

# Help New Leaders Succeed

Here are six best practices.



by Steve Arneson

**I**N RECENT YEARS, WE have all read much advice on how new executives should navigate the first few months on the job. Sadly, much of it suggests, "Don't do a lot at first; just sit back and observe." That recommendation has some merit, since it can take a while to learn about the business issues and people dynamics of a new role. However, when companies hire a new executive, they also expect significant contributions as quickly as possible.

Assimilating into a new role is one of the most difficult challenges an executive faces. To help make the transition a success, companies need to begin applying a new set of best practices.

## Success Is a Two-way Street

One blueprint for helping new leaders to "get on top of the job" is Michael Watkins' book, *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders*, (Harvard Business School Press). It provides a standard framework to accelerate the adjustment process and prevent failure, including guidelines for building critical coalitions. While the book offers valuable advice, it represents only half of the equation. Responsibility for immediate contributions does not rest solely with the new executive. It is owned by the new executive and the company, with the primary responsibility falling to the hiring manager.

## Four Big Mistakes

When new leaders must be replaced early on or, if they are retained but fail to reach their full potential, it's often because companies make one or more of these four big mistakes:

**1. They fail to generate and articulate a clear set of expectations.** New executives can't be expected to succeed without clear direction on the vision and mission of their role.

**2. They expect the new leader to be**

**immediately successful.** Companies often expect a new executive to walk in and take charge on the first day. Expecting too much of a new leader puts undue pressure on the individual, which only leads to missteps that could have been avoided with some well-conceived guidance and facilitation.

**3. They expect the new leader to have a magic wand.** Sometimes companies with political problems, faulty processes, or outdated technologies expect a new executive to have a magic wand to cure all the corporate ills. Rather than cleaning up shop in advance of the new recruit's arrival, they blame any lack of progress on the new leader.

**4. They do not prepare the team sufficiently.** New leaders face an uphill bat-



tle, if not resistance, if their direct reports are never told why the new executive has been hired, what he or she is expected to achieve, and what kind of support and sponsorship the individual will receive.

Only the rarest of miracle workers can compensate when companies make these deadly mistakes. Even the best people need some help adjusting to a new environment.

## Six Best Practices Pave the Path

To clear the runway for a new executive, implement six best practices. The investment is well worthwhile given the alternative of repeated executive derailment and time and resources wasted on recruitment and training.

### 1. Conduct a stakeholder analysis.

Prior to the new leader's arrival, have an executive coach interview the key constituents with whom the new recruit will be working (direct reports, peers, managers). The goal is to produce a 20-page report that analyzes the goals of the new executive's role, his or her greatest challenges from various stakeholders' perspectives, landmines the new leader will need to avoid, as well as details on team members, company history and culture. The new executive who receives such a detailed report on day one will be able to assimilate and become productive much more quickly. This process also works for newly promoted executives or executives who move from one department to another.

**2. Send an advance care package.** A few days before the new executive's first day of work, send him or her a "care package" of company information including history, culture, a list of departments or lines of business, organizational charts, financial information, executive biographies, a case study and one or more popular books containing strategies for transition. This gives new leaders a perspective on the challenges of transition and a chance to learn about the company even before reporting for work.

**3. Provide clear expectations.** To get clear alignment around goals, have an HR representative conduct a facilitated discussion between the hiring manager and the new executive around the vision, mission and goals of the role. When stating goals, avoid generalities. For example, don't say, "We want you to clean up training." Instead say: "We want you to consolidate the various training departments across the company within six months. You'll be unpopular, but we'll stand behind you and give you all the support you need." Give the new leader plenty of time to ask questions about expectations. Be clear about what is and isn't expected of the new executive in the first 90 days, the first six months and the first year.

**4. Conduct a new manager assimilation meeting.** This process is a facilitated, structured session, about four hours long, in which the new leader meets his or her management team. It enables each side to learn about the other's professional and personal rhythms so they can begin to work together quickly and

efficiently. It covers preferred communication channels (email, phone call, in person), styles (open-door policy or by appointment only), frequency and purpose of staff meetings and personal data (families, hobbies).

