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HIRING

Help Newly Hired Executives Adapt Quickly

by Michael Watkins

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The main reason why newly hired outside executives have such an abysmal failure rate (40%, according to one study) is poor acculturation: They don't adapt well to the new company's ways of doing things. In fact, some three-quarters of 53 senior HR managers I surveyed cited poor cultural fit as the driver for onboarding failures.

Acculturation tends to get little attention from employers because it's a difficult problem to quantify. But my research indicates that companies can do a lot to help senior-level hires avoid cultural missteps. In particular, there are some key areas where they can help hires find the right approach.

Alteration versus assimilation.

Many newly hired executives are set up to fail because they've been led to believe they have more of a mandate for change than they really do. Robert Nardelli, who abruptly resigned as chairman and CEO of Home Depot earlier this year, was a manufacturing guy from the top-down culture of GE who had been hired into the decentralized culture of Home Depot, in

part to instill discipline (the alteration expectation). But he didn't know how to balance that goal with maintaining the best elements of the company's entrepreneurial spirit (failure to assimilate).

Process versus relationships.

In some organizational cultures, it's important for a newly hired executive to know the right people to advance his or her agenda. In others, it's all about understanding proper procedure. At both GE and Johnson & Johnson, goals are set via rigorous planning processes, but the companies differ on implementation, with GE executives going through specified procedures and J&J leaders relying more on relationships. Several leaders I've observed have moved from GE to Johnson & Johnson, and I've noticed that they tend to get themselves into trouble with implementation: They wrongly assume that because the companies have similar goal-setting processes, they have parallel corporate cultures as well.

Team players versus stars.

New leaders always have to get early wins to build momentum. But the way they go about it is just as important as the successes themselves. The right approach depends on the company; some have a collective culture, while others reward stars for getting things done.

There are other cultural dynamics companies can flag for new executive-level hires. Some firms have what I call a strong corporate immune system—they attack anything that doesn't "belong"—while others are more welcoming. Some companies see meetings as places for dialogue on tough issues; others view meetings as places for ratifying decisions that have been made in premeeting discussions. Some manage conflict openly; others do it covertly or not at all. Some put no limits on how executives may achieve results; others are more restrictive.

A company can assist its newly hired executives by evaluating all those aspects of its organizational culture and then being explicit about them and about the behaviors it expects. This information should be incorporated into any "Getting Things Done at Our Company" material that may be handed out to new executive hires. It's also important for companies to gather insights from former outsiders who have assimilated successfully; managers who have grown up in an organization often don't realize they even have a culture. I have seen failure rates decline to less than 10% at client organizations as a result of companies' use of systematic acculturation and transition acceleration.

Whatever the program, the new hire should be brought into it rapidly, before he or she has a chance to make the gaffes that might undermine a brilliant career in the new company.

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