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A novel approach for effective integration of new faculty leadership

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Purpose: We report on an accelerated and effective way of assimilating a new leader into a team at a large academic dental school department.

Methods: At University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), a new Chair was recruited through a national search to lead its largest department in the School of Dentistry. Two months after arrival, the new Chair embarked on a process of leadership assimilation among her executive team, facilitated by a professional consultant. Within four weeks, team members participated in one-on-one interviews with the professional facilitator consultant and then completed the leadership assimilation questionnaire and returned it electronically to the facilitator. The facilitator then summarized all answers into themes and met with the team members without the Chair to debrief. Thereafter, the facilitator met with the Chair to discuss the major themes. Next, the Chair met with the team members in a facilitated session to discuss the results and negotiate a path forward.

Results: Approximately half of the feedback described the "how" of leadership: comments on communication, building relationships, building trust, and understanding UCSF history. The remaining half described the "what": comments on vision, strategy, and operations. Team members indicated that the first debriefing session was helpful to alleviate initial anxiety and to start building team spirit. The session with the Chair was perceived as open and fruitful in which team members were able to express their concerns and hopes for the Department, while the Chair showed commitment to the team and the communication process.

Conclusion: Leader assimilation allows teams to share their expectations and anxieties with the new leader early in the relationship in an open way, before new habits and beliefs are formed. Conversely, for the leader, it effectively and efficiently allows a window into the team members' thinking at a critical time period when otherwise first impressions occur. With a safe space created for open communication, the process allowed siloed individual division leaders to move toward a cohesive group while at the same time solidifying a commitment to the success of the new leader.

Keywords: dental school, leadership, new leader assimilation, feedback, team, transition

Introduction

> *Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.* James Baldwin

When a new leader transitions into a new leadership role into or within an organization, it can be a daunting task. Expectations and pressures are often high, and there is normally a steep learning curve to gain knowledge and understanding of the numer-

ous and complex inner workings of the new department or organization. Early formal intervention during the initial period can facilitate a leader's transition into his/her new role.[1] In 1973, Mandersheid co-created an early intervention called New Manager Assimilation Program while they both worked at General Electric (GE).[2] Manderscheid describes this early formal intervention when new leaders transition as "new leader assimilation".[2] This process is a formal early leadership development intervention introduced to help new leaders learn, adapt, and build relationships with their new team in an accelerated and facilitated fashion. This intervention is typically facilitated by an external professional leadership development consultant and generally occurs about 60–90 days after the new leader has started working in the organization. During the assimilation process, the facilitator meets with the leader's team and solicits general feedback about the leader. The facilitator then arranges the feedback into themes and has a one-on-one coaching session with the leader to share the feedback. After the coaching session, the leader with the help and presence of the facilitator meets with the team to have an open dialogue regarding the feedback. This leader assimilation process allows early-facilitated feedback and open dialogue between the leader and team, which can be important in transitioning the new leader with the organization.[3]

Benefits of the early intervention include enhancing the ability of the new leader and his/her team to rapidly learn, adapt, and help build relationships with one another with the goal of creating a "high-performance team".[4] The ability to take charge and bring energy to the new team has become increasingly essential to being viewed as an effective leader. Failure is often the result of the inability of the leader to fix people problems in a timely fashion and to meet their expectations.[5] There is pressure from key stakeholders for the new leader to "hit the ground running" when starting the new role. New leaders are often expected to get up to speed and deliver results within only a few months. Watkins reports that the first 90 days are crucial to a new leader's success. The ability of the new leader to build momentum and personal credibility and to have "early wins" during the first 90 days is important as key stakeholders expect the new leader to make an early impact to the organization.[6] Executives find role transitions to be one of the most stressful and challenging life events they experience. Over 40% of senior-level executives fail within the first 18 months in their new role.[1] The new leader assimilation process allows for early and honest dialogue with the leader's team members, and as such, the building of solid relationships. This in turn will allow the leader to make early decisions with valuable input from his/her close team members and avoid unnecessary mistakes based on misinformation. For this University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) team, having the Chair "take charge and bring new energy" as well as "hit the ground running" did not reflect a one-sided, top-down leadership style, but rather an effective leader, who in the words of former GE CEO Immelt (1) makes decisions with less than 100% of all the data available and is willing to fail fast rather than do nothing, (2) is all in and fully committed to the project she is leading and driving even if it is a risky or a difficult one, and (3) creates a sense of urgency.[7]

