

From Functional Expertise to Systemic Leadership: Rethinking Transitions into General Management

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Abstract. *Transitions from functional roles to general management represent an important period for executive careers. Leaders move into totally different areas of responsibility and impact not only for their shareholders but also for society. In this new role, from managing one system, leaders move to synchronizing and managing multiple systems while crafting strategies, convincing multiple stakeholders and coordinating their efforts. This study, by creating a survey of 49 managers from 19 different countries and with interviews with 10 of them in detail, examines if the selection and transition processes are adequate to support the leaders to perform as expected. The findings show that the participants had limited knowledge and preparation for the new roles, few went through assessments, most took the roles with very short handover periods and very few had mentors or coaches during the transition and after the appointment. This study suggests that both organizations and the appointed leaders themselves underestimate the significance of the change. The transitions are considered as an extension of the prior successful functional performances, therefore the learning is pushed to the first period of the new role, during which the risk for failure increases because of the new context in which the interdependencies and dynamics are totally different than before. The study offers practical suggestions to focus on readiness assessment and selection process, early signalling and mental preparation, strong handover process and coaching support during and after the appointment for a successful transition management.*

Keywords: Systems theory, Transition Design, General Management, Leadership Transitions, Selection Process, Career Transitions, Executive Transition.

Introduction

In recent years, the environment in which general managers operate has become more volatile and difficult to predict. Disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, wars, supply chain instability, and accelerated digitalization have challenged the context for planning and predicting (Sasongko et al., 2024). The systems in which the organizations operate are more and more unpredictable, fast-paced and interdependent. Research on innovation shows that organizations which build external knowledge on connections, interdependencies and keep renewing themselves adapt better in such conditions (Yalamov, 2021), which means general managers themselves need to adapt and innovate constantly — unlike in their previous functional roles where experience, knowledge and depth were enough to drive success. This new environment makes budgets, plans and even sometimes strategies irrelevant and useless; this makes it difficult to manage the stakeholder’s expectations. In a nutshell, we need better prepared leaders to take general management responsibilities.

Despite this reality, transition to general management seems to follow the conventional and traditional methods. Functional managers are considered ready to have bigger responsibilities based on their successes related to their functional areas. While managing the functional systems and driving good results from those is important, the role which they are moving has very little to do with the previous one and cannot be seen as an extension of responsibility, rather a shift to a totally different one (Zhang, 2021).

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In the functional world, and generally after many years of experience, the patterns are easier to predict and manage. The input and output correlation is stronger and with experience and depth of knowledge in the field the functional leaders can predict faster and better both the outcome and the process flows. Basically, *ceteris paribus* works in one system better than in interacting multiple systems. In the interviews leaders generally complained about the speed and accuracy of the predictions, which is totally understandable, they were much quicker in their previous role and they were more accurate too and they got used to that pattern of themselves and took decisions too fast without completing the frame of references.

Systems theory provides a useful framework for addressing the new context of business life. By emphasizing interdependence, feedback, and the dynamic interaction between organizations and their environments (Bertalanffy, 1968), systems theory helps explain the shift from overseeing functional activities to coordinating relationships across interconnected subsystems. Research on corporate reengineering similarly argues that knowledge management is a critical factor in successful organizational adaptation (Bankova, 2005). Given the new reality, the question is: do we have the right selection and preparation processes for the leaders? Or even are we aware of the need for that?

Where these transitions are discussed, the focus is generally placed on behavioural adaptation or competency development rather than on how leaders learn to interpret organizational interdependencies, feedback processes, and broader systemic consequences (Akkermans et al., 2024). Recent work on leader identity dynamics under disruption (Nieberle et al., 2024) has begun to analyse how leaders adjust internally, but the specific moment of transition into general management is yet to be examined.

