

# The Executive Transition Failure Taxonomy™

## Predictable Patterns of Senior Leadership Derailment

*After analyzing 200+ executive transitions, the failures are remarkably consistent.  
Brilliant leaders make predictable mistakes at predictable moments.*

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### CATEGORY I: PRE-ENTRY FAILURES

*The mistakes made before day one that determine everything*

#### **Failure Pattern #1: The Assumption Transfer**

**The Mistake:** Believing what worked in your previous role will work in the new one

- Applying the same leadership style regardless of context
- Assuming similar organizational dynamics
- Transferring solutions without diagnosing problems
- Using previous company's playbook in new culture

**Classic Presentation:** "At my previous company, we always..."

**Failure Rate:** 73% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Weeks 3–4

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - requires complete leadership reset

#### **Failure Pattern #2: The Stakeholder Underestimation**

**The Mistake:** Focusing on direct reports while ignoring lateral and informal power networks

- Missing the influence of executive assistants and chiefs of staff
- Ignoring the previous incumbent's loyal lieutenants
- Underestimating board member pet projects

- Dismissing informal influencers without titles

**Classic Presentation:** “I didn’t realize the CFO’s opinion carried so much weight here”

**Failure Rate:** 67% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 30–45

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires political capital investment

**Failure Pattern #3: The Intelligence Bypass**

**The Mistake:** Skipping deep reconnaissance to appear confident and decisive

- Not interviewing the predecessor
- Avoiding “looking weak” by asking questions
- Trusting official briefings over back-channel intelligence
- Missing the unwritten rules and sacred cows

**Classic Presentation:** “Nobody told me that project was the CEO’s baby”

**Failure Rate:** 58% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 6–8

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - can be fixed with humble recalibration

## **CATEGORY II: FIRST IMPRESSION FAILURES**

*Days 1–30: Where executive transitions are won or lost*

### **Failure Pattern #4: The Overcorrection Launch**

**The Mistake:** Trying to fix everything immediately to prove value

- Announcing major changes before understanding context
- Criticizing predecessor's decisions publicly
- Launching initiatives without stakeholder buy-in
- Moving faster than organizational metabolism allows

**Classic Presentation:** “We need to completely transform this division”

**Failure Rate:** 71% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 15–20

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - first impressions stick

### **Failure Pattern #5: The Authority Assertion Error**

**The Mistake:** Confusing position with permission

- Using formal authority before earning informal authority
- Making unilateral decisions in consensus cultures
- Skipping coalition building to save time
- Assuming the title means people will follow

**Classic Presentation:** “I’m the MD, so we’re doing it my way”

**Failure Rate:** 64% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 2–3

**Recovery Difficulty:** Very High - creates lasting resistance

### **Failure Pattern #6: The Listening Tour Trap**

**The Mistake:** Spending too long in observation mode, appearing indecisive

- Extending listening tour beyond 30 days

- Asking for input without acting on it
- Appearing to lack vision or direction
- Missing the window for quick wins

**Classic Presentation:** “I’m still learning and listening”

**Failure Rate:** 43% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 45–60

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires decisive action to reset

### **Failure Pattern #7: The Communication Misalignment**

**The Mistake:** Using wrong communication style for organizational culture

- Too formal in casual cultures
- Too casual in hierarchical cultures
- Over-communicating in action-oriented environments
- Under-communicating in consensus-driven organizations

**Classic Presentation:** “I thought sending one email was enough”

**Failure Rate:** 52% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 3–4

**Recovery Difficulty:** Low - can be adjusted quickly

### **CATEGORY III: TEAM INHERITANCE FAILURES**

*The mistakes in managing the team you didn't choose*

#### **Failure Pattern #8: The Wholesale Replacement**

**The Mistake:** Bringing in your own team too quickly

- Dismissing inherited talent without proper evaluation
- Creating survivor syndrome in remaining team
- Losing institutional knowledge
- Triggering organizational antibodies

**Classic Presentation:** “I need my own people”

**Failure Rate:** 38% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 60–90

**Recovery Difficulty:** Very High - destroys trust

#### **Failure Pattern #9: The Loyalty Test**

**The Mistake:** Demanding immediate loyalty from inherited team

- Creating us-versus-them dynamics
- Forcing public declarations of support
- Punishing those loyal to predecessor
- Mistaking professional courtesy for commitment

**Classic Presentation:** “You’re either with me or against me”

**Failure Rate:** 46% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 4–6

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - creates underground resistance

