

Onboarding Senior Leaders: A Different RoadMap

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The performance indicators for leadership onboarding in corporate America are troubling. In spite of the economic importance of retention through onboarding, companies are not getting it done. How do you get your program on the right track for success?

According to research by Dr. John Sullivan, a thought leader on strategic talent management, the statistics related to talent management in organizations represent **wide spread failure in recruitment and retention**. These statistics represent the job candidates, new hires and hiring managers who are dissatisfied with the recruitment and integration processes of their organizations.

Here is an excerpt:

- **70% dissatisfied** — 70% of the external customers (applicants) and 28% of the internal customers (hiring managers) indicate they are dissatisfied with the hiring process (*Source: Staffing.org*).
- **50% customer regret** — 50% of the processes users (both managers and new hires) later regret their “buying” decision (*Source: The Recruiting Roundtable*). In addition, 25% of new hires later regret taking their new job within one year (*Source: Challenger, Gray*)
- **46% turnover** — 46% of new hires leave their jobs within the first year (*Source: eBullpen, LLC*) and 50% of current employees are actively seeking or are planning to seek a new job (*Source: Deloitte*).
- **46% failure rate** — 46% of U.S. new hires must be classified as failures within their first 18 months (fired, pressured to quit, required disciplinary action, etc.) (*Source: Leadership IQ*). In addition, 58% of the highest-priority hires, new executives hired from the outside, fail in their new positions within 18 months (*Source: Michael Watkins*).
- **Only a 19% success rate** — only one out of five of the process output can be classified as unequivocal successes (*Source: Leadership IQ*).

Dr. Sullivan goes on to suggest a series of action steps that first validate these failures inside your own organization, then addresses ways to seek improvements. The last of these action steps is the one that relates to the topic of leadership onboarding. “Assume all sub-processes are suspect,” he writes, including the “sub-process” of onboarding. He emphasizes that onboarding is the process that can have a significant impact on these “failure numbers”. **So it follows that implementing a successful onboarding process can reap big benefits for your organization.**

What is onboarding?

Since the mid-90s, onboarding has been “on the radar” of most HR leaders inside larger organizations. Michael Watkins’ book, *The First 90 Days*, made leadership onboarding a relevant business topic, and many organizations followed his lead to create onboarding experiences for their new hires, particularly in leadership roles. Unfortunately, these experiences varied wildly and had mixed results. Some

organizations defined onboarding as ‘employee orientation’ and others left it to the new leaders to figure out for themselves, providing little or no organizational support.

The definition that has evolved and worked best for our clients is that **onboarding is a process that positions an organization’s new hires with its vision, strategies, goals and culture and that success results from the partnership of the new hires, their managers and Human Resources partners.**

Onboarding begins upon acceptance of the new role and usually does not extend beyond the four-to-six month mark.

The Connect the Dots onboarding model starts with a definition of leadership onboarding and its role and context in the **Talent Management Cycle**. (Figure 1)

