A ‘How To’ Guide For Onboarding Executives and CEO’s
Introduction

More than 50% of executives fail within their first 18 months [1]. This is a staggering statistic and in many cases can be directly linked to the company’s failure to provide meaningful support during the executive employee’s crucial first days and weeks. Whilst many companies do have some kind of onboarding process in place, the reality is that most of these programmes are just not up to the task of preparing senior employees for the challenges of an executive role.
Onboarding External v’s Internal Executive Recruits

External recruits

Whilst an external applicant might have proven experience with another company, coming across to your business and replicating their performance may be easier said than done. The most common reason external executives fail is not due to their skills and expertise but rather as a result of their inability to build relationships and work well with their team.

Understanding the new organisation and gaining the confidence of peers and staff is essential to an external recruit’s success. But it takes time.

Get started during preboarding

If time is precious, then preboarding is untapped gold.

Smart companies are taking full advantage of the time between the job offer and commencement to begin filling in the gaps in the new recruit’s knowledge and understanding of the business and the people that work in it.

Almost as soon as they are offered the job, new executives are being given access to a range of electronic resources including key corporate documents, staff profiles, and the social intranet via company onboarding systems.

Providing opportunities for the new executive to meet and socialise with colleagues in the weeks before they start has also proven effective in fast-tracking work relationships. Whether it’s dinner with the CEO, lunch with the team, or an invite to the corporate box at the football, connecting on a personal level - before the new recruit steps into their professional capacity at work - helps build trust and rapport.

Importance of Culture

External recruits also need help navigating the unique features of their new company’s culture. Sometimes puzzling to the uninitiated, a company’s culture encompasses many aspects that aren’t always easy to pinpoint or define such as: unwritten rules and expectations; how workers communicate with each other; idiosyncratic language and lingo; social activities, awards and celebrations of achievement; and how employees react when faced with challenges, problems or when a crisis hits.

Later in this whitepaper we list some useful onboarding tactics for assimilating a new executive into your company’s culture.
Internally Promoted Executives

An internal candidate already understands the organisation's culture and has well established networks across the business. However, after stepping up into an executive role for the first time, many discover they have not been adequately prepared for the challenges of executive responsibilities and struggle to make a successful transition.

The priority during onboarding internal recruits will be to ensure they have the necessary skills and abilities to succeed. The first six to twelve months is going to be a crucial time for bridging any gaps; so onboarding must begin with an honest and realistic discussion about the individual's competencies.

A new executive may benefit from a variety of learning methods to support their progression into a top job such as: on or off the job training; mentoring; observation; shadowing; rotations; and secondments.
The path to the C suite

As people reach the heights of a seat in the C-suite, they will notice that their technical expertise matters less and less. C-level jobs are more about the soft skills - the personal attributes that enable executives to work effectively with others and execute on business strategy.

To create an onboarding plan that caters for the executive employee, it is important to understand what it takes to be successful in this level of role.

Characteristics of successful Executives and CEO’s

So what is it that sets executive employees apart from the rest? Here we profile the common attributes of senior leaders.

Risk takers and innovators

Executives are often entrepreneurial and think in terms of possibilities rather than problems. They are risk takers, willing to try new things and act without assurances of success. They hold themselves accountable to learning, growing and improving. They think about issues from multiple perspectives and encourage their people to question the status quo and show initiative.

High achievers

Executives are competitive and ambitious creatures. They have a high need for achievement and the drive and tenacity to make it happen. They are skilled at harnessing resources and technology to further their cause.

Executives are usually goal oriented, communicate high performance standards to their team, and inspire performance in others. For this reason they sometimes can be perceived as highly demanding and challenging to work for.

Business partners

Executives know how to play nicely. They are at ease in social situations and able to build and nurture relationships. They facilitate decision making by soliciting viewpoints, consulting and listening. They acknowledge the contributions of others and make them feel important and valued. They are politically astute, able to read other people’s behaviour and intuitively recognise perspectives and agendas. They pre-empt issues in negotiations or when making decisions that will impact others.
Consummate professionals
Articulate, poised, and trustworthy, the true executive has a presence that can command a room. They communicate effectively, act with integrity, maintain composure and don’t lay blame.

Sharp business acumen
Rapid learners, executives ask questions, are extremely intelligent, and can sort out the important from the trivial. The ability to grasp new ideas and interpret and analyse information means they make sound judgements and decisions. They have excellent reading and oral comprehension as well as the numerical skills to drill down on operating reports and company financials to identify issues, recognise trends or inconsistencies.

