

Leveraging Your Power Through a Strong CEO Relationship

As an HR professional, you're uniquely positioned to help new leaders at all levels assimilate into your organization.⁷ Successful assimilation means ensuring that a new leader quickly grasps the company's major challenges and goals; forges connections with others above, on par with, and below him or her throughout the organization; and communicates his or her vision for the company or unit in question. Moreover, leaders recruited from inside the organization have just as much need for help with assimilation as do leaders coming from outside. That's because a newly promoted leader will face a whole new set of responsibilities and challenges that may bear little resemblance to his or her previous role. That person will also need to cultivate a new set of relationships based on changing responsibilities and challenges. (See "Assimilating a New CEO" for guidelines on handling the unique challenges that arise when a new chief executive is joining your company.)

Assimilating a New CEO

In handling the assimilation of a new CEO, you have the best possible opportunity to extend your influence. After all, if you can demonstrate your ability to help the new chief executive hit the ground running, your reputation for being a talented advocate as well as supporting the company's goals will likely spread throughout the organization.

Consider these tips for assimilating a new CEO:

- **Play a role during the executive search.** Help the board of directors establish criteria for selection before they fall in love with particular candidates. Ask, "Given where our organization is in its life cycle, what ideal characteristics do we need in the new CEO?"
- **Get to know the new CEO before he or she arrives.** Learn whatever you can about the new chief executive before his or her first day on the job. Talk with people from his or her preceding organization, as well as with individuals who know the new leader by reputation. Read articles about the new leader in the business press.
- **Initiate contact.** Before the new CEO starts, contact him or her and offer to meet outside the office, in a relaxed, social setting, to get acquainted and share information about your company's workforce and key human resource strategies and programs. Come with specific information about where the company stands regarding its workforce,

and what changes need to be made. Rather than using "HR-speak" and minutiae, focus on key metrics such as the match between the workforce's skills and the organization's goals, key problem areas, important strengths, retention and turnover ratios, average sales per employee, cost of goods per employee, and costs of benefits. Ask what the CEO needs to know on an ongoing basis. Explain what you've done so far to address any problems. Describe who the peak performers are in the company, and what concerns employees have overall. Explain your ideas for making the company an employer of choice. Show that you understand the company's big picture, not just the HR part of the business.

- **Assess the new CEO's style.** In your early meetings with the new CEO, try to assess his or her style. How does he lead? How does she prefer to communicate? What does he envision in terms of moving forward with strategic planning?
- **Show that you can assist with the difficult decisions.** If your new CEO was hired to turn around an ailing company, housecleaning may soon follow. Take the lead, helping the CEO identify nonperformers and establishing a process for purging mediocre people.
- **Get the CEO's message out to the workforce.** Communicate his or her vision to your staff, explaining changes they need to make and ways in which they meet the new boss's approval. Also help the CEO get the message out about who he or she is and how things will change with the new leadership. Build a CEO visibility and communications plan, setting benchmarks at thirty, sixty, and ninety days. Brainstorm symbolic initiatives that the CEO might take to reinforce his or her message and demonstrate that this is a person who can make things happen. For example, when New York mayor Rudy Guiliani set out to eradicate graffiti on city buses and trains, the initiative didn't necessary help him accomplish his sweeping goal of reducing crime in the city, but it did send the message that he meant business and could get things done.

Source: Robert J. Grossman, "Forging a Partnership," *HR Magazine*, April 2003.

In your role, you have unusual opportunities to enhance your influence with new and upcoming leaders, thus extending your influence throughout your organization. Why? By helping leaders assimilate, you demonstrate your

knowledge, expertise, and awareness of the company's high-level needs. You thus earn new leaders' trust, respect, and appreciation—all qualities that increase your influence.

In many companies, the responsibility for designing and implementing an assimilation strategy resides in the HR department. For this reason, it's important that you either serve as or designate an "HR touchstone" who will partner with new leaders through the assimilation process. The HR touchstone needs to strike a delicate balance: advocating for the new leader with whom he or she is partnering, while also ensuring that the organization's objectives are met.

Assimilation is a process that unfolds over time. You can help fuel the process through a combination of facilitating, coaching, raising awareness, and intervening where necessary. As you think about the best ways to assimilate new leaders in your organization, consider the distinctive goals characterizing each stage of the process:

1. **Anticipating and planning.** Your assimilation strategy should include activities such as understanding the stakeholder relationships that will be most important to the new leader, preparing those stakeholders for the leader's arrival, identifying the competencies of the leader's surrounding team, preparing his or her team for arrival, and gaining the outgoing leader's support for the newcomer.
2. **Entering and exploring.** During this stage, you need to help the new leader set priorities; score small, early wins; make a good first impression on the rest of the company; assess organizational culture; and build relationships with his or her supervisor, peers, and direct reports.
3. **Building.** In this phase of assimilation, you explain past change attempts that took place in the organization, coach the new leader on handling resistance to new change efforts, create cross-organizational network-building and boundary-spanning opportunities for the leader, and help him or her make difficult staffing decisions.
4. **Contributing.** Here you need to help the new leader modify his or her strategies and approach as needed, based on feedback from the workplace. With your help, the new leader should also be able to further extend his or her network of influence, identify issues in the company

that require large-scale change, and broaden his or her leadership scope by empowering others.

This discussion of influence is far from exhaustive. However, it suggests some of the principal tactics that HR professionals can use to influence others. The best lessons, however, can be found in your own organization. So be alert. Watch how the most respected and effective people in your company influence you and others. Use the most effective and ethical of these influencers as your teachers.

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