

## ETERNITY LEAVE

I got my first lucky break in business when the Personnel Manager fell pregnant and was happily going on maternity leave for a year. As next-in-command it was decided that I would act in her position until she came back and only four months after that I was appointed to a substantive position in my own right within the group – the youngest personnel manager ever to be appointed. Undoubtedly if I had not had the chance to be in an acting role and show my mettle I would have waited another 2-3 years before being considered for a promotion like that.

Understandably because of my personal experience I am VERY pro acting appointments. They provide managers with flexibility, enabling them to deal with short-term human resource needs such as maternity or sabbatical leave, illness, temporarily staffing a vacant position, etc. Whilst still maintaining normal operations. Acting appointments also offer developmental experience for employees and assist in determining their suitability for substantive promotion. At least, that is how it's supposed to play out. What I do not support, however, is the practice of letting someone act in a position and thus slowing down the recruitment process because you consider you have plugged the hole. As a result the 'substitute' manager carries on month after month, usually with expectations that they will have their apparent promotion confirmed on a permanent basis, only to be removed up to 18 months later when management identifies a suitable external replacement. At the end of the period it feels like they have been fired or demoted when sent back to the position that they held earlier and can appear like that in the eyes of other staff members too. Now if I had a thebe for every time I have had to counsel a poor employee who has been a victim to this behavior I would be one very wealthy guy.

Putting people in acting appointments while someone is on leave, training or maternity etc. is reasonable, necessary and probably workable for both the employer and employee. In these situations it only does good. The person gets experience, variety and usually an acting allowance and the company a stopgap appointee. But letting them stay on for an extended amount of time in a position they themselves have applied for can have really bad consequences for the company and the employee, functionally, materially and psychologically. But it happens all too often in business today.

Maybe it's a fabulous new strategy to get rid of non performing managers? Just promote them into an acting position at a level above for a period of 12 months then send them back to their original position with the unspoken inference that they aren't promotion material. Almost guaranteed they will leave immediately or shortly thereafter. If they stay it will certainly be as a disengaged manager who feels inadequate, insecure and unappreciated.

Apart from the damage that it does to the employee there are serious consequences for the organisation too. People in acting positions will rarely take full responsibility for the area they are in. They may drive day-to-day operations but are unlikely to make significant improvements or any other long term decisions – they just do not have that authority, it's not their job and they are not going to be around to drive the initiatives – why bother and why take the associated risk? Furthermore many people put in acting positions may have reached their own glass ceiling of performance and asking more of them is asking too much. The greatest damage of all comes from putting someone in a position that they are not suitable for, or capable of handling and you don't need to be Einstein to work out what damage that can do and the ripple effect it can have.

But there is another evil to this acting appointment story. When companies because of slow procedures, lack of effort or in many cases plain laziness, allow an inappropriate person act for too long, they often end up just confirming that appointment simply because 'they have been doing it for the last year' – even if badly and the company is too embarrassed to admit that it was a mistake. So by virtue of its lack of action the company inherits a disaster which will adversely affect it for years to come.

To avoid all of these things it's important that we put timelines on recruitment and similarly on how long acting appointments can be in place. Without standards like this, months and in many cases years, will roll by where departments merely tread water. We need to become sensitive to the cost of slow recruitment. Can anyone really justify a procedure of longer than 4 months – and that's really quite generous in terms of lowered productivity, Most importantly we need to educate management on the difference between an acting appointment to cover a temporary absence which has no expectation of permanent confirmation and one which is intended to fill a vacancy while a suitable candidate is sourced externally. Both are operationally expedient and in the interests of business as usual but to avoid false expectations the appointee needs to understand that in both instances the promotion is an acting capacity only and not a probationary period prior to permanent confirmation. Depending on their ability and suitability their time may come, determined on how they handle the temporary additional demands and responsibilities but it's neither immediate nor automatic.

And lastly there's the other rare scenario when the understudy performs so brilliantly that it is quite clear a new star has been born. When you discover talent like that right under your nose you'd be foolish not to fast-track them for promotion, even if it means creating an entirely new part to showcase their star qualities.

Send them back to the chorus and they'll likely be auditioning for another leading role in a completely different production and you'll be left playing to a half-empty house.

Managing Director  
HRMC  
Phone: 395 1640  
[www.hrmc.co.bw](http://www.hrmc.co.bw)