The leader assimilation process may also be beneficial for new leaders. Specifically, it appears to be essential for new leaders who are recruited externally versus internally, as seen by a threefold higher rate of attrition among executives who were hired externally compared to executives who were promoted into the position internally over a three-year period.[8] Additionally, a recent study by Rodriguez et al found that 68% of responding chairs in dentistry never received any formal training to prepare them for their position and instead only received on-the-job training.[9] Besides leader assimilation, there are few reported early leadership interventions. Often, onboarding programs consist of providing new faculty orientations, which merely consist of providing facts, procedures, and basic information. Some organizations provide executive coaches or faculty mentors to help the new leader with the transition; however, these resources do not help with providing a dynamic, facilitated process to create an environment of open dialogue with the new leader and team to receive early feedback and unspoken knowledge of working relationships.[8] To our knowledge, there is no literature available describing this leader assimilation intervention in a dental academic setting.

At the UCSF School of Dentistry, a new Chair was recruited externally through a national search to lead its largest department in the School of Dentistry. The Department of Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences (PRDS) executive team consists of eight faculty members who serve as both Division Chairs and Vice Chairs and one departmental manager, all of whom report to the Department Chair. Very early on, it was apparent to the new Department Chair that this group of faculty did not function as a team but rather as individuals who were placed together into a group working in silos. The new Department Chair believed that it was critical to not only hit the ground running but also more importantly assimilate quickly and effectively into this group, and as a second objective, move the group toward a highly functional

team. A new leader assimilation process was embarked upon by this group; here, we report on this leadership process from both the leader's and the team's perspectives.

Methods

One month after arrival, the new Chair started planning for a concerted exercise to expedite relationship building with and among the PRDS executive team and learning through dialogue and accelerated adaptation. The nine-member PRDS executive team (Vice Chairs, Division Chairs, and departmental managers) agreed to engage in this process. The Dean enthusiastically approved the project and pledged the necessary financial support.

A review of the UCSF Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects research decision tree was completed. This project involved only unidentifiable/de-identified private information, which is deemed not human subjects research, as investigators cannot readily ascertain the identities of the individuals to whom the data belong. Therefore, according to UCSF IRB, IRB review was not required for this research.

The University provided a list of professional consultant groups to choose. The Chair preferred a professional consultant who was familiar and had experience with facilitating the leader assimilation process. After interviewing several consultants, the Chair selected a professional consultant who had the required experience and she had good rapport with. An external professional consultant experienced in facilitated leadership development intervention (i.e., leadership assimilation) was engaged. After discussions, the Chair and facilitator settled on the leadership assimilation methodology developed by Schiavoni[2] and validated by Manderscheid and Ardichvili.[3] The following process was followed:

Step 1: The facilitator and Chair finalized the questionnaire, and the Chair invited her executive team members to participate in the new leader assimilation. The team members received the leadership assimilation questionnaire (Table S1) electronically from the facilitator.

Step 2: The facilitator met with each team member individually for one hour to solicit feedback based on the questions in the questionnaire.

Step 3: Team members were given an opportunity to share the same questionnaire with their own teams including faculty and staff in their Division, receiving many more comments and provided that information back to the facilitator.

Step 4: The facilitator summarized the responses into an Interviews Data Report with two leading topics to help guide the discussion in Step 5.

Step 5: The facilitator met with the team members as a group, without the Chair, soliciting feedback using the responses provided earlier, in a 90-minute session. Each team member received a copy of the Interviews Data Report. They reviewed, reacted, and noted items they wanted to add and had an opportunity to add comments from their direct reports. Since the report reiterated what was said during one-on-one interviews, the intent here was (1) to be sure that the facilitator heard and recorded their thoughts accurately, (2) to allow the team to see the results of their collective opinions put together, and (3) to be prepared for the meeting with the Chair, they were asked to send the facilitator three items or topics from the data report that were most important to them. This, along with the Chair's key take-aways from the report, would help generate the most beneficial conversation points for the upcoming Chair–team feedback meeting (Step 8).

Step 6: The facilitator summarized the findings (feedback) gathered from the team and organized it into a Group Summary Report developing major themes, in preparation for Steps 7 and 8.

