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Interim Management and Organizational Support: Applications for the Human Resource Professional

Robert S. Sterneck

Independent Researcher[1],

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Abstract

Interim management represents a critical operational contingency that virtually every organizational leader will encounter throughout their career. At the organizational level, unplanned leadership vacancies frequently arise due to sudden executive departures, extended medical leaves, structural realignments, or performance-related turnover. Despite the prevalence and strategic significance of these transitional periods, most organizations continue to treat interim leadership as a reactive, ad-hoc necessity, lacking the formalized governance, policy frameworks, and support structures required for seamless execution. To address this capability gap, this article synthesizes and integrates contemporary interim leadership research into a practical assessment framework adaptable across various managerial tiers and organizational models. Ultimately, this framework provides Human Resource (HR) practitioners with an actionable roadmap to formulate proactive talent policies, design robust support systems, and optimize organizational readiness for future interim leadership demands.

Keywords: interim leadership, acting leadership, temporary leadership, succession planning

[1] *Dr. Sterneck is a Senior Manager with the Boeing Company, independent scholar, and researcher. He is currently on international assignment leading a multi-disciplinary group of professionals deploying a key strategic initiative and localizing the statement of work for sustaining support. Robert has progressed through multiple levels of management with increasing responsibilities supporting both US-domestic and international activities. In addition, Robert researches and writes on topics including management structure, expatriate and localization approaches, and economic development. Robert holds a Doctorate in Management from the University of Maryland University College, a Master in Management from the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Purdue University. Robert can be reached at rsterneck@gmail.com*

1. Introduction

Interim Leadership Background

Interim management is a position that virtually every manager will encounter at some point in their career and yet there has been very little research or focus on how to make these positions successful. Success must be assessed not only for the organization, but also with respect to benefit to the individual manager. Recent research identifies interim management as a unique management discipline that requires organizational policies and practices along with individual managerial and leadership attributes to successfully complete an interim management position (Sterneck, 2015). It is with this perspective of interim leadership as a specific management discipline that allows practitioners to understand and develop appropriate structures and support systems to deploy interim managers as a strategic element of the organization.

Before delving into specific policies and practices, a short discussion on terminology is beneficial. There are many terms used in practice that confuse the situation. Positions and titles including "acting", "interim", or "temporary" are abundant and can be found in virtually any organization at some point in time. Some organizations may even differentiate within this grouping of terms. For example, a large aerospace firm differentiates between "acting" and "temporary" based on the level of authority and official recognition on the employee's record. In this example, an "acting" manager may provide daily direction and organizational leadership, but does not hold the managerial authority to administer policy related to personnel performance issues. This firm further defines a "temporary" manager as having the same authority and organizational responsibility as a permanent manager with the position documented in corporate employee records. Due to the wide variety of definitions and interpretations of these types of positions, this paper uses the term "interim" to reflect any position where an individual fills a managerial position while a permanent manager is sought. The period filled by the interim manager is known as the "interregnum", a term derived from the transition of a sovereign and applied to managerial transitions beginning in the early 1990s (Farquhar, 1991). The interregnum extends from the time the position is vacated through the transition to the permanent leader.

The interim management problem space can be interpreted across a broad spectrum of situations. The space is depicted in figure 1 with respect to two key elements: internal or external candidacy and planned or unplanned position vacancy. While an organization may encounter a situation within any portion of the problem space, some of the most urgent situations are those that come about through an unanticipated or unplanned vacancy. For a variety of reasons including expediency, cost, company knowledge and experience; organizations often turn to internal candidates to fill interim leadership roles. This case depicted in the upper left

quadrant of figure 1 and termed "internal interim" is the focus of this research and application. The ubiquity of this situation and the immediate impact on the organization highlight the need to understand, prepare, and ultimately deploy policies and procedures to ensure successful transitions and activities throughout the tenure of an interim leader.