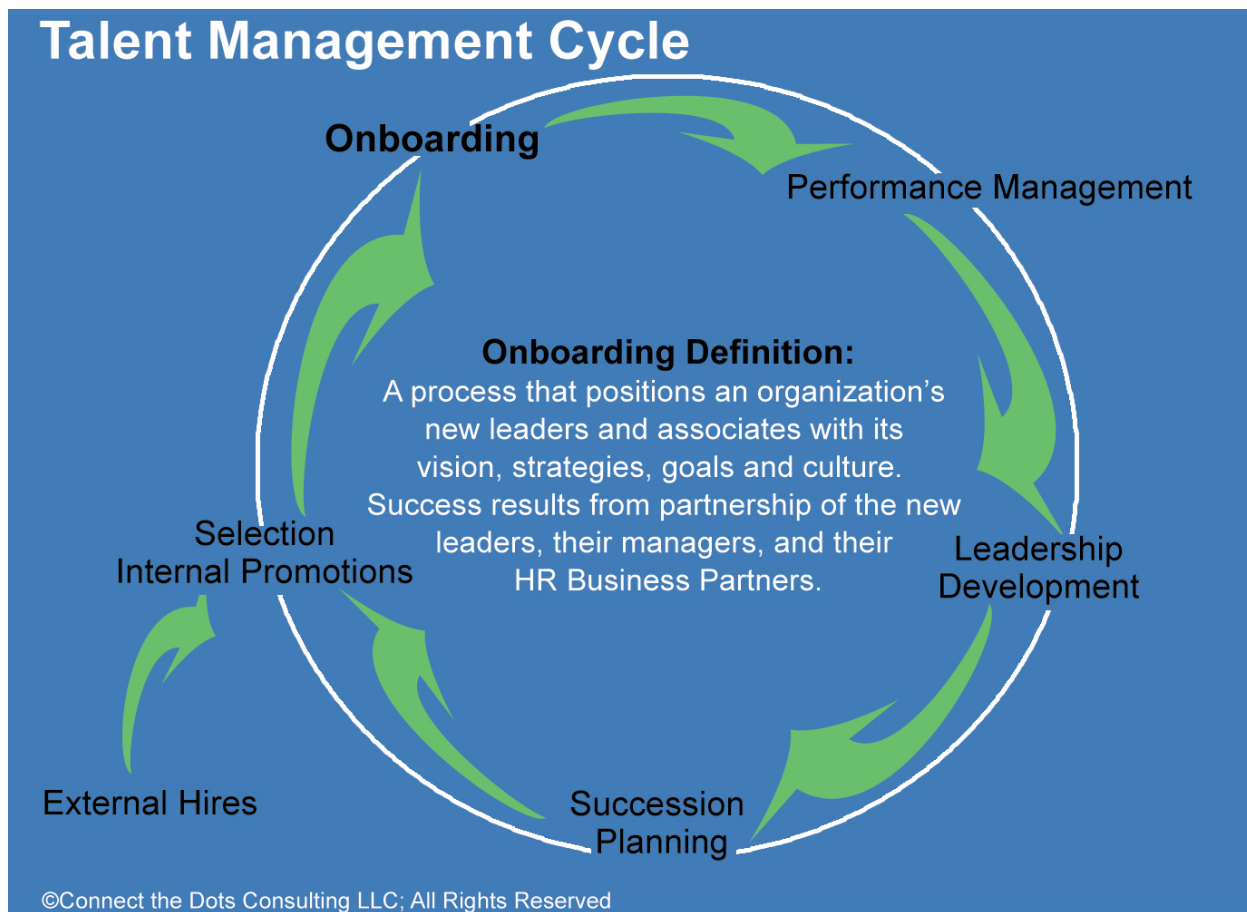


Figure 1

Onboarding is positioned in an organization's talent management cycle to bridge the gap between the selection process and the performance management and leadership development processes. It allows both the new leader and the organization to transition and assigns roles and responsibilities for each participant. Onboarding begins upon the job acceptance and usually ends around the four-to-six month mark, when it is appropriate to transition to the formal performance management process. Most organizations do recognize, however, that it can take up to a full year for a new leader to be completely integrated, but best practices suggest a structured 4-6 month formal process.

What Is Different About Onboarding Leaders?

New leaders need an onboarding experience that is different from the individual contributors in the organization. They have been told repeatedly through the selection process how wonderful they are and how they need to replicate whatever success they have had at their former jobs into their new one.

Once they start in their new job, they may find out that what worked in their previous job does not fit in the new role. They make mistakes because they don't understand the culture and the people with whom they need to build relationships. They are anxious to "make their mark" and frequently miss it completely. Because these leaders are also typically highly successful individuals, onboarding them can be tricky. They may have changed jobs several times before and think they have it "figured out" and that accepting any type of support would be seen as weak or needy. So, it is more important than ever that the organization set the expectation from the top leadership that all new leaders actively participate in the experience and understand it as a development opportunity and continued investment in them as leaders, just as the selection process was an investment.

What New Leaders Really Need

New leaders are bombarded with information, people, meetings, decisions, travel, presentations and a lot more during their first weeks on the job. It is difficult for them to prioritize because they have no context for most of these interactions and activities, and everything seems important. They also want to be perceived as competent, so they are hesitant to ask for time or help. The leadership onboarding process allows them to back up, focus and learn by doing.

The Connect the Dots (CTD) leadership onboarding model is based on three core building blocks, or pillars, of success.

They are—

- 1. Knowledge**
- 2. Relationships**
- 3. Feedback**

The first pillar, knowledge, refers to the information that the new leaders need to acquire throughout their onboarding. It starts with a broad overview of organizational vision, mission, values and history, and then builds to current strategies, processes and culture. From there, new leaders need timely knowledge about their function, their teams and their roles.

The next pillar, building relationships, is critically important to a new leader's success. Achieving success in a new role assumes successful execution of organizational objectives. Execution of objectives and action plans is most easily done through and with the support and help of others in the organization. An important point is that leaders who are brought into an organization to bring about change or lead through a crisis are even more in need of internal relationships to achieve success.