Step 7: The facilitator shared the information with the Chair electronically and in a one-hour one-on-one phone meeting.

Step 8: The Chair led a 90-minute session with the team members and collectively reviewed the feedback and established a plan for moving forward. The facilitator attended to provide clarity as needed.

Results
Timeline

The entire process was completed within one month. Each team member spent approximately four hours in interview sessions (one hour with the facilitator, one and a half hours with the team, and one and a half hours with the Chair and the team) and up to two hours collecting questionnaire responses from his/her division faculty if they chose to do so.

Team feedback

In an effort to better facilitate the in-person meeting with all team members, the facilitator summarized the initial feedback obtained during the interviews with the individual team members into two topics: "Getting to know your dance partner" and "Priorities in the year ahead" as part of the Interviews Data Report (Box 1).

Box 1 Summarized leader assimilation questions, forming the basis of the interviews data

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Part 1: Getting to know our dance partner

1. What do we want most from the new Chair?

2. What should the new Chair know about us as a group?

3. What concerns do we have about the new Chair as our new leader?

4. What thoughts do we have about the impact of the new Chair leading us now, and in the future?

Part 2: Priorities in the year ahead

1. What are the major challenges the new Chair (we) will encounter in the first 6 months?

2. What are the major challenges the new Chair (we) will encounter in first year ahead?

3. What specific suggestions do we have for addressing these challenges?

Report

After the 90-minute session with the team members, the facilitator summarized all feedback into major themes as a part of the Group Summary Report (Box 2).

Figures 1 and 2 depict in word clouds what the executive team wanted from their new leader as well as their early concerns about having a strong leader.

Leader feedback

The initial private debrief with the Chair was important in that it allowed for the Chair to privately absorb the feedback, reflect on the information, ask clarifying questions to the facilitator, and formulate self-management before meeting with the team members.

The Chair's sentiments after receiving the feedback are reflected in Box 3. After discussion with the facilitator, it became clear that much of the feedback reflected the leadership style of previous Chairs and the angst of team members that a similar style would be repeated. Additionally, two swift (and deemed highly necessary) administrative-level management changes that were made by the Chair during her first two months were interpreted by one team member with significant anxiety and projected out as many more "bad things" to come. In total, because the team members had several opportunities to be heard, and many of the team members also sent the initial questionnaire on to their direct reports, we were able to capture 1200, mostly negative comments. Many of these comments were not unique, but rather iterations of each other, in different wordings.

Moving forward

At the end of the feedback session, the Chair and executive team members agreed on three near-term priorities to work on (1) building this team, (2) understanding the Department finances and creating a financial management plan, and (3) building the vision and strategic plan for PRDS together.

Lastly, the Chair committed to be the team members' sponsor, advocate, and barrier breaker. The team members agreed to be open enough to tell the Chair when things are not going well.

Discussion

Effective leadership is needed in any organization to function properly. The roles of leaders have changed over time across organizations. In the past, most leaders led by offering solutions to technical challenges. Technical challenges often have known solutions, and therefore, the leader's role is to know how to solve them. Today's leaders in academic health organi-

Box 2 Five major feedback themes, each with noted example(s)

Communication

- Partner and share your thinking with us. Prepare us for the changes you have in mind.

History

- Take time to get to know us/history from different perspectives.

Trust/fairness/building relationships

- Faculty are concerned about pre-existing UCSF faculty relationships and potential bias.

Vision/mission/strategy/operations

- Use your trans-disciplinary clinical dental research as a bridge between the existing clinician/researcher divide in PRDS.

- Have a succession plan.

Culture

- UCSF culture is considered slow to change - it will take time to adapt to a style of much faster changes, even if/when we want to.

Abbreviations: UCSF, University of California, San Francisco; PRDS, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences.

Box 3 Insights from the Chair (Leader) after initial feedback summary from team members

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Surprises

1. The Chair had not done this (360 feedback) for a while and forgotten that it is not just an academic exercise but truly becomes personal.

2. There were 1200 responses, most of which were negative. There is an inability to rejoice that we are doing this process to see how we can move PRDS forward and become a team.

3. The "team" members are not even working together as members of group. They don't have each other's back. They do not share good ideas but rather keep them for their own division.

