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Top Five Things New Executives Need to Get Right to Succeed

By John Shinal

A long list of studies have shown that about half of all new executives fail at their jobs, and that almost a third leave them within 18 months. The numbers are surprising, given that top-level hires usually go through about 15 to 20 interviews, on average. Despite hiring managers, in-house recruiters, human resource departments and outside search firms focused on getting it right, companies get it wrong a good chunk of the time.

Enter "onboarding," the management consulting practice that combines human resource orientation and executive coaching. The discipline, which has been around since the early 1990s, is now a recognized specialty within the consulting business.

Barbara Bridendolph, president of Crenshaw Associates, a New York executive advisory firm, has been onboarding new executives for about ten years.

When Polycom chief executive Andy Miller wanted to get a new executive team ramped up in a hurry, he turned to her for help.

Even before the new team was hired, she started interviewing key "stakeholders," meaning others at Polycom who would impact and depend on the new team's success. Working closely with Miller, then with five different executives, Bridendolph jumped in and set up 100-day plans for each of them. She then met with them -- and others at the company -- regularly to keep them on plan.

According to Bridendolph, the keys to successful onboarding include aligning the objectives of new executives with the company's overall strategic goals; getting them to develop relationships with key stakeholders; and successfully integrating them into the corporate culture.

It's also crucial that the onboarding process be seamless with the executive's new duties.

"They can't just be a set of exercises off to the side. What we do is track and measure what they need to be doing as part of their jobs," Bridendolph said.

But what if your company is too small (or too cheap) to afford a consultant? Or what if you're further down the management chart and have been thrown into a new role with little more than an expectation that you'll sink or swim?

Well, take heart. After several conversations with Bridendolph, and a few with executive recruiters, we've compiled a list of the top five things new executives need to do to succeed.

1. It's About People Skills

While the business skills and industry savvy that candidates list on resumes and display in interviews are critical for getting a job, they're not the most important factor in succeeding at one.

What consultants and recruiters call the "soft skills" are more important than "hard" skill sets, according to Bridendolph.

"Can they develop relationships with key stakeholders? Do they have the interpersonal skills to communicate effectively? Can they manage themselves and their own emotions? These are the keys to executive success," Bridendolph said.

High-level managers and executive hopefuls should therefore spend more time developing their soft skill set -- either by reading or taking courses or hiring a coach -- and practicing them.

2. Don't Fight Your Own Culture War

New executives coming into a company often believe that because they are being brought into a leadership role, "the company culture will bend to fit them," Bridendolph said.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

"The culture will reject them" if they don't find a way to fit in, she said.

Fitting in means being willing to learn things like company lingo and acronyms; product names and roadmaps; company history; what the appropriate balance is between work and play; whether the culture is competitive or collaborative; and what kind of relationships and behavior are acceptable.

If everyone else is putting in 12-hour days but you're not, that's as bad as pulling all-nighters when the company softball team is playing for their league championship.

"Fitting in is not rocket science," Bridendolph said.

But it is crucial, because the same type of behavior that can help you succeed in one culture can get you fired or ostracized in another, she said.

Crenshaw Associates has "culture-mapping tools" that can help a new executive know the culture before they go in and stomp all over it.

But those without access to such tools can still learn a lot about a company's culture from reading its website, or by talking to people who work there, or reading what's been written about it in the media.

3. Know Thyself

When Bridendolph went to work with the new executives coming into Polycom, she wasn't starting cold. She was armed with psychometric data that the executive search firm Korn Ferry International had used to help identify the candidates in the first place.

"The data was very insightful. Knowing their behavioral tendencies is a big plus," she said.

The information came from a database that Korn Ferry, like other large executive search and recruitment firms, keeps on potential candidates. That data was matched against other information provided by Polycom, where CEO Miller and others filled out questionnaires that measure 21 different aspects of behavior and personality.

"That's how we identify the intangible skill set; that's the harder part of the equation," said Steve Winings, the Korn Ferry partner who led the Polycom executive search.

The tools help everyone in the process learn whether an executive candidate has courage, or a need to win, or can move fast and be a leader, according to Winings.

While not everyone has access to such sophisticated tools, written personality tests are widely available both in print form and online. And paying attention to feedback from those close to you -- both at work and at home -- can provide valuable clues to areas where you excel -- or lag.

4. Get a Plan and Get Some Help

The first thing Bridendolph does with a new executive that she's onboarding is develop a 100-day plan. Part of developing the plan is to identify and interview others within the company that have a vested interest in the success of the new hire.

A major goal of such plans is to generate feedback from others to get the new executive on the right track and keep them there. Such feedback is the first part of what Bridendolph calls her "secret sauce."

Bridendolph uses what she calls a "cultural snapshot" which she uses to measure whether the new executive is fitting in. She usually develops and shares it with her client 30 days into their job.

At 90 days, she has a tool that measures "business traction," which helps determine whether the executive is succeeding at the job they were hired to do.

Too often, she said, executives get caught up in their own goals and fail to learn what others in the company are expecting of them.

"You have to have an understanding of what people expect you to deliver," she said.

The key to such an understanding is identifying others in the company who your success impacts and depends on, and by getting to know them. Both of these things are something all new hires can do.

Executive coaches also encourage new executives to find an "internal sponsor," or mentor, who can help keep them on track with feedback and advice.

5. Keeping Goals Aligned

Aside from being able to fit in culturally, another major factor in whether an executive succeeds or fails is how well and how quickly they align their own objectives with the overall goals of the company.

This means "getting up to speed on what the company does and how they make money," which also means understanding the company's customer base, according to Bridendolph.

Being a good listener is key here.

"New executives have to strike a good balance between listening, learning and leading," Bridendolph said. "You have to do the first two before you can do the third."

One of the biggest challenges for onboarding consultants is to try and improve the alignment of the new executive, the person they report to, the people they supervise and the company as a whole.

And there's little time to lose, given how quickly businesses move today.

"A new executive stepping into a company can't afford to waste even 10% of their time," Bridendolph said.

Or, put another way: "they need to find the ball quickly and keep their eye on it."

Write to [John Shinal](#)