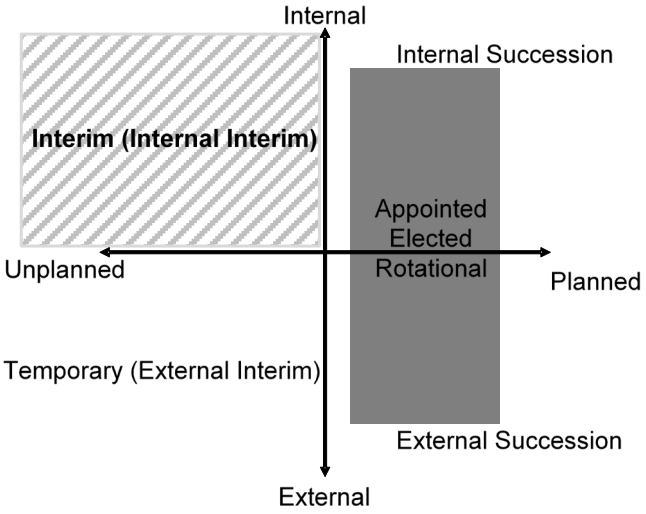


Figure 1. A representation of the relationship between various types of temporary leadership roles. Internal interim management is represented as the upper left quadrant. Adapted from Sterneck, 2015.

The need to fill an interim management position may be the result of a variety of situations. Positions may be vacated due to factors including personnel rotations, illness, organizational re-structuring, or performance. In many of these situations, a leader's departure will leave the organization in turmoil. Some of the most traumatic situations organizations face result in an interim management position where the management vacancy is induced by an unplanned departure or forced removal of a leader. These disruptive, unplanned succession events go beyond the traditional scope of succession planning and require a different perspective on organizational planning, candidate selection, and organizational support throughout the interregnum. Recent research provides insight into this type of succession event and identifies 17 factors contributing to success of an interim position (Sterneck, 2015). This research is distinguished from previous investigations by the integration and synthesis across leadership levels and type of organizations allowing for a broad interpretation and application across organizations. Further, an assessment of these factors provides an organization the ability to leverage strengths and identify gaps facilitating enhanced preparation in the event of a disruptive succession situation. It

is the intent of this paper to distill this information into a practical tool for human resource professionals for deployment within their organizations.

2. Methodology and Evidence Synthesis

This paper builds on previous research which employed a systematic literature review and associated evidence synthesis to integrate a comprehensive set of published articles across research disciplines. Utilizing a realist synthesis and Context, generative Mechanism, and Outcome [CMO] approach (Gough & Thomas, 2012), in association with a hybrid Weight of Evidence (Gough, 2007) TAPUPAS [transparency, accuracy, purposivity, utility, propriety, accessibility, and specificity] (Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, & Barnes, 2003) categorization scheme was applied to the evidence set. The evidence set consisted of 42 published articles and studies answering the research question: "*What attributes affect departmental or higher leadership performance in interim management situations induced by disruptive events*?" (Sterneck, 2015, p. 14). This extensive literature search provides a comprehensive review beginning with Farquahar's (1989) initial work through recent publications. This evidence-based approach guides findings and the development of an organizational assessment tool which is further refined and presented in this paper.

The earlier findings identify 17 elements categorized into four portions of an interim assignment. The four categories are role structure followed by the initiation, interim leadership, and exit phases. The interim management experience is influenced by the 17 elements, each playing a critical role in the success or failure during the interim tenure. It is through an understanding of these 17 elements that we have the ability to structure human resource support structures and systems to facilitate positive outcomes of an interim management position. The following section presents the assessment tool providing the human resource practitioner an application of this research to enhance performance during an interim tenure.

3. Assessment Categories and Elements

The 17 factors are grouped to coincide with the various phases of the interregnum. Role Structure represents the preparation period and includes considerations with respect to the type of position and how it is induced along with structural attributes of regulation and policy. These elements provide the foundation and structure that the organization draws upon when the need for an interim leader is realized. The second grouping of factors coincides with the initiation period of an interim position. It is this period when the candidate is selected. Two key elements coinciding with the selection of the candidate are compensation and the anticipated tenure of the position. These elements flow directly from organizational policy but may see challenges due to the pace required to fill the position as well as the level of disruption to the organization and to the individuals in the group. The next set of factors is realized as part of the interim management tenure. These factors include individual

leadership attributes, group dynamics, organizational support, along with internal and external stakeholder responses.