4. Everyone is afraid to speak up in a meeting for fear that group members may pass the information inappropriately on to others. Individual members then come to the Chair after the meeting with relevant information that would have been helpful to share in the meeting, slowing the entire process down.

Disbeliefs

1. There was an expectation that the Chair would arrive with her own support network and not need empathy and emotional support from the team to transition into a new position and community.

2. Some of the Chair's comments made during the initial "welcome luncheons" were not heard and were misconstrued.

3. The five welcome luncheons (organized by the Chair) were a great success. At one luncheon, a faculty member asked some contentious questions which sparked good discussion. Other faculty immediately considered this as a failure luncheon and at the session with the facilitator it was now mentioned by one member that all luncheons were a failure. No one spoke up to the contrary. The team is not strong enough to withstand any discourse.

Confirmations

1. The team members are very committed people; love UCSF and love to teach

2. The team members are crying out for leadership

Insights

1. The team members' comments seem driven by fear that the past might recreate itself, rather than by the fact that team members think that the Chair is a bad person.

2. There are many things that are not in the Chair's wheelhouse to fix. Specifically the overlap between clinical affairs and the Chair's role is confusing at times.

3. The Chair is the type of person who gets fully immersed in any job that she has had and proudly talks about the previous jobs that she has held. There should be no worry that she would want to bring any previous job's culture to UCSF.

Abbreviations: UCSF, University of California, San Francisco; PRDS, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences.

zations are faced with both technical and adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are some of the greatest leadership challenges as they are difficult to identify and require discovery and change to develop the solutions among the members of the organization. These solutions require changes in roles, relationships, beliefs, and values across the organization.[10] As a recent Association of American Medical Colleges report aptly notes, for leaders of academic health organizations, it is important to embrace three concepts: (1) "organizations are conversations, not machines" that come into existence from human interactions and relationships; (2) "academic health organizations are loosely coupled systems" in which leaders "rely more on influence than authority, on collaboration more than command"; and (3) "leadership is exercised differently in professional organizations" where there is professional autonomy–to be effective, "leaders need to earn credibility in the eyes of the professionals".[11] As such, in this type of environment, a leader in an academic health organization needs to develop a collaborative and relationship-focused leadership style to be effective among the organization.

New leaders need to assimilate well within their organizations to develop collaborative and relationship-focused teams. Even though this is thought to be important, there is little research that focuses on leader transition processes. Of the available literature on leader transition, most are based on the authors' experiences of coaching leaders during their transitions. During the transition process, the importance of "early relationship building, managing first impressions, and expectation alignment" is mainly emphasized.[2] Onboarding programs are often presented to new leaders at their organizations; however, there are different degrees of involvement and facilitation from the organizations.[8] This is nicely summarized by Manderscheid's reflection:

> Many large organizations [...] often neglect to develop their leaders' capacity to quickly adapt to new leadership roles and the teams they are charted to lead.[2]

Clearly, the transition and assimilation period of any new leader is crucial, and the way an organization fosters this process helps establish the tone for the new leader's assess-

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ment of and relationship with the organization.[8] There is no reason to believe this would not be true for dental schools or dental organizations.

Several large companies have historically and successfully used the leadership assimilation process for their new leaders. This assimilation process was created at GE in 1973, and it is still being used today. CEOs of large companies have followed GE's lead by following their New Manager Assimilation Program. They have incorporated this leader assimilation process into their formal onboarding programs.[5] The success of the leader assimilation process stems from the rapid, accelerated learning that allows leader and team adaptation and relationship building at an early stage of the transition period. During this transition period of new leaders, there is a mix of emotions that arises among the individuals involved:

> Among the conflicting emotions are fear, courage, anger, joy, hope, surprise, sadness, happiness, and disgust. But emotions are a response to immediate situations and fade quickly when arousal subsides [...] the leader's job is to influence people's interpretations of their felt emotions.[8]

