

Consult Cashman

Memo To New Executives: Get Ready Already

Kevin Cashman 08.09.07, 4:20 PM ET

What do the names John McLaren, Frank Blake and Robert Gates have in common?

All three offer rich examples of the trials and tribulations of transitioning to executive positions while the world looks for immediate results.

McLaren, the new-as-of-this-month Seattle Mariners manager, had to literally get off the bench (he was previously "bench coach") and direct the baseball team after his boss' surprise resignation, which came midway through the Mariner's best season in four years. His inauguration as a first-time skipper? Try to win a road game less than 24 hours into the job.

The "welcome to the big leagues" moment for Blake? In January, he inherited not only Home Depot CEO predecessor Robert Nardelli's position, but also a mob of shareholders demanding an explanation for the incongruity between the retailer's lagging financials and large executive compensation packages.

Not to be outdone is Gates' story. After passing the rigorous U.S. Senate's confirmation hearings and emerging as Donald Rumsfeld's defense secretary replacement, all he's had to do is solve the war in Iraq.

While especially daunting, these dilemmas illuminate the challenges confronting leaders in a wide variety of roles and organizations. No matter if you're the next Carly Fiorina, Michael Eisner or Maurice Greenberg, or someone assuming a middle-management position, "getting up to speed"--something referred to as "onboarding"--is a challenging, never-fast-enough rite of passage in today's results-demanding, talent-deprived marketplace.

For the average corporate manager, it takes more than six months to hit a break-even in which their organizational contribution surpasses the costs of their being appointed in the first place. That means the better part of a year feeling under-productive and overanxious as stakeholders clamor for more.

And if it's not telling enough that a hefty 70% of executives surveyed are dissatisfied with their initial paths to productivity, perhaps today's new leader failure rate is more convincing. Two of five senior leaders fail in their new corporate roles within 18 months, costing companies a whopping \$2.7 million an instance, more if you consider the escalating costs of top CEOs.

Still, successful onboarding is entirely possible and provides a potent shot in the arm for organizations, especially when stuck with for at least six months. Tech company Texas Instruments shaved two months off its full-productivity timeline just by being more intentional in its orientation process. Window manufacturer Hunter Douglas reduced its six-month turnover rate from 70% to 16% by investing more energy in onboarding. Ernst and Young found that key employees who participated in a strategic orientation were twice as likely to stay with the company more than two years.

Where to start? Research bears that much of the difference between successful and unsuccessful onboarding hinges on leaders' abilities to set good goals and build relational equity within the organization to help accomplish them. Whether baked into a detailed succession plan (preferable) or just improvised (probable), effectively onboarded leaders make positive first impressions and put supportive networks to use. When challenges arise, they are dealt with through a potent mix of strategy and collaboration. Variations of the traditional, rank-oriented organizational chart can be mapped, depicting crucial social networks.

Equally important in today's environment, as John McLaren will tell you, is getting some quick wins. There's no shorter way to gain stability and open up doors than through victory. The words of first-century writer Publilius Syrus weren't intended for a corporate audience, but might as well have been: "When good fortune is on our side, popular favor bears her company."

Here are my responses to your questions related to this issue. Names of individuals and their companies have been withheld to maintain openness.

President, Advertising Agency: I'm considering someone currently employed by a much larger company for a C-level position in my organization. What are the most difficult challenges with such a situation?

Kevin Cashman: The common mistake is to assume that leaders who've succeeded in large, complex organizations will more easily succeed in smaller structures. The reality is that big-to-small company leaders sometimes need more time to get their bearings and gain an in-depth feel for how their leadership style suits the new environment. Executives who've learned to move their old system to facilitate growth may find themselves suddenly needing to forge alliances for their newer, smaller companies from the "outside." The crucial process of networking, therefore, can be a more difficult and time-consuming initiative.

Senior Manager, Health Care Services Industry: What best practices do you recommend for a new manager's first day on the job?

In most cases, a new leader's early-on responsibilities are three-fold. First, realize that the best first impression you can make isn't so much a presentation that you give or action you make. Rather, it's that you simply listen, tuning into the environment and its values system. Secondly, begin to build relationships and earn trust as deeply and widely as you can through areas of connection and common meaning. Finally, when the time is right, be clear about leadership and strategic expectations you have. One effective way to go about this is to openly convey your own personal style of leading and working with others, including your experience with positive or negative organizational cultures. Onboarding by quickly building a high-performing team will be directly proportional to the openness and connection you embody.

Human Resources Coordinator, Transportation Industry: Is it a mistake to blend management-level new hires with other recent staff hires into our orientation processes?

For general orientation sessions that explain basic characteristics about the organization and its general systems, it might be fine to mix groups. But for bona fide onboarding, which focuses on quickly getting more senior people to high performance levels, it's important to organize participants into specific peer groups, and in addition provide personal coaching to accelerate contributions.

Kevin Cashman is founder and CEO of LeaderSource, A Korn/Ferry Company (www.leadsource.com), a global leadership development, executive coaching and team-effectiveness consultancy headquartered in Minneapolis. He has authored four books on leadership and career development, including the bestseller Leadership From The Inside Out (revised edition out soon).

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