1. Developing a plan only to put it away in a folder or binder and never revisit/reevaluate it.
2. Fighting the plan, through unwavering adherence, and not fighting the evolving problem set.

Your plan is important, but it needs to change and evolve with the situation. Similar to running estimates in the Military Decision Making Process, you need to review your plan weekly or even daily to assess its feasibility and consider changes in the situation. Determine that which you will not sacrifice - usually aligned with your primary change initiative that uses one priority vehicle to build the desired culture - and be willing to cut or change the rest.

Own It

It is easy to blame the last guy - don't do that. The minute you take charge, you own it. That means they are YOUR people - you are charged to care for them, to love them, and to prepare them. Get to know your people, taking every engagement as an opportunity to learn about and grow your team. When problems arise, don't shift the blame on the previous team; although the problem may have carried over from them it is now yours to fix. As it was said above, the best unit in the Army is the one you are in - love the one you're with. Take advantage of every opportunity, because you will be transitioning again before you know it.

And Remember...

Transitioning organizations is never easy - we are naturally inclined to sedentary complacency; comfort in consistency. But, transition means change and change means growth. Every opportunity to impact a new organization, growing its systems and its people, is an opportunity to invest in human capital and grow yourself. Employ these four steps to

enter with an open mind, achieve quick wins, remain flexible, and make it yours.

What steps have you used in the past? Did they work? Comment below and continue the discussion.

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