Drawing on survey data from 49 general managers across 19 countries, together with in-depth interviews, this study examines how transitions into general management are experienced and retrospectively evaluated. The findings suggest that preparation processes are often uneven and rely heavily on self-learning after appointment. Although many participants initially reported confidence in the beginning, retrospective accounts frequently described challenges related to prioritization, isolation, and understanding organizational interdependencies.

The study contributes in two ways. First, it frames the move into general management as a systemic shift rather than only an individual development challenge and suggests that the underestimation runs in both directions — organizations underestimate what the role requires, and appointed leaders underestimate how different the new role is. Second, more deliberate and system-oriented transition processes may reduce early-stage risks and support long term success for both individuals and organizations.

Literature review

The evolution of management thought: from control to integration

As the business context changed, the Management theories developed in history in parallel to those changes. The first focus was primarily on structures, authority, and efficiency as tools for coordination and control. Weber's bureaucracy was a tool to define organizations as rational systems governed through rules and hierarchy to achieve predictability and stability (Weber, 1947/1920). Taylor then approached more scientifically and underlined the importance of concentrating on task optimization at the individual level (Taylor, 1911). Fayol was more focusing on administration and his administrative theory further refined management through functions such as planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling, establishing a broader framework for managerial activity (Fayol, 1916).

There had been clear progress on the management theories however while keeping coordination as important, these approaches focused mostly on vertical authority rather than integration and coordination across different systems.

Later work shifted attention from formal structures toward managerial behavior and information. Mintzberg's work redefined managerial activity. He focused more on information exchange and relationships, rather than linear planning and control activities (Mintzberg, 1973, 2009). This perspective is very relevant to leadership transition research because it suggests that managerial effectiveness depends both on technical expertise and on the ability to understand and interpret context while integrating competing organizational demands.

Management theories have evolved in time together with the changing business context. They missed the interdependency element, and how to manage, drive or even use it as an advantage.

General systems theory: foundations and core concepts

General Systems Theory focuses on the interdependencies of the systems, feedback loops and importance of managing interactions. This is very relevant to the general management role; how the manager takes input, influence throughputs and expects outputs while a continuous interdependence is going on. Bertalanffy (1968) argued that complex systems share organizing principles that cannot be explained easily by taking each of them as independent. From a systems perspective, organizations are exposed to exchanging resources, information, and energy with their environments; they transform input into outputs through internal processes while feedback enables learning and adaptation (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972).

Four GST concepts are important to understand for general management. Interdependence: systems influence each other; one of them functioning well does not necessarily mean it contributes to the whole. Emergence: the whole is defined by the interactions between the systems. Feedback loops: positive or negative feedback shapes the performance. Non-linearity: cause and effect is often not linear.

These concepts bring us back to functional promotion logic. Success in a system alone does not automatically relate to success in governing the whole system. Leaders need to understand the connections more than the dynamics in each system.

Systems thinking and the role of the general manager

Once the managers understand the system theory and turn that into systems thinking, their ability to manage the whole improves. Systems thinking focuses attention on patterns, relationships, and leverage points (Senge, 1990; Checkland, 1994). For general managers, systems thinking helps to make the fundamental shift from functional problem-solving and focusing on one system or one department toward systemic understanding and coordination of the whole.

Compared with functional leaders — who are accountable for depth, efficiency, and execution within a defined domain — general managers are accountable for integration and coordination of strategy, structure, expectations, processes and culture to achieve their goals. Unlike the previous role, expertise or experience is replaced with the ability of understanding and prioritizing competing objectives and resource allocations, synchronizing interdependent efforts of functions, providing consistency, direction and purpose while taking care of the external factors and stakeholders.

This role also amplifies responsibility for culture, ethics, and role modelling because general managers have become a direct influence on all.

Systems-oriented approaches to organizational change imply that leaders must adapt their behaviours as well as their role identity, because the responsibility shifts from functional success and execution to systemic coordination.

