

The Unconventional Value of an Interim Leader

Impermanence has value. A skilled interim leader can play a unique role in positioning the incoming leader for success.

Today's Environment

Given the shortage of high-caliber, full-time leadership talent, it takes time to replace a senior leader in today's competitive environment. Finding the right fit is typically a six- to seven-month process that's too important to rush. Meanwhile, the organization is left with a leadership void, along with the unresolved problems that often accompany a leader's departure.

Traditionally, bringing in an interim leader has been viewed as a stopgap solution—someone to fill the day-to-day leadership vacuum during the search for a permanent replacement. But a skilled interim leader can do more than fill the void; he or she can prepare the organization and the incoming leader for success.

Point B's Perspective

Losing a senior leader is a significant event that usually signals a failure of some sort on the part of the departing leader, the organization, or both. Whatever went wrong, it's important to understand why the union was unsuccessful in order to get it right the next time. It's our experience that interim leaders are in a unique position to help an organization gain this valuable understanding and use it to help the incoming leader succeed.

Skilled interim leaders can transform this time of turmoil and transition into a window of opportunity for the organization. They can use their temporary presence and neutral perspective to conduct a highly productive "post-mortem" of life under the previous leadership that offers crucial insights into the current situation. By laying out the landscape, surfacing pivotal issues and identifying roadblocks, they can provide the incoming leader with the organizational intelligence to develop an effective 30-60-90 plan and quickly mobilize forces to deliver results.

The rigors of such an interim position call for a unique hybrid of leader. It takes more than deep experience in the respective functional role. It also requires the people skills and organizational acumen to build trust and transparency—both essential to understanding the current situation and creating a successful transition to new permanent leadership.

An interim leader brings a unique level of objectivity and detachment to the table.

Interim leaders are unencumbered by career goals, long-term bonds or political affiliations within the

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organization. They have the detachment to step back, observe what's going on, and take in conflicting input as valuable information without feeling compelled to act prematurely. They provide a neutral perspective that can reframe intractable problems, defuse charged situations, and make difficult decisions that benefit from impartiality. When appropriate, they can bear the brunt of a tough decision, which helps clear the air and creates a “clean slate”—a rational starting point for the incoming leader.

An interim leader can foster open dialogue that allows for healthy catharsis.

Interim leaders are perceived differently from incumbent leaders. Their temporary presence and neutrality free them and the people within the organization to establish a uniquely candid relationship. As one of Point B's interim leaders puts it, “I'm Switzerland. I'm not there to judge; I am there to listen to the truth—whatever it is—and then chart a productive path forward.”

When an interim leader creates an open, non-judgmental atmosphere, employees feel safe sharing stories that have been suppressed out of fear of retribution. Within these stories are the lines that “connect the dots” to larger organizational problems. This is deeply valuable information for the incoming leader. A skilled interim leader can also use this catharsis to move the organization to a better place, “draining the lake” of negativity so that it doesn't consume the incoming leader's time and energy.

A caveat: In order for such openness to occur, people must be able to trust that the interim leader really is going to move on. There is no wiggle room; you can't gain the benefits of neutrality if your interim leader is actually lobbying or being considered for the permanent leadership position.

Employees can look to the interim leader as a coach and mentor.

People are understandably anxious during times of leadership change. These transitions bring new perspectives, a critical look at how things are done today, and the establishment of new priorities for the organization. Such change is bound to create a certain amount of organizational angst as employees ponder their fate and the organization's direction.

An interim leader can help employees understand what the incoming leader will be looking for and how they will be evaluated, then help them set priorities and accurately frame their value to the new leader. As a coach, the interim leader can help people unlock their untapped capabilities and potential, and position themselves accordingly. As a mentor, the interim leader can share the benefits of experience and help people sharpen their sense of how they add value to the organization.

In the process of coaching and mentoring, people often develop a greater sense of self-awareness. They see how they can position themselves based on a better understanding of what the organization really needs to move forward. They also see *what they* need in order to move forward in their own lives and careers. For some, this new self-awareness may lead to the realization that they are in the wrong place. When they make the choice to leave on their own, there is no need for a “hatchet man.” The incoming leader can enter with a positive outlook and move the organization forward rather than having to clean up the mess left behind.

An interim leader brings clear focus to organizational priorities.

The neutrality and open listening that a skilled interim leader brings to the table make it possible to weigh competing priorities and political agendas, consider all

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perspectives and have an informed dialog about priorities. By bringing a portfolio view to organizational priorities, the interim leader can reframe and rationalize strategic priorities. This perspective makes it possible to get beyond reacting to the squeakiest wheels, and to renegotiate outdated and misaligned social contracts established by the previous leader.

At Point B, we talk about “triage”—the practice of prioritizing the issues that matter most to the survival and success of the organization. To employees, “triage” signals an experiential analysis that is not driven by politics or competing fiefdoms but operates based on the facts and in the best interests of the organization. When people see that priorities are being set to serve the common good, the interim leader is able to move ahead on the things that matter most and help the organization be productive even during a time of transition.

The Bottom Line

In addition to leadership experience in the functional role they assume, a skilled interim leader has the instincts of a scout—mapping the terrain, looking for booby traps, finding alternate paths, and figuring out how to move forward to achieve the objectives of the organization. This is valuable work that not only fills a leadership gap; it also helps the organization through a time of transition and positions the incoming leader for success.

About Point B

Point B is a management consulting firm. We help our clients develop strategic insights and translate them into impact. Point B serves organizations from visionary start-ups to Fortune 100 companies across a wide range of industries, including healthcare, technology, retail and public sector. Our clients look to us for industry and functional expertise combined with our ability to execute. Point B is regularly honored by many publications as an exceptional place to work, including the Wall Street Journal and Consulting Magazine.