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The Executive OnBoarding Challenge

You're a newly hired executive with a can't-fail business strategy. Your chances of failure are much greater than you think if you arrive without a solid personal strategy as well.

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By

Studies show that some 40% of executives hired externally fail to achieve their objectives within the first year at a new company. That's because, despite the considerable time, effort and money spent recruiting top talent, companies do a poor job of "onboarding." In fact, few companies take time to acclimate new executives in the corporate culture beyond the standard, one-size-fits-all orientation session.

You come in armed with a sound business strategy, based on past successes and best practices. Unfortunately, without an equally sound personal strategy, your chances of success are significantly diminished.

If your new company offers a robust executive onboarding process, count your blessings. There are several onboarding steps you can take, both before and after you join the company, to help get off on the right foot.

Before You Arrive . . .

Do Your Homework -- Again. You spent considerable time during your interview process researching the company, its business strategy, its structure and its position in the industry. Now, go back and dig deeper into company culture, history, and "sacred cows." This may be tougher than your initial research; much of the information you're seeking is not available as hard facts and figures, but as subjective material.

Not surprisingly, one of the best ways to learn about the company's culture is to network with

trusted professional resources and contacts. Consider Internet sources carefully and take opinions from message boards and blogs with a grain of salt. Don't worry about the opinions themselves, but use the Internet to identify "hot" issue among executives and/or employees at the company.

Take stock of your strengths and challenges. Understand the type of working environment you're most comfortable in, especially if the new company is unlike any environment you've experienced in the past. For instance, are you relatively quiet and like to work alone, as opposed to having an outgoing personality? Do you prefer face-to-face discussions, but the new company relies heavily on e-mail communication and large team meetings? Understand how your management style may be perceived at your new company.

Thanks to the Internet, your reputation may already precede you. If you haven't already, enter your name in a search engine to see what new colleagues may have found out about you. What might be considered a success at a former company may strike fear in your new team before you walk in the door. That's true even if you're not "lucky" enough to have acquired an industry nickname, like "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap, the Scott Paper and Sunbeam executive famous for buying and downsizing companies in the 1990s.

Ideally, your new company will prepare, with your assistance, a communication strategy to announce your arrival with a consistent, appropriate tone, giving leadership's view of you, where you fit in, and expectations for your future at the company.

Prepare yourself. Rehearse a few stories that show who you really are. At least one should show a character trait or strength; another story should illustrate a best practice or a difficult decision you made. You will want to have several stories ready for meeting a variety of new colleagues in different situations.

After You Arrive . . .

Listen, listen, listen. Your first few weeks should include a listening tour, especially with your own team. Your emphasis should be on learning, not talking.

Ask open-ended questions such as "How do you define success?" and "What are your concerns?" This is your opportunity to build relationships, not show off. In fact, it's best to avoid "I" statements as much as possible. It's amazing how quickly new colleagues pick up and are turned off by a new boss's excessive use of "I."

Meet with your boss within the first two days. Understand what your boss values, what challenges are ahead and how your boss views success -- for you, your team and the company. This is your opportunity to learn more. Is your boss discussing the strategic or focusing on the tactical? Are you being empowered to make your own decisions or is he/she ready to micro-manage?

Meet with human resources (HR). This is your opportunity to discuss the corporate landscape with those on the front lines of employee morale and corporate culture. Review company policies with an HR specialist. Ask questions about anything -- company culture, policies, performance appraisals, employee morale, diversity or even dress code. Find out if there are any potential "land mines" concerning key individuals, situations or departments.

Ask for a mentor from another part of the company. Some companies provide strong mentoring

programs for management and frontline employees. Your mentor should have a long company history, be experienced with many areas of the company and be able to meet with you periodically. A mentor can answer questions that cannot be posed to others, such as your boss or your team. Your mentor can offer advice, but cannot serve as your advocate or intermediary.

The mentor's role should be strictly voluntary; he or she is unlikely to be much help if the individual has been "forced" to serve as your mentor. If there is no one to serve as your mentor, consider an external adviser for the role.

Meet with a peer (preferably assigned by your boss). Unlike your mentor, the peer comes from within your area and has detailed knowledge of your new team's roles and responsibilities. The peer is able to help you fit in.

Again, the best way to get off on the right foot is with open-ended questions. What are the team's strengths and challenges? Who's the go-to person for a specific project or task?

Meet with your direct reports. If your company has no formal orientation process, this step may come sooner rather than later. That's where your preparation, research and rehearsed stories come in handy to help break the ice -- and where listening is most important.

During your one-on-one sessions, learn about each team member's views on success, challenges and values, as well as their roles, your role and team dynamics. This gives you an opportunity to see if you're speaking the same language. Terms like sales, marketing, research, consultants or production at one company may have different nuances or meanings at another.

Beware unsolicited "friendly" advice or gossip from colleagues and team members. Remember, not everyone at your new company wants you to succeed. You were hired from outside, which means some inside were passed over for your job; others might see you as a threat to their own advancement. The best strategy is to be consistent, professional and correct with everyone.

Correct early missteps quickly. Adapting to a new environment is never easy. You are under a great deal of scrutiny from both above and below (and in-between). If you take a wrong turn, the best strategy is to admit your mistake quickly and move on. It's a sign of strength, not weakness.

In Short . . .

Executive orientation sessions are helpful, but often incomplete in today's fast-moving, streamlined business world. Trying to implement a business strategy at a new company without taking its corporate culture and employee morale into account is a business strategy only half-planned. Just a few actions on your part, as a new executive, can increase the odds for your business strategy's success -- as well as your own potential advancement.



How to Kill a Conversation: Phrases to Avoid as a New Executive

Don't be surprised if any of these "killer" phrases are met by dead silence—or worse.

"At my last company, we did it this way ..." Instead, try: "Some companies have tried and succeeded with ..."

"No wonder you guys are in trouble." Try: "Has this been an ongoing issue?"

"Don't you have better metrics?" Try: "What's the best way to measure ...?"

"That's going to change." Try: "Let's take a closer look at that."

"What do you need to get ahead here?" No ifs, ands or buts—avoid this subject completely.

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