



# Nova Consulting Inc.

Setting Vision and Direction  
—*Stepping into a New Job*



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# Introduction

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Taking a position in a new organization is one of the most critical times in a person's career. The same is true if you've been asked to take over a new area in an organization you already work for. Whatever the reasons for the transfer—a non-performing outgoing leader, vacancy due to retirement or promotion, or a restructuring—you're starting at zero with more positive and negative potential than you will ever have again. It's critical to manage your transition adroitly and alertly because:

First impressions are binding. Research has shown that first impressions are so strong that they will color all subsequent perceptions about you. You can't afford to make a big mistake, but if you act wisely, you will have smoothed the path for your future.

Your ability to perform is compromised because too much is unknown. Your ability to process massive amounts of new information—job content, organization structure, power hierarchy, relationships, unknown facilities and technologies, etc.—is limited.

Visible results are expected rapidly. You'll experience pressure to make some decisions quickly, whether from your own desire to "make a mark" or from explicit or implicit messages from the new organization. There is a somewhat finite "window" during which you will be assessed for the role you will assume in the power hierarchy. While people are scoping you out for how much power you have, they will also be jockeying to

determine how useful you will be to them and therefore how they should relate to you at a time when you will have very little knowledge of the system.

This document will help you negotiate the transition skillfully, which is not perfectly. Expect to make mistakes, but with sensitivity and forethought, you can be sure they are minor and that you create a favorable impression and adapt nimbly where it matters most. The following recommendations should help you get a good start.

This document contains two sections to help you make the most of Nova's Training Programs for your specific situation:

Strategies and recommendations that provide a range of immediate answers for your situation. These are the building blocks of new behaviors to improve your performance.

A series of work sheets designed to help you engage actively with the strategies and recommendations to begin making the change you want and learning from your progress to refine your new behaviors.

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END OF SECTION

# Stepping into a New Job

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## BE SELF-CONSCIOUS TO BECOME THE LEADER YOU WANT TO BE

You have great visibility as a new leader, and many people will be watching you to discern your attitudes, moods, and intentions from even your most casual gestures or conversations for the first several months. Monitor yourself closely, but use this unique opportunity to your advantage. Determine what image and presence you want to project at multiple levels in the organization: to your direct reports, peers, and senior management. You have a singular chance to recreate yourself, without baggage. People in the new organization may have heard about you, but this is one time you really can start fresh and become what you want to be. Perceptions create the political reality in which you operate; wisely craft your leadership persona in this new situation according to your highest ideals.

## MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION

Your first public forums (even if only with your immediate staff but certainly every larger meeting) will be critical to making that important “first impression” that sets the tone for expectations. Rehearse carefully your style as much as your content. You want your tone of voice, body language, and words all to express your excitement for this assignment, the passion you bring to the job and want to inspire in others, your appreciation for the challenges, and your can-do attitude that

will lead employees successfully. Everything about your style and message will be scrutinized, so be genuinely yourself to show through your actions what people can expect. Even though it may be too early to understand the scope of the challenge you’re taking on, suggest realistic optimism, expect to enlist everyone’s collaboration, and do nothing to criticize what happened in the past.

## MIND YOUR STRESS STYLE TO AVOID ACTING FROM IT

Like anyone in a new situation, you will be under some stress, whether you realize it or not in the exhilaration of new possibilities. While you may have “no history” in the organization, your personal history in terms of habitual defensive patterns will be all too present. The constant challenges of a new job lead the best performers to revert subconsciously to familiar, protective behavior patterns. The more you can be aware of your behavior, the more you can choose deliberately to take a different course (For example, if you have received feedback that you are too confiding and emotional, make an effort to reserve your opinions and modulate your emotion. If you are normally rather reserved, make an effort to project more warmth and interest in others.). Even though you will feel you can’t “get on top of things” quickly enough, take time out

to relax. Get a massage, work out, garden, dance, or meditate to quiet the mind.

#### ADOPT THE LANGUAGE AND CUSTOMS QUICKLY

Every culture has its own language and customs, including every subculture, no matter how small, in an organization. Don't assume that because you are a star in your profession or have worked in the same business that you understand how this new culture works, even if you already know other employees personally. Treat the new organization as if you were an anthropologist studying a foreign culture, observing carefully and without judgment. What is the style of dress for different areas and levels? How do people use e-mail, meetings, and voice communication and for what? What are the greetings and other social rituals? Daily work and break rhythms? Insider jargon and stories? Interaction patterns? Your goal is to achieve "insider" status as quickly as possible—and to avoid anything that might give offense. Strive to fit in as a "member," adopting their ways as a means of showing respect and being effective. If you can't go along with certain customs, try to mask your nonconformity for a time so that will not be harshly judged.