Decision makers and action takers
Executives cope with ambiguity and can make decisions even with limited information. They will come to a conclusion and act upon it, rather than letting things stall.

People leaders
A great executive can identify talent and will surround themselves with a competent team. They appreciate and understand the strengths and weaknesses of their people and promote self awareness in others. They help people learn from their experiences by providing timely and regular feedback on performance tied to specific and challenging goals. They are fair minded and steadfast when addressing performance concerns.

Strategic thinkers
Inspiring and visionary leaders that can balance the future possibilities with the here and now. They inspire a sense of purpose and direction and are able to translate the organisation’s big picture goals into practical plans and actions.

Not all executives will demonstrate all of these qualities all of the time. No-one’s perfect. Nor are they born them. Executive competencies are something a leader will strive to develop and hone over the course of their career. Understanding a new executive’s current abilities is important for focusing onboarding efforts towards building the soft skills they need to be job ready.
Pitching onboarding at the right level for executives

Don’t forget that when you are onboarding executives, you are bringing very skilled and capable people into the fold. It is important that your process recognises their capabilities, and makes the most of them.

1. Start with a strategic focus

Almost before they do anything else, a new executive will instinctively want to gain a strategic understanding of your business including: the company’s strategic framework (vision, mission, purpose, values and strategy); the competitive landscape and key challenges of operating in your market; core competencies of the organisation; its weaknesses; and, how each business unit contributes to the overall strategy (structure and alignment).

A new executive will benefit from quality time with board members and the C Suite during those first weeks to understand more about the organisation’s strategic context and their own accountabilities.

2. Take a collaborative approach

There is the old saying “it takes a village to raise a child.” Well the same goes for new executives. Onboarding should be the collaborative effort of many people.

In addition to the Board and the C Suite, plan and coordinate for the new executive to get out and meet with the external stakeholders and operational staff that will be a regular part of their working landscape. In particular, make sure they have time with each of the teams they will be accountable for - even if that means some travel early on.
3. Help executives create personal learning networks

A senior new hire is likely to be highly skilled at building personal and professional networks that assist their learning. Placing executives in social and work situations where they can identify and connect with subject matter experts or people with unique expertise is like putting knowledge in the bank for the future.

4. Consider a handover period

In a planned succession, the outgoing executive is instrumental in helping their successor adjust to and understand the role and the company. In addition to providing job clarity, they can shed light on the less obvious aspects like: who the key decision-makers are; how decisions are made; and any unwritten rules, sacred cows and other cultural nuances they can expect to encounter.

However, there are some instances in which the predecessor can do more harm than good. In cases where an executive has trouble letting go, or has been fired or pushed out, a handover period may not be a good idea. In these situations, it will be important that someone else from either the board or executive steps up to coach or mentor the new leader.

5. Provide mentors and trusted advisors

A mentor is a particularly useful when a new hire is struggling to adapt to a new organisation, or when they are experiencing resistance to their leadership style. Mentors can help the leader take the emotion out of a situation, look at things objectively, and make a plan for improvement.

There is also benefit in establishing one or two trusted advisors (aka buddy's for executives) within the organisation that the person knows they can turn to for clarity on why things are done in a certain way or advice on how to get something done. This person will most likely be a member of the executive or HR.

6. Self-directed learning

It is unlikely that commitment or self motivation will be an issue for this level of employee, so there is no need to coddle them during onboarding. By nature, executive types like to take charge, so take advantage of this and let them have input into their own onboarding plan.
7. **Build in flexibility**

Executive employees and aspiring CEO’s are often insatiably curious characters and hungry for knowledge. It will be important to maintain a high degree of flexibility in your executive onboarding plan to allow for the advanced learning agility of the new recruit. An employee at this level may feel limited by a set agenda or become frustrated by a programme that doesn’t keep pace with their needs.

8. **Don’t rush it**

There is constant pressure on new executives to make changes, solve problems and deliver immediate results - particularly when a business is not doing so well. This often results in a temptation to rush through onboarding or take shortcuts so that the executive can ‘get to work’.

But such haste is perhaps the reason for the dismal executive failure rates. Insufficient onboarding will result in a leader’s understanding of company culture, goals and operations being incomplete or inaccurate.

Onboarding is not a quick fix. Rather it is about giving a new executive a foundation for long term success.

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