**5. Facilitate getting to know key players.** This is a facilitated process that helps new executives meet and become familiar with the key people he or she will need to work with in the new role. The hiring manager should prepare a list of all the key players with whom the new leader will work and help schedule one-on-one meet-and-greet sessions.

**6. Use a buddy system.** Many companies assign one or more "buddies" to new recruits. It works best if the buddy is a peer in another department, someone they can reach out to who is not a boss or in their area. Having a dedicated "guide" helps the new leader to navigate some of the early challenges that all new executives encounter.

Best practices such as these help new executives learn the organization quickly, get an early read on the key business issues, build a coalition of trusted colleagues, and ask the questions that will lead to making the right moves in the new role. They provide clear direction for new executives and a foundation for getting results.

### **Failure Is Not an Option**

Almost half of all new executives fail, and many other leaders never reach their potential. In some instances, the fault may lie with the new executive; however, in many cases, new leaders are set up for failure from the start with unreasonable expectations and insufficient guidance. Every company would like to hire a star who transforms the enterprise. But it takes careful planning and concerted effort to make new leaders successful.

So, communicate clear goals and expectations, remove barriers or at least alert new executives to potential landmines, create a support network, and make the executives and all stakeholders comfortable with each other to ensure smooth working relationships. Do everything in your power to help new leaders reach their full potential. LE

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**ACTION:** Help new leaders succeed.

# Enhancing Performance

Create a learning culture.



by Frank Anderson and Christopher Hardy

OUR 134,000 PROFESSIONALS SERVING in 13 career fields are undergoing transformation, dramatically increasing the number requiring certification training. By 2005, almost half of our workforce will be eligible to retire (70 percent by 2007). We need to rapidly recruit and train a replacement generation! Globalization, competition, converging IT, new business processes and capabilities, the shorter shelf-life of knowledge and skills, and a need for seamless access to knowledge assets are driving a need to improve.

To guide this transformation, our leaders set a goal to build and sustain a motivated, agile workforce. The fact that our CEO has personal ownership of our learning goal sets the direction for our corporate university and enables:

- Clearly defined lines of authority and accountability for workforce training
- Centralized curriculum development and design responsibility
- Alignment of curriculum with strategic goals and business objectives
- Job-relevant performance support and applied research responsibility
- A focus on on-going technology-based learning to reach the entire enterprise
- A strategy to meet our learning needs.

The Chief Learning Officer became the principal architect of a vision to create an agile learning environment—delivering learning assets at the point of need—any time, anywhere.

### **Changing Our Approach**

To create an agile learning environment, we evolved to four-dimensional learning: support for groups, individuals, skill development, and knowledge

distribution. In the past, we had one-dimension—resident training courses. All of our training initiatives were perceived from a classroom perspective. We set the time, place, and location.

By redefining our role as a corporate university, we expanded our products and services to include: performance support or expert consulting (on demand), distributed learning to reach more people, and knowledge-sharing through technology.

By employing a multi-dimensional perspective, we built speed and agility into our delivery of training activities (or learning assets). We started fast-track initiatives to become a full-service



learning and development enterprise. As a first step, we had to sell our own training staff on this *Performance Learning Model (PLM)* to enhance work place performance. The PLM offers people more control of their learning with connectivity at the point of need and incorporates formal training, continuous learning

activities, performance support (consulting, targeted training, rapid deployment training), and knowledge sharing.

The PLM is intended to provide our people with the right learning solution at the right time, and at the right place, 24/7. The PLM, when thoughtfully deployed, provides content, the right amount, integrated, and delivered when and where needed.

Our focus is to achieve better alignment of our learning assets for performance improvement. Courses, lessons, learning modules, and knowledge-sharing assets are all integrated to achieve performance improvement. This requires an end-to-end mindset from curricula developers and course managers. To help the socialization process, we renamed our course managers as *Performance Learning Managers*.