

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Congratulations You're Hired!

Part 2: Integration Planning

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Imagine that an NFL team signs an expensive new quarterback. On his first day, the coach says, "Quarterback, this is your new team. We're expecting you to lead us to the Super Bowl, and then walks away. This seems unlikely, but it is not far from what happens when many organizations hire new executives.

Why? An organization typically believes it has chosen an outstanding new executive and is paying a premium, and therefore expects her to quickly deliver significant results without much guidance. And the executive expects the same, based on her experience, expertise and desire to make impressive contributions.

However, such a hands-off approach to integrating a new executive is a recipe for underperformance at best and failure at worst. Integration planning is a much better strategy for leaders who hire new executives ± and for individuals starting new positions.

Orientation vs. Integration

Most organizations have a new employee orientation process, but that is not what we mean by integration. Orientation typically addresses specific activities such as benefits enrollment. Integration includes a dedicated team

broadly focused on helping an executive thoroughly understand the new culture and operate successfully within it.

Orientation is a passive presentation that lasts a few hours. Integration is an active collaboration between a new executive and his teammates that continues for 6 to 12 months, and even longer as the team's purview shifts from assimilation to broader issues.

A hands-off approach to integrating a new executive is a recipe for underperformance at best and failure at worst. Integration planning is a much better strategy.

The most successful integration plans are a shared responsibility. They are systematic and formalized. Effective integration addresses both the external and internal environments, and facilitates building relationships that are critical to a new executive's success.

Who Drives Integration?

Responsibility for integration planning rests squarely on the shoulders of an organization *and* a new executive.

The organization is accountable for providing the new executive with adequate authority to carry out the responsibilities of her new position, to build the necessary relationships and to obtain the required resources ± essentially, providing a framework in which she can succeed.

An organization's integration process is best facilitated by a team of three or four individuals who regularly meet with the new executive. A typical team might consist of the new executive's immediate superior, a senior Human Resources executive and one or two peers, each of whom represents diverse views and is invested in the new executive's success.

Initially, the team's job is to help the new executive understand how the organization works, who its external and internal stakeholders are and how it makes money. But the team is also responsible for identifying and facilitating access to stakeholders the new executive must influence and be influenced by, as well as helping identify desired results and how to most effectively achieve them.

However, a new executive is equally responsible for his own integration. First, he must drive the integration planning process if the organization does not. He is accountable for being a fully participating member of the integration team. He should use StraightTalk dialogue to raise issues, assess progress, discuss alternatives and select next steps. Last, a new executive should maximize the integration process to learn how the organization works, forge relationships and secure resources to deliver significant value.

Before starting a new position, an executive should ask about developing an integration plan. Since this is a new concept for many organizations, she should be prepared to explain it, recommend a team and suggest a process.

Formalized and Systematic

Effective integration relies on a defined process and a written plan. For example, the integration team should meet regularly ± perhaps every week during the first three months of a new executive's tenure, followed by monthly meetings for the next three months and quarterly meetings thereafter. However, if the organization experiences significant change during an executive's first three months, weekly meetings over an extended period may make sense. In other words, the plan should be flexible and accommodate changing circumstances.

The start-up plan should cover the new organization's strategy and culture, what the new executive should accomplish, with whom and by when. Start by helping the new executive understand the organization's strategy and culture. For example, what is required to achieve his responsibilities in this organization? What elements of the culture will work for him? What will work against him?

Then clarify where he can have the greatest impact: what should the new executive accomplish? How? The plan should also begin identifying key external and internal stakeholders with whom the new executive must develop productive relationships.

Outside and Inside

A new executive is not fully integrated into an organization until she has a strong grasp of the organization's external and internal realities, and has begun to form relationships with a broad base of external and internal stakeholders. It is easy to overlook the external environment during integration, largely because learning the internal environment and building relationships with superiors, subordinates and peers can be overwhelming.

However, ignoring the external context will hamper the new executive's ability to identify and deliver meaningful results because it offers crucial insight into what she must contribute to help achieve the organization's strategy. So keeping a new executive working from the outside in is one of the integration team's most important responsibilities.

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The Relationship Equation

An executive's ability to achieve results that add significant value depends on establishing productive relationships with individuals he must control (e.g., subordinates), influence and be influenced by (e.g., superiors, peers, customers, competitors, regulators, the community and others).

Although it is usually easier to identify what an executive should accomplish rather than how and with whom, be careful not to sacrifice building relationships in favor of achieving quick results. The overall goal of integration is to help a new executive achieve results quickly and effectively. By enhancing or constraining her ability to elicit support for a direction and successfully implement it, relationships with others define both

how well and how quickly she can drive meaningful results.

Start and Stay on the Right Foot

StraightTalk is a fundamental personal and organizational operating principle, but it is especially important to integration. A new executive starts a new position with only the minimal trust and respect built during the interview process. Openly and honestly raising issues, talking about **T**elephants in the room and welcoming StraightTalk in others builds mutual trust and respect initially and for the long-term.

Active listening is also critical to successful integration, because an executive and a new organization typically speak different languages. Selectively repeating what he has heard and asking others to summarize what he has said confirms understanding, and helps him more quickly learn the new organization's language.

Maintaining a balanced perspective is also essential. Both organizations and individuals tend to start new relationships with overly positive views, but impressions often become overly negative as they get to know each other better. An integration team can fight this dynamic by engaging in StraightTalk dialogue about what is going well, what is challenging, and opportunities for individual and organizational improvement.

Adapting to a new organization is a tall order. It requires developing a thorough understanding of external and internal realities, building relationships with those you need to influence and be influenced by, establishing and testing your agenda, and clarifying the best approach to delivering significant results.

Organizations and new executives who leave integration to chance might get lucky. Or they might crash and burn. But an organization and individual who use integration planning to invest in and protect their promising new relationship greatly increase the likelihood of successfully adapting to each other ± and achieving outstanding results together. **HK**

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