#### LEAVE THE PAST BEHIND

Although it's only natural to allude to ways you learned to do things or what succeeded in your previous position, it's better not to keep referring to what you used to do in your earlier life. Even if you were hired specifically because you came from a prestigious situation, frame your suggestions, comments, and ideas as much as possible as if they were occurring to you on the spot rather than "what we did at my previous company." Keep mementos from your old job out of the office, so that it looks like you're fully on board with the new job and not "living on past glory."

#### BE VERY ALERT TO THE ORGANIZATION'S CONFLICT STYLE

One of the biggest potential minefields in organizations is how dissent is voiced. Company cultures usually have very strong, unspoken norms about communicating disagreement, and violating these can create an intense backlash that may be hard to recover from. Watch very carefully how people express disagreement, especially in certain relationships (manager to direct report, peer to peer, senior management to middle management). Whether you think the conflict style is effective

or not, your job is to find a way to express your opinions so that they will influence others—not offend or be invisible.

#### MAKE IT A POINT TO MEET WITH PEOPLE INDIVIDUALLY

As the new leader, you will be the target of curiosity as well as the focus of attention. Everyone will want to meet you to size you up and to bring themselves to your notice. Starting with the highest ranking people in your new area, meet first as a team, and then spend one-on-one time asking about the business but also trying to get to know each person. If you've heard complimentary things about their work, pass them along. The more you can personalize your interactions by referencing something special about each person's contribution, the more bridges you can build. As soon as possible meet with subgroups or lower-level individuals for the same purpose. You want everyone to get a chance to have your undivided attention and to get to know you in a favorable way, including asking you questions and giving you more of a chance to learn about what they do, what their concerns and passions are on the job, and how you can facilitate them.

#### USE ALL YOUR RELATIONSHIPS TO GATHER POLITICAL INFORMATION

When you meet with direct reports and peers, remember that "task content" is only part of the conversation. Use these opportunities to do more than discuss "what needs to be done" by moving on to

the equally important question of "how to get it done." What are their perceptions of the politics and best approaches? Find out about the special interests that may influence perceptions of key people and projects, especially how your team and their work are perceived. Discuss your own perceptions with trusted colleagues, and don't be afraid to ask how they might handle a political situation facing you or how you could improve the odds of getting the outcomes you want.

#### DEMONSTRATE A UNIFORMLY FRIENDLY BUT NEUTRAL INTEREST IN OTHERS

It will take time to figure out the formal and informal politics of the organization; right now they represent situations you can inadvertently become involved in by appearing to be friendlier or more open and accessible to some and more distant to others. Many people will be approaching you representing different interests: some may be seeking to ally themselves with you for political reasons that are opaque to you as a newcomer. The best course is to treat everyone the same—warmly and noncommittally—to build light connections everywhere without giving offense.

#### KEEP AN OPEN MIND WITH HEALTHY SKEPTICISM

While it's crucial to gather as much information as quickly as you can, be careful about what you hear, especially about what is volunteered to you. What people will tell you as the new, unknown boss will be filtered and skewed. Some will be seeking to impress you with their own importance and that of their projects. Others will be trying to pay off old scores, hoping to gain advantage or payback before you know the ropes. Still others will tell you what they think you want to hear or company policy, which may not have anything to do with operating reality. Triangulate every piece of significant information you hear to check its validity—and keep track of the sources. It will be helpful to start figuring out the factions, hot topics, and interfaces.

#### UNDERSTAND THE PULL OF OLD LOYALTIES

Some people are likely to have been in intensely loyal partnerships to your predecessor or others that may make it difficult for them to shift allegiance to you, and more importantly, to changes you may want to make. Realize that resistance you may encounter may have less to do with you and new ideas than to a sense that they are betraying a past loyalty to the way things were. Provide a good rationale for new direction, and recognize that inconsistent adoption may be the result of emotional rather than logical resistance.

Be alert for any signs that resistance may be being fueled by inappropriate contact or communication and take steps to address it.

#### KNOW THAT YOUR OBJECTIVITY IS TIME-LIMITED

Any newcomer's ability for objective observation of a social system is strong for about only three to six months. After that, research shows that even with the best critical faculties, a person will have become so acculturated as to be largely "part of the system," unable to stand outside it and perceive it objectively. So keep your "outsider" eyes open now to be as critically dispassionate as possible about what you see, knowing that this ability will inevitably decline. Make written notes about everything that strikes you as odd or different for the first six months. Your notes can help you recall the uniqueness of your new organization in ways that will be useful later on.

#### DRAW INFLUENCE CHARTS TO NEGOTIATE THE POLITICS

One of the most important and difficult things to ascertain quickly is the informal power structure. In addition to the formal power structure on organization charts, you need to identify who the real decision-makers and

influencers are, and the alliances, turf, and conflicts that affect how things really get done. Make notes of whose names come up most in conversations and what you hear about their connections or tensions. Use this information to create charts of key influencers, their relationships, and their interests to help negotiate the politics of the organization quickly and skillfully. The chart should include not only the vertical links to upper-level decision-makers but also horizontal and diagonal links to peer groups, support organizations, and staff, as well as internal and external stakeholders.

