



# New Leader Assimilation

## What is New Leader Assimilation?

New leader assimilation is a structured learning process designed to introduce and integrate a leader into the culture and relationships of their new team. When done effectively, new leader assimilation aligns expectations and preferences and removes barriers to success for the new leader and the members of their teams.

## New Leader Assimilation Definition and Characteristics

Most traditional new leader assimilation processes trace their roots to original research conducted by John Gabarro first published in 1985 (Gabarro, 2007). Gabarro studied the succession of 14 general managers to understand the challenges in the process of taking charge of a new organization. Using longitudinal studies and historical case reviews, Gabarro examined successions covering a range of both functional and general managers in organizations ranging in annual sales from \$1.2 million to \$3 billion, included both turnarounds and normal situations, and successions that failed as well as those that succeeded.

Across all of the leadership successions in the study, Gabarro discovered three key findings:

- Managers took much longer to get up to speed than expected;
- Successful transitions followed predictable stages (including two sit-back-and-watch periods of immersion and refinement),
- A good working relationship with a boss had a significant impact on the likelihood of a successful transition

The five stages of taking charge identified by Gabarro are:

**Taking hold:** Typically lasting from three to six months, leaders in this stage orient themselves to the new position, identify and diagnose the root cause of performance problems, and assess the organization. Actions taken during this stage tend to be corrective – based on what they are learning about the new situation, new leaders deploy interventions to fix the problems that they can.

**Immersion:** Taking place over 4 to 11 months, immersion is a period of focused learning where new leaders build on their initial learning from the ‘taking hold’ stage, gaining additional experience that enables them to see new patterns of challenges and opportunities for their organization. Leaders in the stage spend time refining their approaches to problems previously identified, tackle new challenges unmasked by solving higher priority issues and often explore uncertainties they have about the people they have in place in the organization.

**Reshaping:** After the intense learning of the immersion phase, new leaders have been in their role for between 13 to 18 months and are eager to act on what they’ve learned and the ‘reshaping stage’ is when new leaders direct their attention toward reconfiguring the organization to implement their concept of the way the organization should function. This stage involves a great deal of organizational change and new leaders learn through implementing new initiatives, getting feedback, and modifying their approach to drive desired results. This stage ends when the new leaders have implemented as much of their operational concepts as is possible given their current circumstances.

**Consolidation:** The major changes of the 'reshaping phase' provide extensive insights for new leaders and in the 'consolidation phase', new leaders evaluate the impact of reshaping stage changes and focus on consolidating information and following through on what's working. Additionally, during this stage, new leaders focus on unanticipated problems created through actions in previous stages and take steps to diagnose and correct those problems.

**Refinement:** By this point in the process, new leaders have taken charge and no longer feel new. The challenges they face (or not) driven by lack of familiarity but are often either due to circumstances they've created or external environmental pressures that are posing a risk to their business. During this stage, and moving forward, the leaders' learning becomes more incremental and routine, and leaders focus is on building sustainably great organizations.

## Formalizing the Assimilation Process

As revealed in the experiences of the new leaders Gabarro studied, it typically takes 13 to 18 months of learning and experience before a new leader is ready to make significant changes and significantly impact the organization. Given the amount of time and resources invested in finding and placing a new leader, waiting a year or more to see a return on that investment is a daunting proposition for most organizations. As such it is no surprise that Gabarro's work spawned tremendous interest in finding ways to significantly reduce the time it takes for new leaders to progress through the first two stages of the process. The resulting new manager assimilation process that is common practice today was first developed as a program by the U.S. Army and has been used in numerous organizations including Citigroup, Exxon, GE, Ford Motor Company, and others (Nielson Group, n.d.).

Manderscheid (2008) describes the typical process used to accelerate new leaders' assimilation as a five-step process that gathers insights from the new leaders and teams and then facilitates open dialog to build a shared understanding of key personal and organizational factors for the new team.

The goal of the structured process is to accelerate the development of team operating norms, to clarify expectations, and to build relationships that will enable the leader and team to achieve full performance in an expedited timeline. Little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of this typical approach to new leader assimilation, though a Google search reveals dozens of organizations that offer the service and many more who use some form of the assimilation process for new leaders.

