

CLEARFIELD ADVISORY

Before You Build

What Every Incoming Leader Needs to Know About the Floor They're Inheriting

A Clearfield Advisory Whitepaper

Clearfield Advisory

Restoring the Conditions for Organizational Joy

clearfield-advisory.com

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M O V E M E N T O N E

The Numbers Nobody Is Talking About

Over half of executives fail within their first eighteen months in a new role. That number appears across DDI, McKinsey, Harvard Business Review, and Heidrick & Struggles with remarkable consistency. The range runs from 40% to 50% depending on the study and the definition of failure used.

75% of new executives feel unprepared for their new role.

Unsuccessful transitions produce 20% lower employee engagement and 15% lower team performance in the organizations receiving them — damage that persists long after the executive has been replaced.

The financial cost compounds quickly. A floundering CEO can destroy in weeks a market valuation that took a decade to build. Severance, replacement search fees, litigation, and stalled initiatives multiply the direct cost into multiples of the original salary investment.

These numbers have been stable for decades. The interventions designed to address them — executive coaching, structured onboarding programs, transition plans, first-ninety-day frameworks — have not moved them meaningfully.

The reason is not that these interventions are wrong. It's that they address the incoming leader's readiness without addressing the structural conditions of the organization the leader is entering.

The floor beneath the transition has never been examined.

That is what this paper is about.

M O V E M E N T T W O

What the Incoming Leader Actually Inherits

The standard transition narrative focuses on the incoming leader. Their mandate. Their style. Their strategic vision. Their first ninety days.

What it doesn't examine is the organization they're entering.

Not its financials. Not its market position. Not its talent profile. Those get examined thoroughly in the selection process.

What doesn't get examined is the structural floor the incoming leader will be building strategy on from day one.

Every organization has five structural conditions that determine whether the people inside it can carry what they're being asked to carry. These conditions exist independently of who leads the organization. They were present before the previous leader arrived. They shaped what that leader could and couldn't accomplish. They will shape what the incoming leader can and can't accomplish — unless they're identified and addressed before strategy is committed on top of them.

Authority

Who actually owns the consequential decision when it goes wrong. Not the org chart answer. The structural answer. In most organizations these are different. The incoming leader who assumes the org chart reflects actual decision ownership discovers the gap when their first consequential decision is quietly reversed by someone whose informal authority was never mapped.

Orientation

Whether the leadership team shares a genuine frame for what the organization is actually optimizing for. Not the stated mission. What the organization is actually willing to sacrifice when things get hard. An incoming leader who builds strategy assuming shared orientation discovers the fracture when five leaders execute the same initiative in five different directions.

Risk

Whether the cost of inaction is visible alongside the cost of action. Most organizations map risk asymmetrically. The incoming leader who doesn't know which risks have never been named inherits the blank column without knowing it exists.

Temporality

Whether the organization is still executing the right plan for the conditions that currently exist. Incoming leaders almost always inherit initiatives launched under conditions that have since changed. Nobody has structural responsibility for telling them which ones.

Agency

Whether the people with expertise and authority have genuine permission to act on what they know. Organizations that have experienced leadership instability almost always have Agency fractures. The capable people learned what full honesty costs under the previous regime. They stopped raising things. The incoming leader receives a sanitized version of organizational reality until they've demonstrated — through specific and repeatable experiences — that honesty is structurally safe again.

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These five conditions don't appear in the transition plan. They don't surface in the first ninety days framework. They don't show up in the board's assessment of organizational readiness.

They show up six months in — as the initiative that isn't moving, the alignment that didn't hold, the capable person who just resigned, the decision that was made in the room and unmade in the hallway.

By then the incoming leader has committed strategy on top of a floor they never saw.

MOVEMENT THREE

The Instrument

The Structural Readiness Assessment is a diagnostic instrument designed to map the five structural conditions of an organization before the incoming leader commits strategy on top of them.

It doesn't evaluate the leadership team's performance. It doesn't produce recommendations for restructuring or redesign. It doesn't require the organization to be rebuilt.

It produces a Fault Map — a single document that shows which structural conditions are sound, which are fractured, where the fractures live, how long they've been active, and what they're currently producing.

The assessment consists of five individual conversations with members of the existing leadership team — conducted obliquely, without the team knowing they're being structurally assessed — and one session in which the Fault Map is delivered and the leadership team designs their own structural repair.

The entire assessment is complete within the incoming leader's first sixty to ninety days — before strategy is committed, before initiatives are launched, before the structural conditions of the floor have produced their first consequential surprise.

What the incoming leader receives is not a consultant's prescription. It is a map of the floor they're standing on — produced from the inside, owned by the organization, repaired by the people who will live inside the repair.

The no ongoing dependency clause is structural not commercial. You cannot restore Agency by removing it from the repair process. The repair has to belong to the organization.

What the incoming leader gains is something no transition plan, no executive coach, no first ninety days framework currently provides:

The ability to see the floor before they build on it.

That is not a competitive advantage in the conventional sense.

It is the difference between building on solid ground and building on a floor that has been shifting beneath the organization for years without anyone having the instrument to show it.

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