



THE 3 PILLARS OF EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING

IN LIGHT OF RISING CEO TURNOVER LEVELS AND THE anticipated shortage of executive talent, onboarding has moved to the forefront in discussions of HR strategy. Driven by concerns about weaknesses in their internal leadership pipelines, anticipated growth, and its talent acquisition implications, many companies are planning significant outside hiring at senior levels.

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However, hiring is just the beginning of the story. Having expended time and money to identify and recruit talent, companies can ill afford to have their newly hired executives underperform or end up frustrated and deciding to leave after a year or two. That's where onboarding comes in. Done well, not only does it accelerate the time to performance for new hires, but it also contributes to talent retention by providing executives with a warm welcome and a supportive environment in which to realize their aspirations.

Even though onboarding is receiving a lot of attention, many talent leaders still do not believe their companies do a good enough job to effectively transition newly hired executives. A survey of 1,350 HR executives conducted by the IMD Business School in Lausanne, Switzerland, revealed 54% of respondents thought their companies do an inadequate job of executive onboarding.

At the same time, 87% of these HR professionals agreed transitioning into significant new roles is the most challenging task any manager can face. Some 70% said they felt success or failure during the critical transition period – roughly the first six months – is a strong predictor of long-term success or failure in new positions.

Why are more companies not doing a better job of onboarding executives? They probably have major misconceptions about what onboarding is and how best to implement talent support systems. When creating and implementing a new-hire onboarding program, companies must consider the three pillars of effective executive onboarding: cultural adaptation, political connection, and expectations alignment.

Pillar 1: Cultural Adaptation

Perhaps the most daunting challenge for a new hire is adapting quickly to an unfamiliar organizational culture. For this to happen, the onboarding organization must be open about its culture and be able to communicate about it. This first hurdle can be difficult because some companies don't want to be open about their cultures for fear of scaring away talented recruits who may not see themselves as a match. But the results of this often unconscious misdirection are usually harmful. New hires either conclude they have been misled or fail because they think they are operating in one culture when, in fact, they are dealing with a different one.

Given a willingness to be open, the second hurdle can be overcome by effectively mapping the company culture through interviews and surveys. This provides a basis to create such resources as concisely written summaries of the company's history and culture, and informational videos with advice from those who successfully transitioned in from an outside organization.

Companies can also designate cultural interpreters to help new leaders quickly assimilate to unfamiliar surroundings. This gives executives a go-to resource for company culture questions and insights.

Pillar 2: Political Connection

Helping newly hired executives identify key stakeholders and forge relationships is the second onboarding imperative. Transitioning executives must develop the right wiring as soon as possible. There is a natural but dangerous tendency for new leaders to focus on building vertical relationships early in their transitions – up to their bosses and down to their teams. Insufficient time is devoted to building lateral relationship with peers and key constituencies outside their immediate organizations.

For effective onboarding, you need to identify the full set of key stakeholders before the executive formally joins the organization. Typically, a point person from HR takes responsibility for touching base with the new hire's boss, peers, and direct reports to identify a priority list of stakeholders. This point person also may encourage and support the transitioning executive in setting up and conducting these critical early meetings.

If dedicated resources are not available to support this process, talent managers can provide hiring managers with a tool to create a top-10 list of people with whom the transitioning leader should connect early on, as well as a template for sending introductory email to these people.

Companies can also provide new executives with tools to diagnose informal organizational networks, identify key alliances they need to build, and plan how to gain support and create momentum.

Pillar 3: Aligning Expectations

Recruiting is like romance, and employment is like marriage. During the recruiting period, neither the organization nor the new hire gets a complete, clear view of the other. Both the leader and the organization put on their best possible faces, not necessarily to deceive, but to accentuate the positive.

This is understandable, but it can sow seeds of later problems. The organization may come away with inflated expectations of what their new hires can accomplish. New hires may think they have more authority to make changes than really exists. As a result, confident they understand what is expected of them, new hires come in guns blazing and generate predictable backlash.

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Therefore, the third pillar of effective onboarding is expectations alignment. Prudent new hires don't take the mandate discussed during recruiting for granted. They check and recheck expectations. To ensure expectations are aligned in every case, an organization can help by making it an explicit part of the onboarding process, providing support for early interactions with key stakeholders as described above.

This also means providing new leaders and recruiters with a clear process to negotiate expectations and resources. In some companies, systems used to do business planning may be sufficient. In many cases, however, an explicit expectations alignment process and a supporting set of tools should be used to accelerate onboarding.

INTEGRATE RECRUITING AND ONBOARDING

While necessary for success, attention to the three pillars of onboarding is not sufficient. There must be a relationship between the recruiting and onboarding processes. The best onboarding processes can't compensate for the sins of poor recruiting. This disconnection often is exacerbated because different parts of the organization – with potentially divergent incentives – are responsible for recruiting and onboarding.

Too many organizations practise the “best athlete” approach to recruiting and do not focus enough on assessing how talent might fit into the organization. Many winning sports organizations are not built around the highest paid or most talented players, but rather on those who bring out the best in each other – often called “role players”.

The recruiting process must therefore make tradeoffs between technical capability and cultural fit. An executive might have all the knowledge and experience a company desires, but that leader may not have the style and values to match the company's culture.

DEVELOP A UNIFIED TRANSITION APPROACH

As companies strive to create an onboarding system based on the three pillars, they should avoid adopting multiple, potentially inconsistent transition models. Onboarding is just one critical type of transition; others are promotions and international assignments. There is no reason to have a different conceptual model and set of supporting tools for onboarding than for promotion or international moves or other types of transitions. Everyone should speak the same transition language. The same leader who is onboarding today will move to a new role tomorrow and get promoted the next day. By adopting a single unified transition model, companies can institutionalize a durable transition capability that helps accelerate everyone. Success in doing this is a sustainable source of competitive advantage.

Finally, as with any business decision, cost has to be a major factor in designing onboarding systems. Before structuring an onboarding process, the company must decide the best way to manage their costs. The extent and type of onboarding support has to match that of the new leader's needs requirements.

Transition coaching – a specialized and deeply involved process – is often the best way to go. For lower-level managers and

frontline supervisors, onboarding processes can be deployed effectively through a combination of such short programs as webinars and online support tools.

Regardless of cost and support, no onboarding system will be effective unless executives understand their companies' cultures, political wiring, and how to be up-front during the recruiting process. The key is to provide onboarding support in real time, recognizing that newly hired executives benefit most from getting some support immediately – such as diagnosing their new organizations – and other types later – such as setting goals and driving team alignment. Giving too much support too early can overwhelm an executive. But waiting too long can create post-transition regret: “Why are you telling me this now, when I've already made mistakes?”

It's critical for organizations to consider all factors before instituting a transitioning process. An efficient and effective onboarding system will help new executives quickly assimilate to their new surroundings and ensure the company gets the right person for the job.

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