General management transitions as systemic shifts

Understanding the role being so different requires the transition to be treated differently and carefully too. However, we can observe that the succession processes are heavily influenced by the functional performance. Limited transition research also supports this by highlighting that the organizations often underestimate the magnitude of change when individuals move to enterprise-level roles (Kates & Downey, 2008). The promotion period comes with multiple challenges and brings vulnerability; leadership changes can create disruption in coordination mechanisms, informal networks and quality of feedback loops. Effective transitions require deliberate choices and actions to reconfigure the system with role clarification, mentoring and coaching and enough time to learn the frame of references before major irreversible decisions are taken.

Systems theory has been very helpful to understand organizations and how their functions work in an interdependent manner, however its application to leadership transition has been very limited. Transitions have focused mostly on individual traits, competencies, or behaviours. This study positions transition design as the key variable and uses systems theory as the main reference.

Methodology

Research approach

In this study a mixed method was used to collect a strong data set to support my assumptions. A comprehensive survey with 54 questions covered demographics to processes; I built it on Survey Monkey and invited participants through it. During the survey period, I reached out to several participants to interview them. 10 who had completed the survey agreed; 5 face to face and 5 on video calls. The two methods together produced solid quantitative data alongside the personal experience and the words and feelings people used to describe the process.

Sample and research context

The participants consist of 49 general managers across 19 countries and multiple industries (consumer goods, retail, energy, telecommunications, finance, healthcare, and industrial services).

I kept an international scope of the sample to enhance the findings beyond a single national or institutional context. The aim was to reach out to general managers with 1-2 years of experience however needed to extend it to three years, allowing them to have fresh memories about the transition. Roles included CEOs, managing directors, business unit heads, and divisional general managers with full P&L responsibility. Most respondents were promoted internally (73%) and had executive education (71%).

Participants were recruited through professional networks: London Business School and Harvard Business School alumni, and targeted outreach from my company network.

Data collection

Quantitative survey. The questionnaire of 54 questions was administered via Survey Monkey between December 2019 and January 2022. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured.

In my survey I covered four main areas; first was about the facts related to the person; age, gender, education, expertise, industry, location, career progress. Second was about how the

transition process started with the selection, followed by assessment, preparation and handover. Third area covered the early experience in the role; decision making processes, priority setting, concerns, time allocation and the readiness level they felt in the beginning. Last part covered the reflections after certain time in the role, learnings, adjustments and new ideas. The survey had different question types; multiple-choice, Likert-scale items, ranking exercises as well as open-ended ones to have qualitative input.

Qualitative interviews. To complement, verify and deepen the survey findings, I conducted interviews with 10 participants, five face-to-face and five via video conferencing platforms, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. I took detailed notes during each interview.

I had prepared an initial set of questions in advance. By avoiding “yes/no” questions and focusing on “why” and “how”, interviewees were encouraged to share their thought processes as well as their feelings. The conversations explored the personal experience of the transition, perceived gaps between expectations and reality, changes in leadership identity and decision-making, reflections on responsibility, and retrospective assessments of organizational support and self-preparation.

Ethical considerations. Participants were informed of the study purpose, participation was voluntary, anonymity was preserved via Survey Monkey, and no identifying personal or organizational information is disclosed.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis. Survey data were analyzed to identify patterns related to preparation, transition design, and early role experience. I wanted to understand the patterns and correlations between certain elements to strengthen my assumptions. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were employed via Survey Monkey to explore correlations between preparation programs and handover duration, coaching support and timing of major decisions, and perceived readiness and work–life balance changes.

I am aware that the nature of the study and the sample size are not enough for generalization. The focus though was on identifying patterns which can be helpful for future managerial practices.

Qualitative analysis. I decided to have two parts for the interview; first one with selected questions from the survey that I believed were worth analyzing in detail and the second with questions related to systems theory and thinking to check their reaction to the concept and the possible implications for their role. Per participant I interviewed, I printed their answers to those questions and took notes of their answers to ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions related to them. The focus was mainly on the role identity, interdependence of the functions, quality of feedback loops and also the personal experience and challenges of the leaders through those processes. After the interviews I cross-checked the evolving ideas and patterns to compare them across interviews.