The use of a professional facilitator created a safe and trusting space for the executive team to speak openly and honestly about their feelings regarding the new Chair without fear of retaliation. The facilitator made a point early on that the one-on-one interviews and meetings without the Chair were confidential in the sense that specific names were not connected to specific responses. Most of these emotions were reflected during our leader assimilation process with the executive team as well as from the Department Chair's reflections after the feedback session. As shown in Figure 1, the executive team early on indicated that they wanted their Department Chair to lead, inspire, create a vision, make change, and be a fair and just administrator. At the same time, they wanted transparency, discussion of plans for change, and a Department Chair who communicates, cares, and understands them. They also wanted to be treated with respect, feel heard, and receive mentoring. A group of mid-level faculty in Division Chair and Vice Chair roles may differ in the degree of mentoring they have had for their positions. Some may have ascended due to skill and competence in a discipline-based field. Being an administrator at all levels requires a new set of skills. The incoming Department Chair found the Divisions to be functioning in silos and not a team at all. This meant that new leadership had to quickly communicate new expectations to move this group of individuals into fully functioning team members. Every Department Chair has to establish new expectations

based on his/her leadership style. While not necessarily welcomed, it is critical for mid-level leaders to receive clear expectations about how to communicate and interact with leadership going forward. These individuals have to be relied on such that their relationship with the Chair is copasetic. The assimilation exercise created an early opportunity to address wants and concerns about the new leadership. It enabled the Chair to select those who welcomed and adapted to leadership change. It also moved the relationship between leader and executive team forward to a place that would have taken months to achieve without this exercise.

The executive team had early concerns about working with the strong leader they sought, as portrayed in Figure 2. The executive team was concerned about collaboration, interest in institutional culture, and the pace of decision-
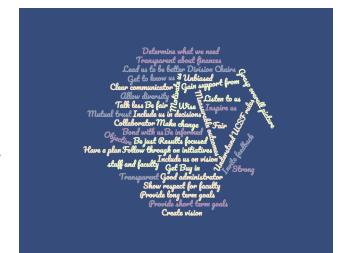

Figure 1 Word cloud representing "what faculty want from our new Department Chair".

Figure 2 Word cloud representing "early concerns expressed by faculty about new leader".
Abbreviation: UCSF, University of California, San Francisco.

making. Faculty members have high expectations of their leaders and are also known for being highly independent, value collaboration, and desire good relationships with their leader. There is an expectation that a new Department Chair takes time to get to know the faculty, their interests, and institutional culture prior to making changes. Change is inherently uncomfortable, and it is a balancing act for Department Chairs to meet these expectations at the perceived ideal pace. The road to being a new Department Chair is filled with potholes and debris. The assimilation exercise gives new leaders an early opportunity to see faculty strengths, make necessary leadership corrections, and openly address relationship obstacles to effective Department functioning. Indeed, true leadership involves making unpopular decisions at inopportune times. As the journey continues, one has to keep an eye on the horizon and look back in the rear-view mirror for lessons learned.

The facilitated meeting with the Department Chair and executive team allowed for a fruitful discussion to develop a common understanding of each other's feelings. This allowed for an open, honest dialogue between the Department Chair and executive team that helped facilitate developing common goals and purpose of the group. Effective leader assimilation may be a window to move the group toward a high-performance team for sustained success; "in the end, the goal is high performance, and that starts with clarity and agreement on desired goals and timeliness".[8] Katzenbach describes a basic discipline that allows teams to work. He found that teams and good performance go hand in hand. He also differentiates working groups from teams as not all groups are teams. He describes the characteristics of a team to have "shared leadership roles, individual and mutual accountability, specific team purpose that the team itself delivers, collective work-products, encourages open-ended discussion and active problem-solving meetings, measures performance directly by assessing collective work-products, and discusses, decides, and does real work together". He found that commitment and trust will follow when individuals work together toward a common goal. As a result, "teams enjoying a strong common purpose and approach inevitably hold themselves responsible, both as individuals and as a team, for the team's performance".[12]

Leader assimilation serves as an accelerated and effective intervention for new leaders to transition into their team. Organizations should consider offering this onboarding process and transformative experience to all new leaders as a voluntary option to be considered during their time of onboarding. This process was valuable for

this executive team at UCSF because all individuals were willing to take a risk and took the process seriously. Their contribution seemed open and honest. The environment and structure of the leadership assimilation intervention created a "safe space" for participants to voice their thoughts and opinions with the expectation they would be heard and taken seriously. Creating a safe space required a facilitator whose integrity was evident to the team in a short amount of time in order to allow trust and full participation. Also important was having a leader who spearheaded this new leadership assimilation process with the team while being genuinely open and allowing himself/herself to be vulnerable to feedback. As such, the data in Box 3 are not just mere qualitative measurement of transcribed responses into themes, but rather "an alternative approach for strategy making and innovation—one that relies less on data analysis and more on imagination, experimentation, and communication".[13] This was a fruitful and worthwhile process that brought a disjointed group of individuals together to move the group toward the development of a high-performance team.