#### **Failure Pattern #10: The Performance Tolerance**

**The Mistake:** Avoiding difficult personnel decisions to maintain stability

- Keeping underperformers too long

- Allowing toxic high performers to remain
- Delaying inevitable restructuring
- Hoping problems will self-correct

**Classic Presentation:** “Let’s give them another quarter” **Failure Rate:** 61%  
make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 90–120

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - but credibility impact lingers

## **CATEGORY IV: STAKEHOLDER NAVIGATION FAILURES**

*The political mistakes that create lasting damage*

### **Failure Pattern #11: The Board Bypass**

**The Mistake:** Focusing down and across while ignoring upward management

- Under-communicating with board members
- Surprising board with problems
- Missing informal board communications
- Treating board interaction as obligation not opportunity

**Classic Presentation:** “I assumed my boss was keeping them informed”

**Failure Rate:** 41% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** First board cycle

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - board confidence is hard to rebuild

### **Failure Pattern #12: The Peer Neglect**

**The Mistake:** Prioritizing vertical relationships over horizontal ones

- Ignoring peer executive dynamics
- Missing cross-functional dependencies
- Creating silos through isolation
- Underestimating peer influence on success

**Classic Presentation:** “I didn’t think I needed their support”

**Failure Rate:** 55% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 45–60

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires dedicated relationship building

### **Failure Pattern #13: The Shadow Organization Blindness**

**The Mistake:** Following org chart instead of actual influence patterns

- Missing informal power brokers

- Ignoring cultural influencers
- Bypassing gatekeepers
- Misreading actual decision-making processes

**Classic Presentation:** “But the org chart shows they report to me”

**Failure Rate:** 69% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 6–8

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires influence remapping



## **CATEGORY V: CULTURAL INTEGRATION FAILURES**

*The subtle mistakes that trigger organizational rejection*

### **Failure Pattern #14: The Pace Mismatch**

**The Mistake:** Moving at wrong speed for organizational metabolism

- Pushing change faster than culture can absorb
- Moving too slowly in crisis situations
- Misreading urgency signals
- Ignoring change fatigue indicators

**Classic Presentation:** “Why is everything moving so slowly here?”

**Failure Rate:** 63% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 30–45

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires pace recalibration

### **Failure Pattern #15: The Language Violation**

**The Mistake:** Using wrong terminology or violating communication norms

- Importing jargon from previous company
- Violating formality/informality norms
- Using military language in collaborative cultures
- Being too direct in indirect cultures

**Classic Presentation:** “At Amazon, we call this...”

**Failure Rate:** 48% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 1–2

**Recovery Difficulty:** Low - but first impressions linger

### **Failure Pattern #16: The Sacred Cow Slaughter**

**The Mistake:** Unknowingly attacking cherished practices or people

- Criticizing founder’s initiatives

- Changing symbolic practices
- Dismissing long-serving employees
- Eliminating beloved perks or traditions

**Classic Presentation:** “I didn’t know that was so important here”

**Failure Rate:** 37% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Immediate

**Recovery Difficulty:** Very High - creates lasting resentment

## **CATEGORY VI: DECISION-MAKING FAILURES**

*The judgment errors that undermine executive credibility*

### **Failure Pattern #17: The Analysis Paralysis**

**The Mistake:** Over-analyzing decisions to avoid risk

- Requesting endless additional data
- Creating decision committees for everything
- Delaying decisions until perfect information
- Reversing decisions repeatedly

**Classic Presentation:** “Let’s study this further”

**Failure Rate:** 44% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 45–60

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires decisive action burst

### **Failure Pattern #18: The Altitude Error**

**The Mistake:** Operating at wrong level of detail for role

- Getting trapped in operational weeds
- Making decisions that should be delegated
- Missing strategic forest for operational trees
- Micromanaging senior professionals

**Classic Presentation:** “Let me review that spreadsheet formula”

**Failure Rate:** 57% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Week 3–4

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires conscious elevation

### **Failure Pattern #19: The Reversal Pattern**

**The Mistake:** Changing decisions based on last person spoken to

- Appearing influenced by whoever has access

- Creating confusion through inconsistency
- Undermining previous communications
- Showing lack of conviction

**Classic Presentation:** “I’ve been thinking more about what you said...”

**Failure Rate:** 31% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 30–45

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - destroys decision credibility

## **CATEGORY VII: STRATEGIC FAILURES**

*The vision and direction mistakes that limit impact*

### **Failure Pattern #20: The Vision Vacuum**

**The Mistake:** Focusing on operations without providing strategic direction

- Delaying vision articulation too long
- Being vague about strategic direction
- Changing vision based on feedback
- Failing to connect vision to daily work