I followed the logic of thematic analyses to spot themes emerging from the qualitative analysis to explain patterns, highlight difficulties, and provide understanding that gives better insights to lived experiences.

I preferred not to use the findings as a separate stream; rather qualitative findings were used to interpret and explain quantitative patterns. I was happy to observe the qualitative research confirmed and strengthened the findings of the quantitative research.

Results

The findings point to a consistent misalignment between the demands of general management roles and the way transitions into these roles are typically designed and supported. Participants generally

brought strong functional backgrounds and sustained records of high performance, which creates a false sense of confidence; the transition process itself was often informal, quick, and weakly structured. I have organized the results into four thematic areas: structural gaps in transition design, perceived readiness and hindsight reflection, support mechanisms and early decision-making, and qualitative insights into the experience of leadership.

Structural gaps in general management transitions

The quantitative data reveal frequent shortcomings in how organizations structure transition into general management roles.

Assessment was weak: 43% of the participants had no formal assessment prior to the appointment. This suggests that decision makers relied mainly on functional performance and took it as evidence of readiness for the new role.

Advance signaling was often limited: 31% of the participants had never been identified as potential general managers before the appointment itself, while the remaining 69% had been told at one point during their prior career. This leaves little time for cognitive preparation and pushes the learning process into the early tenure, when managers are under pressure to act. Not being mentally prepared makes leaders reactive rather than proactive.

78% of respondents did not participate in any role-specific preparation or training program designed for general management responsibilities. Of those who had a program, 36% mentioned that it did not help. The process had two issues at the same time: lack of preparation and quality of preparation. Most entered the role relying primarily on prior functional experience.

Handover practices further illustrate this structural gap. Nearly half (45%) of the participants reported a handover period of one week or less, including 29% who had only a single day, while several reported no handovers at all due to abrupt predecessor departures.

71% of the participants did not have a mentor or coach.

Managing internal complexity and appointment abroad

Transitions into general management frequently involve significant relational complexity. Internal promotion was common, and 61% of the internally promoted reported becoming the manager of former peers. While managing former colleagues is not inherently problematic, respondents consistently emphasized that this situation requires deliberate preparation, role clarity, and explicit organizational support. During the interviews participants mentioned the difficulty of leading a colleague who was a competitor before for the position. In the absence of such preparation, newly appointed general managers described difficulties in redefining boundaries and setting a new tone, reshaping expectations, and establishing leadership legitimacy with respect and trust.

41% of the participants were appointed to another country as a general manager, this also represents a fundamental change in the context and culture. The difficulty of bringing the family along was mentioned during the interviews.

Perceived readiness and hindsight reflection

49% of the respondents mentioned they felt ready or totally ready at the time of the appointment. This situation, in fact is not a surprise, while the companies saw the functional leaders ready for the new role because of functional performance, looks like the leaders themselves were also sharing the same opinion about readiness. I would argue they supported each other's biases.

After one year in the role, 73% of respondents said they would have changed something if they were given the chance again. Majority of them also highlighted that their priorities have

changed and they have discovered being alone, 61% agreed they should have prepared better. At the same time, 78% reported that they had learned to manage expectations better, this suggests that the self-reflection was real, not just retrospective regret.

These reflections suggest that initial confidence was often rooted in functional competence and performance rather than the requirements of the new role.

Importantly, 55% of the participants mentioned that their work-life balance got worse, which puts more pressure on personal life.

Support mechanisms and early decision-making

Post-appointment support mechanisms were applied unevenly. 71% of the participants did not have a coach or mentor. Among those who received coaching support, 80% found it helpful or very helpful. During the interviews, I cross-checked the early decision-making processes and the impact of the coaches and mentors; participants highlighted that the coaches have helped them to have a better perspective and frame of reference. This finding suggests that the respondents with coaching support tended to have better calibrated decisions by considering different inputs and perspectives.