This assessment tool allows the practitioner to evaluate each element related to an interim management application using stratification across six levels. The assessment provides the opportunity to understand the current state of processes, procedures, and support structures related to interim management along with the ability to identify gaps such that actions can be taken to strengthen the organization's ability to deploy interim leaders in times of need. Figure 2 and table 1 present an example of the assessment tool. An approach to tailor the content to a particular organization or business unit follows. Using the 17 categories, the individual levels and expectations can be aligned to specific situations facilitating use across different types of organizations. Each organization should begin with the base definitions within the 17 categories but may choose to refine the definitions of each assessment level to reflect their specific organization's terminology. The goal of the assessment is to provide a deeper understanding of the influencing factors contributing to successful application of interim management and for the organization to embark upon activities to further strengthen the foundation and support structure in order that future interim management situations benefit from enhanced readiness, ultimately leading to more successful interim management tenures.

3.1 Role Structure

Role Structure encompasses the organizational foundations and the impetus of the role. The first element is organizational *Regulation and Policy*. Regulation and Policy is comprised of two sub-elements for consideration. The first is the presence of policies regarding interim management. The second is the level of maturity of the policies with respect to interim management. The former is understood through a review of the relevant elements. Regulation, labor law, and other external requirements may determine, in the short-term, specific actions or mechanisms associated with the position. The assessment scale rating reflects the level of knowledge and understanding of internal and external requirements and limitations. The second portion of the rating recognizes the level of maturity of internal policies for compliance with the structural requirements. These requirements may include internal policies and procedures as well as external legal or regulatory requirements. These two elements together determine much of the compliance risk when implementing interim leadership positions.

Circumstance brings with it one primary assumption: through either lack of planning or an unforeseen event, the leadership position is vacated without an immediate successor to fill the position. Essentially, the rating takes into account the level of disruption the vacancy drives into the organization.

Position Structure is a result of an understanding of the first two elements. The rating reflects the ability of the organization to identify and execute an interim leadership

role in order to mitigate the time lag and associated disruption to the organization resulting from lack of organizational action.

3.2 Initiation Phase

The Initiation Phase puts the Role Structure elements into action. *Selection* of the candidate and associated compensation structures are the two areas of interest during this short phase of the interim leadership cycle. While selection and compensation are generally determined by organizational policy, it is the ability to execute these actions that this addressed by this portion of the assessment. Again, assuming previous succession planning activities are insufficient to fill the position, the Selection element rating accounts for the ability of the organization to proceed with candidate identification and selection activities that are not only compliant, but stand up to ethical review and stakeholder perception. The *Compensation* element is intended to assess the ability of the organization to provide sufficient and appropriate compensation on an interim basis reflecting the roles and responsibilities of the position.

3.3 Interim Leadership Phase

The *Interim Leadership Phase* comprises the period of performance for the interim leader. While the foundational elements of the previous phases flow into the interim leadership phase, performance is also influenced by many factors encountered during this phase. The ten elements during this phase are: tenure, authority, attributes and capabilities, support, stakeholder perception, group motivation, communication, personal motivation, and development. Each brings with it unique characteristics and challenges.

Tenure is a sub-component of the interregnum and represents the time during which the interim leader holds the leadership role. Tenure is influenced by two primary factors: the ability to define and hold to a period of service as well as the length of the period of service. The ability of the organization to clearly define the anticipated time period of the position and adhere to the published tenure enhances stakeholder trust and organizational stability. The second component of tenure is the length of service. Research indicates the one-year mark as the general time when results during the leadership period decline (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010; Didrichsen, 2006). Literature also supports shorter periods as more desirable, recognizing the need to quickly select the appropriate leader for the permanent role (Sterneck, 2015).

While the position by-definition is temporary, leadership success as an interim is supported by the level of *authority* held by the interim leader. This authority flows from the policies, procedures, and regulations discussed earlier. In addition, it is incumbent upon the individual to garner recognition as a leader through their own actions. Alignment of organizational structures and the individual's actions aid in the overall success of the interim.

