

## OPINION

### From Deputy to Leader: the perils of that final promotion

By Pia Lee

The rapid ascendancy of Julia Gillard, only two years ago an opposition back-bencher to the post of Prime Minister, would give even the most ambitious, career 'goal-hanger' a few moments of self-doubt. So how do leaders become equipped for the next role as they ascend in their journey and take on greater responsibility?

Is acquiring leadership like compound growth – ending with CEOs or indeed statesmen like Bob Hawker or John Howard – filled with wisdom and leadership experiences? Leading US business advisor and author Dr Ram Charan revealed that this is not the case in his research "The Leadership Pipeline". Instead, the leadership journey is more of a metamorphosis. The leader requires a complete change of form but with each stage dependent on the ones before.

Each transition along the way means a shifting of priorities in terms of skills, focus of time and what needs to be valued. Leaders at a transition point have to decide what they must stop doing and what they need to do differently, hence the "real Julia". Those who struggle or, indeed, do not ascend, try in vain to do more of what got them historical success (an example perhaps is Australia's longest-serving Treasurer Peter Costello's re-emergence in the election campaign?)

This is rather like the new junior leader, who was promoted as a star performer and has to learn the difference between micro-management and delegation, as well as the new portfolio of skills required for people management as opposed to technical excellence.

So what separates a deputy from leader?

First, balancing the internal and external focus is key. One of the toughest challenges at the very top is that those reporting to the PM or CEO are often significantly less exposed to the public eye than the person at the top. Gordon Brown, as UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, waited patiently for Tony Blair's job. Apart from taking the poisoned chalice at a historically imprudent moment, he was simply not ready for the public exposure that his job entailed. Paul Keating was less patient in his ascendancy to the top job ousting Bob Hawke. History also proves that most generals were shot in the back by their own men during warfare, so masterminding the political snipers within your own ranks becomes a key priority.

Second, there is the need to preserve the core and stimulate progress. This is always a fine balance for the leader, and never more important than at the very top. Stacy Alison, on reaching the summit of Everest remarked there is "nowhere else to climb", there is "no one else to preserve the core". While many people in an organisation will be striving to create a new future for the organisation, it is the job of the person at the top – party leader, CEO, statesperson – to be the advocate for what the organisation stands for and why it exists.

For the ALP, progress may have been seen in taking an apparently popular stand against gay marriage, but it could not possibly be the 'core' of the party to make Penny Wong go onto ABC RV's Q&A and support that position.

Third, there is the need to take the strategic view. If the leader makes the transitions needed to thrive in the top job, not just occupy it, they will find that one of the benefits of being there is that they get the best view. This is not the view afforded by the long-awaited corner office, but the view

that comes with the role itself – the opportunity to look further into the future. Daily polls and share prices should not be the obsession of the person in the top job: they need to look beyond this and be shaping a future. After all, who else is going to do it?

Finally, there is the need to show real ‘real’ leadership. What makes a leader at this level truly great? US researcher and author Jim Collins in his research “Good to great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don’t” observed a common theme among the leaders of multinationals that had achieved a dramatic and sustainable change in fortunes: a paradoxical combination of personal humility and professional will.

There is no shortage of professional will among politicians, it seems, but what about the humility? It may be because the media jumps on expressions of weakness but surely the public, especially the Australian public, can spot a fake a mile off? We’d be sincerely hoping that the ‘real Julia’ is about a statement of authenticity not a publicity stunt.

Becoming Prime Minister will take more than a coup for Julia Gillard – it is not enough to rely on her accumulated wisdom. It will mean making careful choices to ensure that she really is leaving her old role behind and taking on the new one with all the complexities and contradictions that it entails.

The same goes for any promotion, but particularly when you become the Leader.

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