**Classic Presentation:** “Let’s focus on execution first”

**Failure Rate:** 49% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 60–90

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - organization drifts without direction

### **Failure Pattern #21: The Strategy Plagiarism**

**The Mistake:** Copying strategies from previous company or competitors

- Implementing Harvard Business Review strategies
- Copying competitor playbooks
- Ignoring organizational uniqueness
- Forcing inappropriate frameworks

**Classic Presentation:** “This worked perfectly at McKinsey”

**Failure Rate:** 42% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 90–120

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires strategy reset

### **Failure Pattern #22: The Initiative Overload**

**The Mistake:** Launching too many initiatives simultaneously

- Diluting focus across multiple priorities

- Exhausting organizational change capacity
- Creating initiative competition
- Losing track of what matters most

**Classic Presentation:** “These seventeen initiatives are all critical”

**Failure Rate:** 53% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 60–90

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires ruthless prioritization

## CATEGORY VIII: PERSONAL LEADERSHIP FAILURES

*The self-management mistakes that cascade*

### **Failure Pattern #23: The Imposter Projection**

**The Mistake:** Overcompensating for internal doubt with external bravado

- Speaking too much in meetings to prove knowledge
- Name-dropping to establish credibility
- Making bold claims without foundation
- Avoiding areas of weakness instead of acknowledging

**Classic Presentation:** “When I was at Google...” (repeatedly) **Failure Rate:** 39% make this mistake **Time to Surface:** Week 2–3 **Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires authentic reset

### **Failure Pattern #24: The Energy Depletion**

**The Mistake:** Unsustainable pace leading to burnout and poor decisions

- Working 80+ hour weeks to prove dedication
- Attending every meeting to show engagement
- Not establishing recovery protocols
- Ignoring stress signals until crisis

**Classic Presentation:** “I’ll rest after the first hundred days”

**Failure Rate:** 66% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 60–75

**Recovery Difficulty:** High - recovery takes time

### **Failure Pattern #25: The Isolation Trap**

**The Mistake:** Not building support systems for executive challenges

- Avoiding vulnerability with anyone
- Not establishing peer relationships
- Missing informal feedback channels
- Creating echo chamber with direct reports

**Classic Presentation:** “It’s lonely at the top”

**Failure Rate:** 71% make this mistake

**Time to Surface:** Days 45–90

**Recovery Difficulty:** Moderate - requires intentional relationship building



## THE COMPOUND FAILURES

*When multiple patterns create systematic derailment*

### **The Perfect Storm (Patterns #4 + #5 + #8)**

Overcorrection + Authority Assertion + Wholesale Replacement =  
Organizational Revolt

### **The Credibility Collapse (Patterns #17 + #19 + #20)**

Analysis Paralysis + Decision Reversal + Vision Vacuum = Leadership Void

### **The Cultural Rejection (Patterns #14 + #15 + #16)**

Pace Mismatch + Language Violation + Sacred Cow Slaughter = Organizational  
Antibodies

### **The Political Disaster (Patterns #2 + #11 + #13)**

Stakeholder Underestimation + Board Bypass + Shadow Blindness = Influence  
Failure

## **PREDICTIVE DIAGNOSTICS**

### **Early Warning Signals by Week:**

**Week 1–2:** Language Violations, Authority Assertions

**Week 3–4:** Overcorrection Launch, Altitude Errors

**Week 5–6:** Stakeholder Underestimation, Shadow Blindness

**Week 7–8:** Intelligence Bypass, Sacred Cow Slaughter

**Week 9–12:** Listening Tour Trap, Performance Tolerance

**Days 60–90:** Vision Vacuum, Energy Depletion, Isolation Trap

**Days 90+:** Strategy Plagiarism, Initiative Overload

## THE RECOVERY PROTOCOLS

### **For High-Difficulty Recoveries:**

- Requires executive coaching or advisory
- Timeline: 3–6 months minimum
- Success rate: 40–60% with intervention

### **For Moderate-Difficulty Recoveries:**

- Can self-correct with awareness
- Timeline: 4–8 weeks
- Success rate: 70–80% with recognition

### **For Low-Difficulty Recoveries:**

- Quick adjustment possible
- Timeline: 1–2 weeks
- Success rate: 90% with immediate action

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*“In 200+ executive transitions, I’ve seen every one of these patterns. The executives who succeed aren’t those who avoid all mistakes—they’re those who recognize patterns quickly and correct course before permanent damage.”*

— Francisco Serrano Baptista