Your Launch Pad — Navigating Transitions Successfully: Before, During, and After

Career Development

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Once, when I started a new role, I introduced myself as “Jonathan.” It was intentional. I had gone by “Jon” for years. A small thing, but it reframed everything for me: fresh start, new pathway. Every time someone said that name, it was a deliberate reminder of who I was becoming.

A career transition is one of the most defining moments in your professional life. How you handle it shapes your reputation, your relationships, and your trajectory. After two decades in senior legal roles and years of coaching corporate counsel through transitions of every messy kind, I’ve come to think about them in three parts: what you leave behind, what you need to see clearly right now, and what you build with intention.

Before, During, and After.

Let’s look at a career change as an example. But this framework applies wherever you find yourself navigating a shift: a new team, a restructuring, a return from leave, a promotion, or even a major personal change that spills into work, as it always does.

Before: Leave a departure legacy

Most people treat leaving a job like closing a door. What if we thought about it differently? Not just leaving, but leaving *well*.

When you leave well, you build what I call a departure legacy. It’s proof of who you were when

nobody needed you to perform anymore. Think about a vacation that was wonderful right up until a brutal flight home. That's what people remember. Your job is no different. A chaotic finish can taint a strong tenure.

The sequence matters. Tell your boss first, then your team, then everyone else.

Dictate out a data dump of everything you know about your role and leave it with a trusted peer.

Hand-write a note to your successor. Make it genuinely useful, not a formality. I left mine slightly hidden in my desk and was delighted to get a picture of it texted to me six months later.

Give your team substantive feedback before you go, not a placeholder. Leaving has a way of unlocking honesty. Your colleagues deserve your real thoughts. And when a colleague is leaving, that's your cue to ask for their honest read too.

Take time to build a robust recipient list and send your goodbye email with a few days still left so you're around to read the replies. Ask for LinkedIn recommendations, and offer them.

How you leave is remembered longer than how you arrived.

All of this is something you should be building even if you have no plans on changing. Leave institutions and artifacts that will outlast you.

During: Absorb without judgment

The first instinct in a new role is to prove yourself. Resist that. At least initially.

Transitions reveal what you've been assuming. Culture, relationships, and the unwritten rules of how decisions actually get made. Spend your first weeks absorbing without judgment as much as doing.

Ask yourself: who are the real stakeholders here? What does success actually look like in this organization? What's broken that nobody's telling me?

Early wins matter, but they're not about speed. They're about signal. What you choose to work on first tells people who you are and what you value. They shouldn't be isolated from your longer term vision. Think of them as the first bricks, not the whole house.

After: Show up as who you're becoming

Most people wait until they feel settled before they start building. That's a missed opportunity.

Your reputation in a new role is being formed right away whether you're intentional about it or not. Corporate counsel roles are often ill-defined, which makes it difficult for your clients to understand your value. If you don't define your value proposition relatively early, someone else will. And trust me, you probably prefer your own.

Your relationships with business partners, your team's trust, your visibility with senior leadership: all need active investment from day one.

The in-house lawyers I've coached through the biggest transitions share one trait. They don't wait for permission. They show up as the person they're becoming, not just the person they've been. Before is your legacy. During is your clarity. After is your chance. Don't waste any of them.

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Jonathan Cullen Coaching

Jonathan Cullen helps lawyers ready to move from technical expert to strategic leader at every stage: junior, mid-career counsel in transition, lawyers pursuing a GC role and law firm lawyers looking to lead at a higher level. He spent nearly two decades as a legal executive at Pfizer, leading teams across Europe, Latin America, and Canada. He was recognized as Canadian General Counsel of the Year, helped bring a COVID-19 vaccine to market, and collaborated with Greg McKeown on the New York Times bestselling book Effortless: Make it Easier to Do What Matters Most. He's a graduate of the Rotman School of Management/CBA Business Leadership Program for In-House Counsel, a Certified In-House Counsel and a Certified Professional Leadership & Performance Coach. His

clients say the work sticks. One GC called it "a transformative experience" and another said it "fundamentally changed how I lead." He's helped lawyers have more impact, more influence and more life.