Attributes and Capabilities is another area where alignment to the position is critical to facilitate a successful interim tenure. It is imperative to ensure that the interim leader has both the technical capabilities and the leadership attributes to navigate the interregnum. Interims often embark upon a dual role where they retain a significant portion of their previous role and expand into the interim leadership role (Mundt, 2004; Soltys, 2011). Given the organizational instability generated by the vacating of a leadership position, leadership actions leading to prompt recognition as the leader are as critical, if not more, than the technical requirements of the position.

As these interim leadership positions arise from an unplanned event, the interim leader will likely not be fully prepared to step into the position. For this reason, supplemental *support* needs to be anticipated for the leader. This support may come from a variety of sources. Consideration needs to be granted allowing the interim leader to garner support from subordinates, peers, superiors, as well as external stakeholders. This support may come in many forms ranging from organizational policy to individual actions. While others provide support, it is incumbent upon the individual leader to elicit support as well as take advantage of the support offered from others. This support factor ranges from the most negative form of active resistance to a fully supporting structure that provides the interim leader the opportunity to take full advantage of organizational and interpersonal support systems.

Stakeholder Perception is a result of many factors and is essential for success during the interregnum. Similar to support, stakeholders include both internal and external people and organizations. Stakeholder Perception influences both the period of performance as well as the transition period to the permanent leader and as such, is essential for both the short-term as well as the long-term.

Group Motivation refers to the organization(s) and personnel directly under the responsibility and authority of the interim leader. As the interim leader enters the role through an unplanned transition, garnering the support of subordinates is essential for the organization to perform during the interregnum and prepare for the placement of a permanent leader. Individual leadership plays the largest role in motivating subordinates during this period.

Communication encompasses both the amount as well as type and level of transparency. While there may be restrictions to providing 100% full and transparent information due to the situation, communication is a large contributor to building trust and acceptance by stakeholders. Within the bounds of confidentiality and legal requirements, generally more communication is better than less.

Acceptance is similar to stakeholder perception, but refers to acceptance into the specific role as leader and manifests itself in the actions of the stakeholders during the interim period. These actions may facilitate or inhibit the leader's ability to execute during their period of performance.

Personal Motivation needs to be understood by both the individual and the organization. From the individual perspective, the range may be from an individual-centric motivation to enhance a resume with a leadership role to a purely altruistic perspective of support to the organization. The individual candidate needs to be cognizant of the possibility of being manipulated into taking an interim role (Sterneck, 2015). While the opportunity may provide benefit to the individual, neither the organization nor the individual should expect that the interim leader will be placed in the role permanently before the full candidate identification and selection process is complete. Perception of favoritism or nepotism need to be avoided to mitigate negative consequences.

Development is one aspect that is often promoted as an opportunity for the interim leader to accept a position. While the opportunity does provide a situation for the individual leader to exercise their leadership abilities, the position is not generally reflective of a longer-term stable role and, as such, the type of leadership characteristics employed may or may not be indicative of performance in other situations. This is not intended to be positive or negative, only that it is necessary to recognize that an interim leadership position requires a unique set of leadership attributes and abilities.

3.4 Exit Phase

The Exit Phase comprises the time from which the permanent leader is identified and has lasting effects on the future path of the organization and for the departing interim leader.

Transition from the interim leader to the permanent leader is another disruptive event for the organization as it represents additional change. Generally, transition to a permanent leader represents an increase in the stability of the organization in the long-run, but presents short-term tension and instability. The transition is influenced as much by the permanent leader's actions as by the interim leader's. It is critical for the permanent leader to understand the interim leader's personal motivation for accepting the interim position and leverage it in a positive manner. Particularly in cases where the interim leader is not selected for the permanent position, there may be questions as to why another individual was placed into the role. The follow-on role for the departing interim leader is also a critical decision for the organization. Consideration needs to be given to stakeholder perception and to the experience the interim leader gained during the interregnum.

Retention may be a secondary effect of the interim role. Several factors may influence retention of the individual leader. Performance during the interregnum, personal motivation and expectations, as well as alignment to the new leader's organization may all be factors to consider. Particularly in organizations where the interim role is a senior leadership position, "second wave departures" (Goler, 2001, p. 397) need to be considered. Second wave departures are situations where other leaders depart as

a result of permanent placement of an individual and may result in increased instability for the organization.

