

## Leadership Development and Succession Planning

SPECIAL SECTION

# Spotlight on Executive Onboarding

Maggie Moore

Many organizations believe that to integrate new staff, all employees should go through the same orientation process. However, it is increasingly recognized that implementing a single onboarding approach for all types of employees is neither appropriate nor effective. For many organizations today, establishing a separate onboarding process for executives might not only be desirable, but almost necessary to achieve retention and succession planning objectives.

One reason for establishing a separate executive onboarding program is that traditional employee onboarding programs are typically geared toward the general employee population, and usually focus on standard topics such as organizational policies, human resource and benefits information, and mandatory safety and security awareness.

An abundance of research indicates that what new executives need to know in order to be effective differs significantly from the focus of most general employee onboarding programs. For example, new executives must quickly understand the unwritten rules, processes, and networks that influence how things really get done in their organization in order to be successful in their role.

The nature and workforce of many organizations today might also argue for a separate approach to executive onboarding,

Overall, today's organizations are bringing in more individuals from the outside to assume senior management roles. In many cases, the nature of the work performed (e.g., specialized scientific, engineering, or education work) results in the selection of a high percentage of senior management officials from outside the organization, typically from other segments of the public sector as well as academia.

In addition, such organizations often demand that their entire workforce possess deep technical knowledge, taking the focus away from leadership and management skills. As a result, senior management officials in these organizations are often selected or promoted based on their technical skills, knowledge and/or specialty area, rather than their leadership capacity or experience.

Consequently, many senior managers are first exposed to the leadership ranks without any formal leadership experience or training. These situations reinforce the importance of the initial executive onboarding experience and call for a specialized onboarding approach to help bridge these gaps.

According to the Corporate Leadership Council, there are six common derailers for new executives: failure to establish key connections and partnerships; lack of political savvy or support to effectively navigate the organization; failure to establish a cultural fit; confusion about role

expectations; lack of feedback and coaching; and ineffective people management/team building skills.

These benchmarks underscore the need for specialized executive onboarding programs geared specifically toward the areas required for successful integration at the executive level. Organizations can help to combat these common derailers by developing and implementing a specialized onboarding program targeting employees new to senior management roles.

**On average, it takes new executives a minimum of six months to become fully productive in their role. Implementing a specialized executive onboarding program is one of the ...most cost effective ways to ensure ... integration**

### Tips for Implementing a Successful Executive Onboarding Program

When developing and implementing a specialized executive onboarding program, consider the following tips.

#### Establish relevant program objectives.

Developing a successful program that fits your organization starts with program objectives. Identify key issues specific to your executive population—these issues should drive the development of sound onboarding objectives.

At a minimum the program should assist new executives in understanding the organization's business and cultural contexts, help clarify performance expectations, and shorten the executives' learning curve to enable them to perform to their full potential as quickly as possible. Some examples of onboarding program objectives include: supporting transitions into executive positions from outside the public sector; and developing executive knowledge about the organization's mission, culture, people, and business processes.

*Secure program commitment from senior leadership.* Program success depends upon senior leadership commitment and program support. Commitment from the highest level of leadership is essential in supporting the necessary buy-in that will encourage new executives to successfully complete the program. Participation in and endorsement of program activities from senior leadership is the main way organizations bolster program credibility.

#### Target core leadership competencies.

Inoculate against derailment by ensuring that the program targets four core leadership competencies: understanding the organization, key stakeholders, business goals and objectives; understanding the organization's culture, including its unwritten rules; navigating internal networks and relationships; and understanding the organization's expectations for executive leadership.

*Use a blended learning approach.* Providing new executives with the

tools, information, skill-enhancement, and support they need is most effective when information is delivered through multiple mechanisms. To help new executives reach their full performance as quickly as possible, organizations should provide various learning options to reinforce messages (e.g., website/handbook, online tutorials, peer mentoring and executive coaching).

Providing a variety of vehicles for key information throughout the onboarding period (e.g., before arrival, during the first month, three to six month follow-up) helps executives to stay engaged and focused on learning throughout their onboarding period.

Facilitate networking and relationship building. Since a new executive's success relies to a large degree on building strong relationships with other senior executives, an organization can support a new executive's success by facilitating the creation of networks across the organization and providing guidance in building key relationships. For example, some organizations pre-schedule one-on-one meetings between the new executive and key organizational contacts during the executive's first 30 days. Organizations can also offer informal meet and greet gatherings to bring together leadership and other executives to network and build contacts.

*Establish clear accountability mechanisms.* Define and make explicit how new executives are accountable for completing the onboarding program. Include the executive's supervisor as a key facilitator in the onboarding and long-term integration process. The executive's supervisor can enforce program accountability by ensuring that the new executive's onboarding needs are being addressed and by serving as feedback monitor for performance.

Establish program metrics and evaluation criteria. Ultimately, the program should have a positive impact on both individual and organizational performance. Therefore, it is essential to identify and establish meaningful evaluation criteria to measure program success. Establishing meaningful metrics such as retention rates, performance ratings, and organizational performance measures ensures that the program is aligned with the organization's larger strategic goals. Ongoing evaluations should be conducted to monitor program success, and to identify and drive necessary adjustments to the program's design and delivery.

### The Bottom Line

On average, it takes new executives a minimum of six months to become fully productive in their role. Implementing a specialized executive onboarding program is one of the simplest and most cost effective ways to ensure a new executive's effective integration into their organization.

A successful executive onboarding program helps to combat the specific issues common to most new executives, thereby easing their transition, and allowing them to focus on performing effectively in their new role. Ultimately, this contributes to leadership retention and promotes long-term organizational success.

*Maggie Moore is a human resources consultant with Federal Management Partners, Inc. Email: mmoore@fmpconsulting.com*

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