#### USE YOUR FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS TO GATHER ORGANIZATION INFORMATION

When you meet with direct reports and your manager, remember that “task content” is only part of the conversation. Use these opportunities with people who should have a common interest with you to do more than discuss “what needs to be done” by moving on to the equally important question of “how to get it done.” As a newcomer, you are entitled more naturally than others to ask sensitive questions, such as how they perceive the politics and best approaches. Find out about the special interests that may influence perceptions of key people and projects, especially how your area is perceived. Ask your team or your manager how they might handle a political situation facing you or how you could improve the odds of getting the outcomes you want. Until you know which

peers and other internal and outside sources are trustworthy, avoid asking them for advice.

#### CHECK UNUSUAL SOURCES

Never forget that the clerical and administrative staffs usually are better plugged in to certain parts of the grapevine than anyone else. The same goes for outside stakeholders, such as vendors. It is frequently easier to pick up valuable information on organization politics from these sources, although you will need to be careful and casual in your approach. The grapevine works two ways. Start the way you intend to go on. For instance, maintaining pleasant, friendly contact with the administrative staff shows you value them, but not if you only pay attention to them when you need something.

#### DELAY DRAMATIC CHANGES

It is often tempting to make highly visible, dramatic changes in structures or systems to “make your mark,” especially if one reason for your move was an expectation that you would change things. Avoid making any dramatic actions quickly, no matter how obviously beneficial they seem. As a newcomer, it will be impossible for you to understand the reasons or politics behind what exists. Vested interests wanted things to be that way at one

time (and may still want them to be that way)—and they are now supported by the vested interests any existing structure or system acquires. Any change, no matter how advantageous, will upset a lot of people. Make large moves only when you are absolutely sure the changes will produce positive, measurable results—and that their rational presentation has obtained sufficient buy-in from key political figures.

**CONSIDER WHETHER YOU WANT TO TAKE THE RISK YOURSELF**

If you are brought in as a turnaround agent, consider carefully whether you want to be closely identified with a risky change, one that may have significant impact on established interests. Even if you have a turnaround mandate, given the limited information you will have for the first six to nine months, it may be wiser to take credit for acting while offsetting your risk. You may want to visibly bring in vendors who can get information that will not be readily available to you, who can be the “experts,” who will remain outside the system, and who can take actions and accountability more safely than you. This will minimize your political liability and increase the likelihood of a winning solution.

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**END OF SECTION**

# Creating a Plan For Improvement

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## INTRODUCTION

This section is designed to help you work actively with the information and recommendations provided by Nova, first reflectively, then by applying them on a day-to-day basis. Most people find that this practice enables them to identify more quickly critical transactions where they can apply their learning to improve their leadership abilities and performance rapidly.

When you make note of strengths you can develop as well as the interactions that leave you feeling dissatisfied, uncomfortable, or less than successful, you can create strategies to take advantages of opportunities coming your way and to anticipate potential challenges in ways that can resolve them successfully.

### IDENTIFYING AND APPLYING MY STRENGTHS

When I think about my performance in relation to the strategies and recommendations, my strengths and best assets I can apply to my situation include the following:

Based on the information and recommendations, I can best leverage my strengths in this situation by applying them in the following ways to improve my performance:

## IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

These are the three most critical areas where I can improve my performance. List the situations that you find challenging in each area and the qualities or behaviors you would like to develop to improve your performance:

IMPROVEMENT AREA 1

IMPROVEMENT AREA 2

IMPROVEMENT AREA 3

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END OF SECTION

# Assessing Your Plan For Improvement

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## CHALLENGE 1, A SUCCESS STORY

This section is for you to track your efforts to change in the coming months. Each time you encounter a situation that involves one of your key challenge areas, capture it in writing. It's best to include not only "success stories," but incidents that illustrate that success isn't always easy. You will learn more and gain greater insight from times when you fall short of your goals in the situation you described, and comparing success with times that weren't so successful is an optimal learning experience.

State the background briefly, the people involved, and what was said or done. Indicate what you intended to accomplish in the situation in contrast to the way it actually turned out. Then write down how you can better manage similar situations—including how you might anticipate them—in the future so can begin to plan and monitor your progress.

CHALLENGE 2, A TIME WHEN THINGS DID NOT GO AS DESIRED

State the background briefly, the people involved, and what was said or done. Indicate what you intended to accomplish in the situation in contrast to the way it actually turned out. Then write down how you can better manage similar situations—including how you might anticipate them—in the future so can begin to plan and monitor your progress.

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END OF SECTION

# Conclusion

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Congratulations! You've now got specific recommendations for new behaviors that can improve your performance, and a way to work those behaviors into your day-to-day activities and learn quickly from practicing those new behaviors. If you consistently act on the recommendations and strategies provided here, you can become an outstanding leader in your organization or wherever your career takes you.