4. Application

While the theoretical basis allows the reader to understand the elements of interim management, it is the application that allows practitioners to capitalize on this knowledge and add value to their respective organizations. Referring back to figure 1, this application aligns directly to internal interim leadership positions vacated through unplanned or emergent events. When applying the results of this research, the practitioner needs to not only understand the maturity of each element, but also organizational needs. The following five step process aids the practitioner in applying the interim management assessment and associated actions to their respective organizations. This review should be conducted on a regular semi-annual or annual basis to ensure continued alignment to organizational requirements.

1. Identify Organizational Need: Of particular interest is the maturity and application of succession planning and application. For an organization that has a complete and fully defined succession plan, the likelihood of an unplanned vacancy is minimized. However, many organizations do not have robust and fully deployed succession plans (Giambatista, Rowe & Riaz, 2005) supporting the need for interim leadership preparation and planning.

2. Review and Refine Element Definitions: This step is not intended to re-write the element definitions, but does provide the practitioner the option to review and refine the wording to align terminology to the appropriate individual organizational nomenclature. The complete spectrum is maintained so the assessment can take full advantage of differentiation opportunities.

3. Identify Element Targets: Given the unique nature of each individual organization, the target level for each of the 17 elements is dependent upon organizational needs. The practitioner should review each of the 17 elements and identify a target value along the zero to five spectrum. It is expected that there are varied target levels dependent upon organizational maturity and expectations.

4. Assessment: An organizational review is conducted and mapped against each of the 17 elements. The results are plotted along with the target values identified in step 3 (figure 2).

5. Gap Analysis and Action Planning: Based on the assessment, the practitioner conducts a gap analysis and identifies specific actions to move the ratings toward the target levels. Individual actions plans are developed and deployed to improve organizational readiness to implement interim leadership activities.

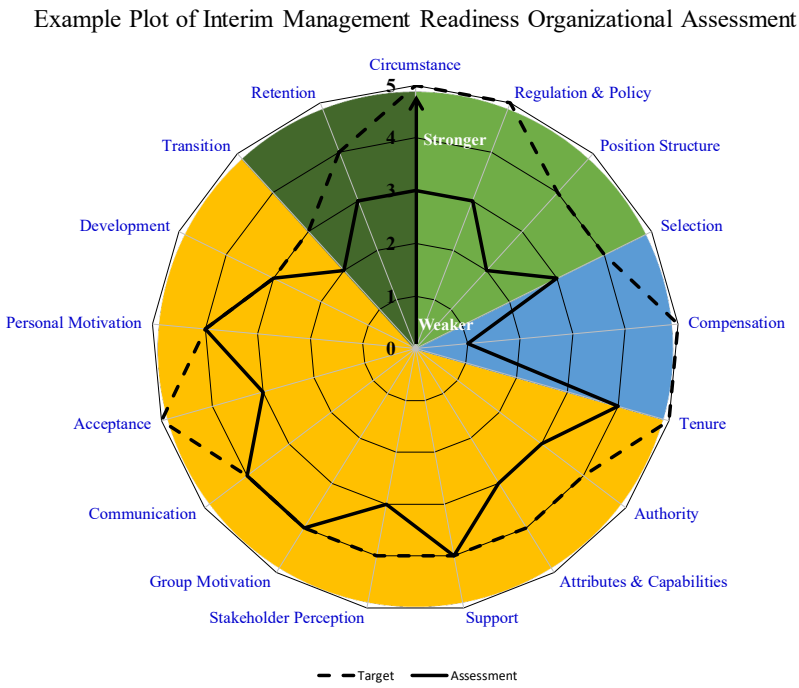


Figure 2. A sample representation of a completed interim management organizational assessment plot. Adapted from Sterneck, 2015.

5. Conclusion

The ubiquity of interim management instances across organizations and management levels compels firms to develop approaches to handle these situations. Using information from multiple organizational types by synthesizing evidence from a multitude of studies and research, the Human Resource practitioner is now able to apply both an assessment and deployment methodology to strengthen the organization's ability to respond to unplanned succession events. The disciplined approach presented here provides the avenue to enhance organizational strength and increase the effectiveness of interim management tenures not only for the organization, but also the individual leader.

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