

Leadership Coaching the New Hire: Minimizing risk while maximizing potential

By Neville Knowles

“On-board coaching helps the newly hired or promoted individual expedite their assimilation into the role, organization and to become productive earlier.”

It minimizes risk while maximizing potential.

According to studies more than 50% of senior executives entering a new position perform significantly below expectations, resign or are terminated during the first 18 months. The risk can be even higher when the new executive has been brought on to manage a change initiative, turnaround or department merger. When a new hire doesn't succeed, the costs can be substantial, including expenditures on: search, relocation, severance, and training. These costs can reach many times more than the annual executive salary given intangible costs such as the loss of moral, momentum and growth opportunities for the organization in redirection.

Opinions on new hires effectiveness begin to form surprisingly quickly, and once formed, they're very hard to change. If successful in building credibility and securing early wins, the momentum likely will propel the new leader through the balance of their tenure within the position. Conversely should the new hire dig themselves into a hole early, they may face an uphill battle from that point forward.

If it takes an individual six months to a year to become fully productive -- or, worse, to find out that the match wasn't to their liking -- then the cost of bringing that executive on board goes off the charts.

Leadership coaching can cut the transition time significantly, by a half or more, so that individuals are fully up and running sooner -- and the organization begins to achieve an earlier return on investment.

It's relatively easy for a newcomer to join an organization and learn the reporting relationships; the budgeting processes ... all the structural things. It's not as easy to go in and learn the organizational culture ... how to communicate and work effectively with a new boss, peers, direct reports and other stakeholders.

For example, if you have to give your first presentation at a monthly Senior management or Divisional meeting, you need to understand how those meetings operate. Are they simply for sharing information, or is there interaction? Do the meetings tend to stay on a rigid agenda or are they more free-flowing? If you are scheduled at 10:30, do you have a high degree of certainty that you will actually be speaking at 10:30? And how should you structure your presentation at that meeting so that it both is effective and makes a good impression?

Very often, newly hired individuals can cover ground like this on their own, but the support of a coach helps them address issues like this sooner and in a focused fashion. First impressions are important! Early success's or wins are vital as they serve to accelerate transitional assimilation and consequential productivity sooner.

A leadership coach can also help identify how an organization measures success by asking questions like, "What have you noticed about people who have succeeded here? What have you noticed about people who failed here?" The answers to questions like these can provide broad brushstrokes of how things work in a new organization.

Common traps experienced by new hires include:

- Sticking with what you know. What worked for you in your previous role might not serve you or others in your new role given cultural differences or expectation differences. You may need embrace new competencies.
- Jack rabbit starts. You feel you need take action and you try too hard, too early to put your own stamp on the organization. You are too busy to learn and understand resulting in bad early decisions that catalyze early resistance to your leadership.
- Setting unrealistic expectations. A clear mandate isn't negotiated with established objectives and timelines of delivery to suit the upstream leader and/or stakeholders. What do they expect in the first 60 to 90 days, six months and first year? What does the new hire expect in the way of access, work style and authority?
- Attempting to do too much too early. You rush off in all directions, launching multiple initiatives in the hope that some will pay off. People become confused, and no critical mass of resources gets focused on key initiatives.
- Coming in with "the" answer. You come in with your mind made up, or you reach conclusions too quickly about "the" problems and the solutions. You alienate people who could help you understand what's going on, and you squander opportunities to develop support for good solutions.
- Misdirected learning. Spending too much time and focus on the technical part of the job and not enough on the cultural and political dimensions of the new role.
- Neglecting horizontal relationships. Spending too much time and focus on vertical relationships and not enough with peers and other stakeholders. You miss what it will take to succeed and you miss early opportunities to build supportive alliances.

Tips for starting the new position successfully:

- Learn about the organization, its culture and politics. Do so with beginners mind and not with a lens carried over from your last position.
- Understand with full clarity your new role and its expectations of you from all stakeholders. Also have a clear understanding of how your role and team contribute to the overall success of the organization.
- Establish high quality relationships with management, peers, subordinates and all other stakeholders from the get go. Create a plan for doing so. Coaching in this regard will help immensely where challenges occur, as they commonly do.
- Gain insights over the operational unit processes and practices being assumed, seek to understand and learn.
- Develop effective communications strategies within the context of the organization to ensure full alignment and priorities management is achieved.
- Enlist the support of an experienced leadership coach to help and guide you through the first 6 months of onboard transitioning.
- Create a plan for doing the above referenced over the first 90 to 180 days, identifying realistic early wins that create initial momentum. Do so with the leadership coach mindful that your objective is to accelerate leadership transition in the role.

In today's highly competitive environments, individuals and organizations can always apply more capital or more technology to a given situation, but there is no substitute for time. On-board coaching creates time by building critical velocity to enable newly hired executive to assume their position more rapidly and most importantly on a solid foundation of interpersonal relationship with those upstream, in team and laterally. Over the long haul an investment in onboard coaching pays significant dividends while minimizing risk.