The leader assimilation process was viewed as a valuable endeavor by the leader and the team members. However, it is not for the faint of heart. The leader must digest early negative feedback that may not seem accurate or fair, and yet, must digest it through reflection and the facilitator's help in order to meet with the team. The team members must trust the facilitator enough to share their true impressions of the new leader, positive and negative. While the team does not yet know the new leader, they must extend enough trust to engage in the process entering into unknown territory. The process involves deep conversation not typically part of the early relationship between a new leader and his/her team. It has the effect of fast-forwarding the relationship out of the "honeymoon" phase toward recognition of early conflict and resolution. This not only creates more realistic expectations on both sides but also invites loyalty and investment in the leader's success.

The leadership assimilation intervention is an opportunity for the leader to build early communication and set mutual expectations, but it is not without risk of failure. The asymmetrical nature of the relationship between the leader and the team represents an unequal power dynamic. The leader or department chair makes decisions about merits and promotions, hiring and firing, salary setting, and the provision of resources to the entire department including members of the leadership team. This power dynamic potentially influences the accuracy of information the leader receives from

the team. In addition, factors such as a desire to please, fear of retaliation, and lack of trust may jeopardize the process. All leaders have an asymmetrical relationship with those who report to them. The leader assimilation intervention requires a highly skilled facilitator to overcome these fears by creating a process with safeguards and integrity that guarantees the confidentiality of individuals who give candid feedback. While there is no way to be certain about the accuracy of the team's report that the leadership assimilation intervention was beneficial, there are anecdotal signs that it was positive: increased interaction among team members, increased consultation within the leadership team members regarding division issues, and increased participation in monthly division chair meetings. It is worth noting that these division leaders tend to be outspoken, are mostly full professors (some tenured), and the majority are male. It is the leader's observation that the leadership assimilation intervention set the stage for transforming a group of siloed division chairs into a newly functioning team.

Conclusion

Leader assimilation serves as an accelerated and effective early intervention for new leaders to transition into their teams. It provides a preview into the team's first impressions of the leader and his/her leadership style. This allows for early clarification and corrections if necessary. It reveals aspects of team members' personalities and team dynamics as observed in interactions within the team. The commitment and vulnerability required by the leader to engage in this process, despite moments of discomfort, engender loyalty as the team becomes a vital part of the leader's success. Leader assimilation allows teams to share their expectations and anxieties with the new leader in a relatively safe facilitated environment. Potential benefits to the team include early clarity about what the leader expects of them, an opportunity to share important values and institutional norms, and group safety in expressing expectations and criticisms of the new leader. The importance of this early intervention is the ability for the new leader and his/her team to rapidly and, in an accelerated fashion, to learn,

adapt, and help build relationships with one another with the expectation of creating and sustaining a high-performance team. This paper describes this intervention as a potentially valuable tool to use in a dental academic setting.

Acknowledgment

Disclosure

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Supplementary material

Table S1 New leader assimilation process questionnaire

New Leader Assimilation Process

Purpose

The New Leader Assimilation Process is designed to enable team(s) to maintain and enhance their productivity during a period of changing leadership by:

- Providing leaders with a quick snapshot of how they are viewed by their new team
- Providing a forum for discussion of suggestions, issues, needs, etc.

The first step in the process is gathering feedback from members of the team through individual interviews.

Interview Questions

1. What do we want most from (leader)?
2. What does (leader) need to know about us as a group (team)?
3. What concerns, if any, do you have about (leader) becoming your leader?
4. What thoughts do you have about the impact of (leader) leading your unit now and in the future?
5. What are the major challenges (leader) and team will encounter in the first (6 months/year) ahead?
   a. What specific suggestions do you have for addressing these challenges?
6. What can (leader) do in his/her new role that will help you be successful in your role?
7. What can you do that will help (leader) succeed in his/her role?
8. What aspects of your culture would you:
   a. Like to keep during this transition?
   b. Feel is being set aside or left behind that you would like to maintain?
   c. Change?