But, despite this proliferation of intentional assimilation programs, research by Carruci (2017) found that between 50% and 60% of executives fail within their first 18 months in a new role. While the reasons for failure are varied, research by the Center for Creative Leadership (as cited in Jacoby, n.d.) identifies three common reasons that result in failure for newly transitioned leaders:

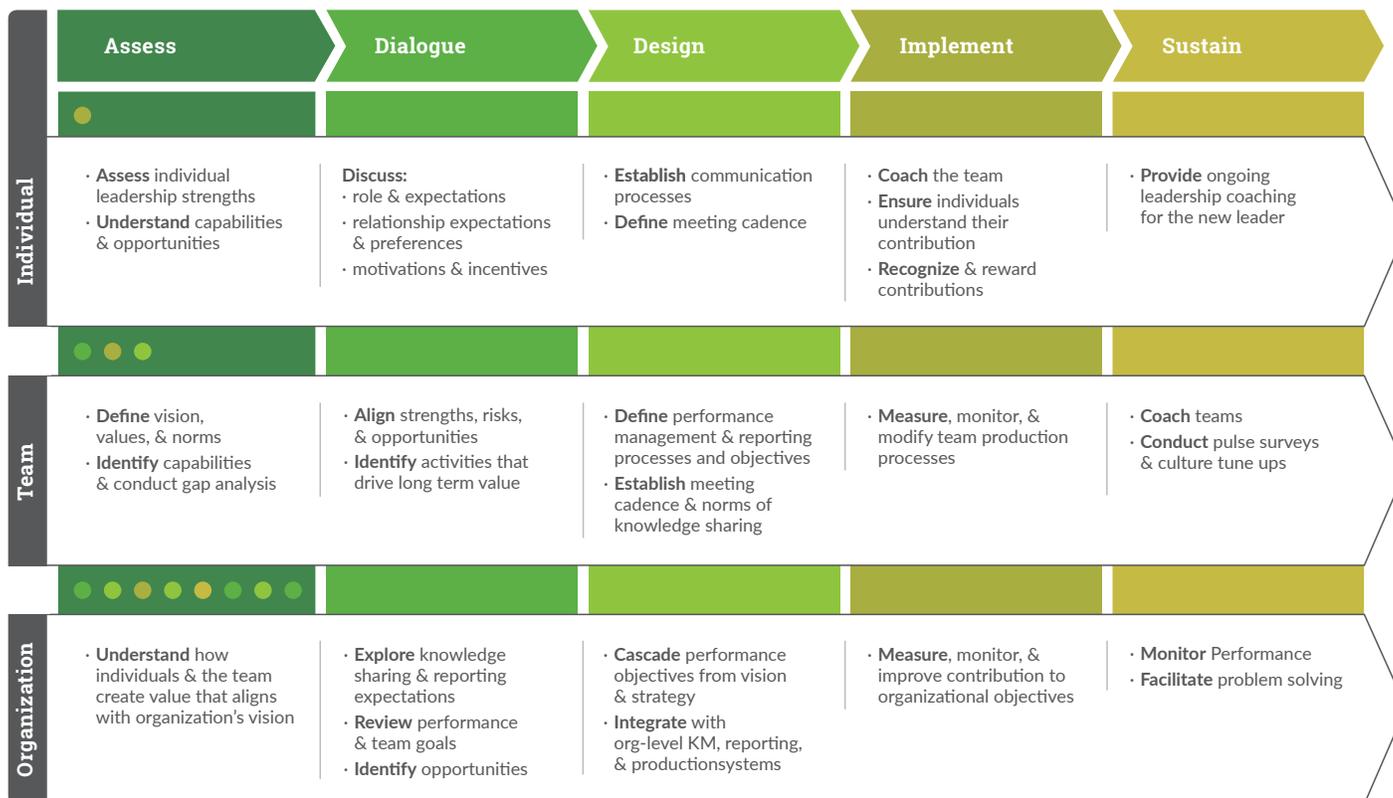
- Failing to build key relationships
- Being too slow to learn the organization's culture
- Neglecting to clarify role expectations

And while the typical assimilation process can be an effective way to start addressing these three items, the one-time nature of the intervention means that the work done is, at best, laying the foundation for continued work between the new leader and her new team. That's why at gothamCulture, our unique approach to new leader assimilation spans beyond these first facilitated interactions to include a set of wrap-around services that help accelerate team formation and shorten the timeline to full performance for any new leader.

## Our Approach

The gothamCulture approach to New Leader Assimilation applies our Assess, Dialogue, Design, Implement, and Sustain engagement methodology and focuses on understanding the expectations and environment of the new team at 3 levels: individual, team, and organization. The activities and engagements across all phases and levels create a customized assimilation road map for new leaders that charts the course to full performance.

## The gothamCulture Approach



Our team of organization development and leadership experts partner with new leaders to tailor their assimilation plan and provide coaching and facilitation support needed to achieve results and accelerate impact.

## REFERENCES

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