These findings suggest that coaching and mentoring helped the leaders to take better business decisions.

Qualitative insights: experiencing the systemic shift

The interviews confirmed the patterns of the survey results. During the interviews some concepts were recurring; role isolation, identity and role difference, expanded responsibility.

Role isolation. Almost all respondents mentioned loneliness after the appointment as the main feeling. As one participant noted, “You suddenly realize that everyone has an opinion, but the decision — and its consequences — are yours alone.”

Identity and role difference. Respondents emphasized a significant shift from being valued for expertise and experience to being judged on leadership and choices. They highlighted the difference in requirements, speed and expectations. This shift and the impact on the leaders were in line with the findings of the survey related to preparation and assessment. One participant clearly stated, after 6 months I realized that it had nothing to do with the old role.

Expanded responsibility. Participants reported the overwhelming difference on responsibility scope and impact. Many described the importance of understanding the new role and the new impact they create on the ecosystem they operate in.

Taken together, these three themes show that leaders went through a major shift in their leadership impact and model in the very beginning of their tenure, while carrying full responsibility.

Summary of key findings

The findings indicate that general management transitions are frequently under-estimated and under-designed. Organizations tend to rely on functional performance as a reference for readiness, while overlooking the selection, assessment, preparation and support mechanisms which secure selecting the right leaders and preparing them for the challenge.

The results also show us that the leaders equally underestimate the new role and the complexity of it. The realization comes later, and this delayed realization increases personal pressure and organizational risk during the critical early phase of tenure.

Discussion

Using systems theory as a lens and empirical evidence from 49 general managers across 19 countries, the study suggests that general management transitions are not structurally managed as part of the career change but seen as an extension of a successful functional expertise. Although leaders also underestimate the change coming with the new role, the difficulties they face during the transition are mainly because of the organizational design.

By redefining the move to general management as a systemic shift rather than a functional promotion, the study invites more deliberate investment in transition design alongside the growing investment in leadership development and executive education.

The findings highlight structural gaps however I still take the outcome with a pinch of salt as transition experiences do not only emerge from the structure; initial challenges may also be related to leadership styles, prior experiences, leadership traumas and cultural backgrounds. This is worth keeping in mind for future studies.

Functional performance as a misleading proxy for systemic readiness

One of the central insights of this study highlights functional performance as a proxy for readiness for general management. While high functional performance remains an important prerequisite for promotion in most of the organizations, the findings suggest that it is not enough to verify the potential and leadership capabilities required for the new role.

The managers in their functional role with experience and expertise start building very strong input to output correlations, they get faster and efficient. They know how one small move on one topic can influence the other and how the results can vary. This ability becomes a muscle memory for the leaders which in a functional role is definitely a strength and they feel more powerful and wiser. The early confidence comes from the sharpened muscle memory of getting things done, that also creates a situation during the appointment as ‘they do not know what they do not know in the new role’. However, the new role requires different skills, general manager needs to manage the functions led by confident and strong functional heads, competing elements of the functions, resource allocations between those and more importantly synchronization of the events between the functions which are interdependent. The discovery of this reality should not be postponed and left to learning while leading.

Support mechanisms as systemic enablers

Support mechanisms should not be treated as optional or extra, but as an integral part of the transition. The shift leaders need to make in understanding, interpreting and reacting to the new environment is significant and counter-intuitive to what they have been doing before; without coaching, mentoring, structured handover and preparation, they are expected to construct the new frame of reference while already operating in it. Preparation and handover periods give leaders time to reflect and learn, and to observe the new reality before taking important decisions.

Practical implications for organizations and aspiring general managers

Based on the findings, four practical design elements emerge for organizations.

Role-specific readiness assessment. The requirement of the new role is different from the previous one. Organizations need to assess potential based on future requirements such as ability to lead under pressure, managing uncertainty and unknown, ability to coordinate and motivate. A separate or independent assessment can help to avoid the overshadowing of functional performance. The search is for a chief not a master.