The last pillar, feedback, is usually the missing link in most leadership onboarding programs. Organizations are typically not set up to give formal feedback and the informal feedback on which they rely can be incomplete or missing entirely. Impressions and perceptions about the new leaders are formed very early, so it is really important to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative early feedback into the onboarding program, usually at the 45 to 60 day mark.

These three pillars are the foundation on which you must build your onboarding program to ensure that you see results that are consistent with your organizational objectives.

Leadership Onboarding in Action

Organizations have experienced real success with this onboarding model. **A large, global off-priced retailer** discovered that it required a new approach to building its internal leadership "bench." It had historically relied on internal promotions; however, the changing talent pool caused them to begin to hire more leaders from outside the organization. To meet the demands of this business change, they used the CTD model to create a consistent onboarding process that integrates the new leaders into the company culture, and engages both the HR partners and the hiring managers.

Challenges and obstacles that the new leaders experienced without onboarding:

- Physical environment not set up (no offices, furniture, computers, etc.)
- Didn't know how to access information
- No structure to transition – no formal objectives
- No one to help navigate culture – staff seemed apprehensive
- It was assumed that they knew what to do – no real training in new position
- For those relocating, personal transition issues overshadowed their early days
- Not being able to contribute right away
- Being told to put aside what they already know and just absorb information

After implementation of the onboarding process, a formal *Onboarding Impact Study* identified these results from program:

- Leaders said that the positions matched their expectations
- They had a clear understanding of their roles and how it fits into the organization
- Working with an HR Partner was very helpful – it was valuable to have someone to think things through with and act as a “sounding board”
- They felt supported by their Manager and HR
- They felt the environment was positive and welcoming
- Transition Objectives clearly focused the first weeks on the job
- Meet & Greets were productive and led to stronger relationships
- Early Wins built confidence of new leaders and organization in the new leaders
- Having structure the first few weeks/months was effective
- They felt the environment supported and encouraged development on the whole
- Meet & Greets were planned and had clear intent
- Having HR as a support was important

Another example is from a **leading pediatric health and research center** which had been experiencing significant growth and change, including its senior leadership team, during a 2-year period. The organization’s board encouraged this growth by recruiting nationally and internationally recognized clinical and administrative talent. The result was a significant culture shift and the new leaders had to be integrated quickly and appropriately to be able to meet their aggressive objectives.

Using the CTD model, the hospital built their leadership onboarding process so that it allowed the new leaders to feel that they were a valued part of the organization and the community while leveraging their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Results included:

- Better understanding of the new leaders and the hospital of the role expectations
- Smoother personal transitions by connecting relocating leaders to community resources
- Faster return on investment of the new leaders, “pay-back” to the hospital for the recruitment process
- Reinforcement of cultural elements that needed to be preserved, and a reduction in “negative” culture elements or “old ways” of doing things

The human resources team of this medical and research center now has the tools to measure how well the new leaders are integrating (retention and engagement are up) and what parts of the hospital’s selection and onboarding programs need improvement.

Summary

In our work with client organizations, we have found that even the smallest changes and additions to a leadership onboarding experience can yield big returns. A simple addition of formal feedback at the 60 or 90-day mark can have a dramatic effect on both a new leader who does not realize she is making mistakes and the organization which may have misperceptions about how the new leader views her role. Other examples include having purposeful and scheduled conversations specifically around the transition that make it “Okay” and acceptable to ask questions and ask for help. A formal, structured program should be the long-term goal, but it should not stand as a barrier to making incremental, positive changes in the short-term.

Leadership Onboarding should be a key process in the overall Talent Management strategy of an organization. With clearly defined objectives and metrics, its impact will be demonstrated to the organizations leadership with increased engagement, retention and speed to productivity of all new leaders.

Successful onboarding is a true partnership between a new leader and the organization. For companies that have developed that partnership, it has been an invaluable tool in the engagement and retention of key new hires in an uncertain economy and will continue to play a key role in the talent management process as the climate shifts to stabilization, then to growth. Acquiring and retaining new leaders will be a key to organizational growth.

The numbers will then speak for themselves.

About Connect the Dots Consulting

Connect the Dots is a management consulting firm dedicated to creating solutions focused on leadership onboarding and high-performing teams. Connecting your organization’s leaders and their teams to measurable objectives is our purpose and passion. Hampel and Lamont are the authors of two books, *Perfect Phrases for New Employee Orientation and Onboarding* and *Solving Employee Performance Problems*, both published by McGraw-Hill, 2011.

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