



Nailing It: How to Cement Your Success in a New Leadership Role

So you're starting a new job soon. It seems like a great opportunity – a good fit between your skills, goals, and the organization's needs. That alone should increase the likelihood of your success, right?

Perhaps. For new leaders, the stakes are very high. A recent study by The Center for Creative Leadership revealed that about 40% of new management hires fail within their first 18 months on the job¹. Corporate expectations of new leaders are high as well, and are often unclear at best. Or conflicting. Or hidden altogether. Walking into a job in a new organization is like traveling to a foreign country – one where you don't speak the language or know the laws. As an outsider, you are at an extreme disadvantage. Even the best due diligence in your research before taking this job will do little to prepare you for the realities you face once in position.

What can you do to “nail it?” To build a solid foundation for your success, you must be intentional about your OnBoarding process. Build and continually adapt a strategy for successful assimilation from the moment you become interested in the organization.

Successful OnBoarding is a study in paradox. To be effective in your transition, you must focus on learning, rather than demonstrating your worth. Build alliances while not becoming overly political. Seek to improve the organization without devaluing what already exists. Gain the credibility to be allowed to enact decisions that should, by rights, be yours to make. Even, or perhaps especially, if your mandate is to bring about radical change, you must approach your OnBoarding with the sophistication of an anthropologist studying a foreign culture (and the caution of someone who is unsure whether the natives are armed and dangerous).

Be clear about one thing. With or without an OnBoarding process, your fate in a new leadership role is, for better or worse, typically sealed within your first three months. If you fail to establish a toehold for yourself, it may take 12 - 18 months before you know it. But the organization knows it. You are being observed and evaluated from the moment of your first interview. Organizational members are judging whether or not you “get it”, and making decisions about the ways they will work to either support or undermine your success.

A recent Manchester Partners survey of 826 Human Resources leaders identified ineffective peer relationships, role confusion, lack of internal political skills, and failure to meet key objectives as the four strongest predictors of new leader

derailment². What is the best way to get out in front of organizational judgment and avoid those pitfalls? The obvious answers – build strong peer relationships, get role clarity, be savvy about the political climate, and meet your performance goals – are not as easily accomplished as they sound. If you're lucky, your new organization will have a structured Executive OnBoarding process that can assist you – one that guides you through the series of transitions you will experience within the unique context of your company's business climate.

Importantly, Executive OnBoarding is not the same as employee orientation. A typical orientation process is event-based and short-lived (often totaling no more than eight hours of training), providing a high-level company overview and access to basic information. An effective Executive OnBoarding process is different in several important ways – it is broader in scope, interactive, more structured, covers a longer time period, and is customized to focus your learning on the areas of greatest import to your new role. With a structured Executive OnBoarding process, your chances of successful assimilation increase, and you are more likely to be happy and effective in your new job. Without it, your learning process as a new leader will be marred by the fallout of highly public trial-and-error learning.

Whether or not your organization uses a structured approach to Executive OnBoarding, build a plan for your transition and enlist support for it. In partnership with your boss, you need to gather and integrate information to smooth your assimilation at four levels: your corporation, your business unit, your function, and your personal/family life. In doing so, you will achieve greater role clarity, develop an understanding of the organization and its expectations of you, and build a topographical “map” of the new land you are exploring.

In learning about your corporation, strive to build an in-depth understanding of the history of the company (both public and private knowledge), its key initiatives, and the results achieved. Identify the short- and long-term priorities of the leadership team. Immerse yourself in the Brand. How was it conceived? Communicated? To what extent do you think the brand image the company projects is aligned with how it is perceived in the marketplace? Meet with key leaders, especially those in areas related to your own. Much as an anthropologist would, study the culture. What are the norms (both stated and unstated) for leadership and other behavior? What is forbidden? Why? What differences do you notice between successful and unsuccessful leaders in your new corporation? How does the company measure and talk about success?

In your business unit, many of your OnBoarding activities will mirror the things you've learned at the corporate level. The primary difference here is the level of detail. Study the business decision-making processes. Identify and become fluent in the financial language of your business unit.

Attend all senior-level business cycle meetings, and then whittle down a list that you should regularly attend. If you're studying past initiatives, ask for post-mortems from people who led those efforts. Glean their lessons learned. Learn about the work done by their functional areas, the handoffs to your areas, and their assessments of your area and team. Ask their advice, speaking both generically and specifically. Importantly, during this process, you need to share and test your impressions with your boss, gaining mid-course corrections that will support greater long-term success in your role.

Your functional OnBoarding is where you will roll up your sleeves and really dig into the work processes used in your area. Again, learning about context and history is key. Be cautious about forming and sharing a vision for your team until you have gained enough information to make others feel valued (and you feel well-grounded) in your decision-making. Resist the temptation to “fix” things until you truly understand the underlying issues. Size up your team and their capabilities (and aspirations). Ask to see samples of their work. Find out what they'd do to improve the effectiveness of your area. Visit with key vendors and external partners, and learn from their perspective. Slowly, after several sounding board sessions with your boss, formulate the beginnings of a plan for your group. Put accountabilities into place. Monitor progress and make adjustments as needed.

Finally, do not overlook the importance of personal OnBoarding. Most executive transitions require relocation, and poorly handled relocation can have devastating consequences for executives and their families. Spend the time to find a neighborhood that meets the needs of all family members. Search out churches and clubs that provide social support and a sense of community. Align yourself with charitable organizations that match your personal values, and accept leadership roles where offered. Additionally, well-planted family roots can help you weather the vagaries of a demanding executive role. Recognize that it is a transition process, and that your family may not truly feel at home for a year or more. Do all you can to make your new house a home.

By focusing your OnBoarding at these four key levels, you will be demonstrating real commitment to your success in your new role. And you will be greatly enhancing your chances of “nailing it”. When doing so, please remember to frequently consider the paradoxical nature of OnBoarding. Don't worry about demonstrating that you were worth the six-figure hiring bonus – be concerned about developing the knowledge and ability to really add value long-term.

EndNotes

1. The Center for Creative Leadership study, cited in Don't Blow Your New Job; Fortune, June 22, 1998
2. Manchester Partners study, cited in Don't Blow Your New Job; Fortune, June 22, 1998