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Books Worth Your Time: Q&A with Author Nat Stoddard

The Right Leader

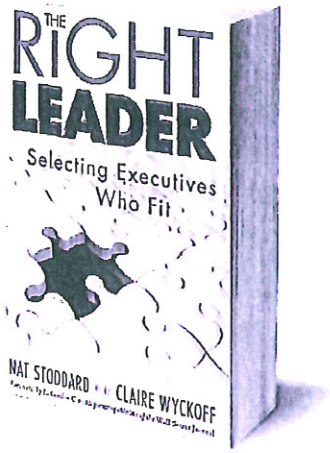
With the economy being at its most challenging level in recent memory, the last thing any company wants is to absorb staggering costs as its management makes frequent leadership changes. Yet ExecuNet's *2009 Executive Job Market Intelligence Report* shows that executive tenure with the same company is only 2.8 years. Stability is called for; more than that...it's necessary.

The Right Leader [Wiley, 2009] by career and corporate transitions specialist and experienced CEO Nat Stoddard, and written with Claire Wyckoff, gives companies and executives the tools they need to avoid the tremendous costs created by high levels of leadership failure. As he offers practical ideas and strategies for selecting the right leader, Stoddard stresses that many exceptional leaders fail simply because cultural fit is not woven into the selection process in a meaningful manner.

In an exclusive ExecuNet interview, we asked the author to explain how *The Right Leader* can help companies reduce the risks of leadership failures and ensure that their new executives match the business needs of the organization and also fit within its culture.

Q. What is your "Leader Selection Process," and how does being aware of its principles help executive candidates in today's job market?

A. The new Leader Selection Process is built on the basic steps that constitute the traditional selection process in use at most companies today, but with a few missing steps added. Our research leads us to conclude that most leaders don't fail because they *can't* do the job, but more because of *how* they do their job. In short, they fail when they don't fit appropriately with the cultures through which they must bring about desired changes. The accelerated and extended versions of the Leader Selection Processes described in the book utilize assessments that permit a comparison of the predispositions,



values, beliefs and philosophies of the prospective leader with the make up of the organization's cultures. This involves newly developed tools that specifically measure and define these key elements and then map them to get a sense of the degree of fit between the leader and the organization's cultures.

Q. How does *The Right Leader* aid in senior-level succession planning?

A. An entire chapter of the book is devoted to the steps boards can take to integrate the selection processes we recommend into their succession planning so that they are prepared to move swiftly and successfully to find the right replacement for a departing CEO. In it, we lay out step-by-step, a comprehensive approach to be used by boards interested in designing credible succession plans and from them, detailed development plans for internal candidates.

Q. How will *The Right Leader* help candidates look beyond the excitement of a new job opportunity and determine if they really are the right person for the position?

A. Abraham Lincoln used to read the Richmond newspapers every day because he was interested in understanding what his enemy was thinking, saying and doing. While *The Right Leader* was written primarily for the benefit of those who have responsibility for selecting new leaders, it provides many, many valuable clues and insights into the new direction of hiring "best practices" for those who are candidates as well. Of greatest importance is the understanding of what "culture" is all about and why it is so important to hirers and hirees when it comes to making the correct employment decisions. A second key takeaway that candidates will benefit from is an appreciation of what the real needs of the organization are and why they are rarely presented to candidates with as much clarity and specificity as one would like. In addition, there are numerous interviewing tips, case studies and examples of what other senior executives have done in similar situations and what has worked, or not worked, for them and why.

Q. How can *The Right Leader* serve as a tool in an executive's onboarding plan?

A. Most onboarding plans begin 100 days too late. Instead of being built on hard facts and data generated prior to the final candidate's selection, most are based on work done by the new leader and his or her onboarding coach *after* they've arrived. Far too often this work is based more on "conventional wisdom" and "educated guesses" than on hard facts and relevant data. It's little wonder, then, that there are no documented studies suggesting that the way onboarding is currently being done makes any difference in the long-term success of the executive. By adopting the principles advocated in *The Right Leader,* much of the risk and resulting cost of leadership failures can be eliminated, and the same information can also be used, beginning on day one to make accurate, measured decisions and appropriate changes while avoiding the pitfalls that are a part of every new cultural landscape. ■