Anticipatory signaling (pre-appointment) and preparation. Providing early notice helps the leaders to prepare the shift and mindset. It gives time for stakeholder mapping and system understanding. Introduction of a structured pre-appointment system-mapping process can help the leader identify key interdependencies, culture and business dynamics.

Structured handover as system learning. Handover should not be treated as an administrative process, rather a deep understanding of the key stakeholders and interdependencies. An honest information about the organization and the unseen realities can be very handy to understand the real dynamics. Handover periods also serve as good periods for building buffers for critical decisions and collecting information by asking the right questions.

Formal support (ideally starting before the appointment) in the first 6–12 months. Appointing a coach or mentor is crucial for the leaders, in the new era of isolation and loneliness, mentors and coaches can be the discussion partners to support healthy reflections, add perspectives, build new points of reference.

For aspiring general managers, results suggest proactive preparation. The managers should start by reflecting on their functional performance and how irrelevant it can become in the new role. They need to start building a different mindset to experience different leadership challenges in different business contexts than in a functional department. While working on skills to manage the tasks better by understanding the strategy, interdependencies, resource limitations they need to prepare soft skills to be able to convince and mobilize the organization.

Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to general management literature in three ways. First, it uses systems theory as the lens for leadership transitions, an area that has not been studied from this perspective before. Second, it challenges promotion logic by demonstrating how functional success cannot be used as the main proxy. Third, it shows the difficulties in general management transitions as an organizational design issue rather than as an individual deficit.

Limitations and future research directions

The study has limitations. The network used for inviting participants is limited to my educational and business network. 80% of the participants are male, I think this is in line with the C suite representation however still is a limitation to understand the full scope of gender diversity.

Data are collected from individuals based on their own perception and experience, and perspectives from organizations, boards, or direct reports and HR were not included. While interviews mitigated some bias, future research could benefit from studies designed for different actors.

Since the sample is purposive, it is not statistically representative, and findings should be treated as patterns to think and learn from rather than full scale generalization.

Future studies could focus on the same issue from the perspective of the organizations, especially the boards who appoint general managers for big corporations. Longitudinal research designs could further examine how readiness evolves over time and how the organizations and managers are mitigating the risk as the new experience and learning comes into shape.

Although the correlations were looked at, the qualitative analyses were done without formal coding.

Another important note is about culture, leadership transitions into general management roles are also embedded within broader cultural and institutional contexts. While the present study includes a geographically diverse sample, it does not explicitly differentiate between these

contextual influences. Future research could examine how cultural and institutional factors influence transition experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

Starting from my own experience, this study helped me to understand how different the general manager's role is from functional leadership. With this study, I wanted to understand whether functional leaders are properly prepared for the systemic demands of general management roles. Using systems theory as the lens and using mixed-methods evidence from 49 general managers across 19 countries, the findings show that there is a pattern of under-preparation and structural gaps in transition design. The results show that the challenges related with general management transitions are less about individual capabilities or shortcomings and more related to under designed or non-existent transition processes.

On the other hand, observing highly capable functional leaders struggling with the new role while starting it with confidence shows that the individuals also underestimate the transition.

As a result, both organizations and individuals need to understand that the requirements needed for functional performance are different than the ones for a general manager. Functional success is derived from experience, expertise, and control within the domain, whereas general management requires strong prioritization, synchronization and coordination between interdependent parts of the ecosystem they operate in. When this shift is overlooked or insufficiently recognized, newly appointed general managers may experience difficulties both in their new function as well as in their personal lives, which also stands for a risk for the organizations and their progress.

In an increasingly interconnected and volatile business environment we operate in, the role of the general manager has become both more complex and more consequential. This study suggests that improving general management outcomes requires a deliberate choice of selecting the right person; not a master but a chief, preparing them to activate beyond their muscle memory and supporting them along the way to become the leader both they aspire to be and organizations require.

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