

GIVE YOUR BIG FISH A FIGHTING CHANCE

by Richard Davis, Ph.D.

Director of Organizational Development, Career Partners International/Hazell & Associates

You have an expensive salt-water fish tank, containing several unique and rather expensive fish that live in an environment sensitive to changes in chemical balance, food, lighting and cleanliness. In all, it is a very good-looking tank, despite a few problems here and there.

But you don't want it to just be an ordinary fish tank. You decide you need a Goldflake Angelfish - expensive, beautiful and rare. You go to great lengths and spend a small fortune on professional fish hunters to get it.

You gently scoop the Angelfish into its new home, and sit back to admire the now complete fish tank. Something doesn't seem right, but you don't know what it is and don't do anything about it. After a few months, all the fish seem to be unhealthy and getting worse.

It's not the Goldflake's fault: You forgot to prepare it for its new home and prepare the tank for its new arrival. You decide that bringing in the Angelfish was a bad idea, so you remove it and pay a professional a substantial sum to get your fish tank back to where it was before.

Research indicates that approximately 40 per cent of external senior executive hires are unsuccessful -- resulting in significant losses for the organization, including lost opportunity costs, separation costs and recruitment costs, plus lost credibility and career costs to the executive.

Why don't they work?

Well, they may be the wrong people for the jobs.

More likely, however, they weren't properly integrated. Indeed, many companies don't pay any attention to executive integration, beyond formally introducing the executive and giving him or her lots and lots of information.

Incoming executives know that people in the organization have high expectations of them and they are usually willing to move mountains.

But they often don't know important aspects of the organizational culture and how to effectively embrace it. They don't know the landmines, the right priorities on the job, the

key players and how they operate, who's amenable to change and who's not, and what sorts of organizational politics are at play underneath the surface of any decisions or interactions. And sometimes their skills and experience aren't as transferable as they -- and their new company -- thought. They need time to make the adjustment, to establish a strong network, to ensure they understand their new roles and responsibilities.

Integration should be treated as a process, not as an event. Successful integration happens over time. Companies must be patient with new executives and set them up for success. Every organization has a unique culture and it will take time for the new executive to fit in. Think of integration happening over six to 12 months. After that point, the organization and executive should be settled in.

What can the executive do?

Do your homework, but be ready to learn.

Executives must immediately be perceived as having credibility and contextual intelligence. Not surprisingly, it is essential that the new executive knows as much as possible as early as possible.

That being said, executives must recognize that they are coming into an organization with a unique history and culture, and that this is something that can't be learned by reviewing spreadsheets or annual reports. So learn as much as possible about the business but recognize that you have learned only one chapter in the textbook of the organization.

Meet and greet.

Incoming executives must be visible not only in internal memos and press releases, but also by meeting face-to-face with as many people as possible. Recognize that people will be talking among themselves.

And meet with people up and down the corporate ladder: Ask what they need and then show that they are being listened to (and be real -- people are very good at detecting corporate BS). Follow up meetings and specific recommendations with either an e-mail or a voicemail indicating what was suggested and



what action is being taken (if any). Voice as many employee recommendations to the management team as possible, reinforcing the fact that employees' voices are being heard.

Although there may be a natural tendency to avoid asking for help or advice at an early stage, people generally respond well to earnest requests for input. In fact, it increases motivation and organizational commitment.

Communicate the vision.

Employees want to know the incoming executive's plans for the organization. Are there going to be any major shifts or will it be business as usual? Whatever it may be, it is important to communicate what you want to accomplish and how you plan on doing it.

Acknowledge your emotions.

Executives often feel scared, uncertain and outside of their comfort zone. They often feel as though they are "starting all over again," which can have both positive and negative emotional implications. The research literature in organizational psychology consistently confirms that the old adage, "it's lonely at the top" is indeed very true. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, that they are perfectly normal, and that it is all a part of the fun of joining a company at the most senior position.

Incoming executives often demonstrate a high fear of failure and have very high expectations of themselves and of their anticipated impact on the organization. They have been successful in previous endeavours and are highly motivated to bring that energy to the new organization. That energy is fantastic, but things rarely work out as planned, and incoming executives must be ready for that. This is one area in which I have found executive coaching to be particularly helpful -- to stimulate reflective practices and work at self-awareness.

Be yourself.

An incoming executive is always forced to deal with the wake of the outgoing one -- both good and bad. If the previous executive was well liked, you will face pressure to live up to those ideals. If the previous executive was a failure, you will face skepticism from the ranks.

Executives must present themselves and be seen as unique individuals, bringing with them

new personalities and styles, yet fitting into the specific organizational culture.

What can the organization do?

Beware of executive cloning and transference.

Organizations have a tendency to want to mould the new executive into something similar to his or her predecessor. They want all of the best assets of the old boss, coupled with perceived characteristics of an ideal one.

Companies that set their new executives up as new iterations of old executives are bound for trouble. For GE, there will never be anyone like Jack Welch, nor should there be. Could you really (or would you want to) "clone" Larry Ellison or Bill Gates once they are ready to leave their respective companies?

The danger lies in employees perceiving their successors as extensions of their old boss. What happens is that the incoming executive can never live up to expectations, and everyone is bound to be disappointed. Instead, accept the incoming executive as an individual coming in with a unique set of values and methods, and never ever say, "well, the way we used to do it was . . ."

Set criteria for success.

The organization and new executive need to know what a successful integration will look like. Set specific, challenging but manageable goals for the new executive's first year. The goals should be based on observable criteria, and should be developed in collaboration between the new executive and key stakeholders. It is important that this message is conveyed to stakeholders and that after six months or a year, a process is engaged (typically 360-degree feedback) to measure the success of the integration.

One good acronym (and who doesn't like a good acronym?) to remember in setting goals is that they should be SMART. That is, they should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reasonable and Tangible. Don't set the incoming executive up for failure by being ambiguous and far-fetched.

Instead, set specific measurable targets that are challenging yet doable. In doing so, the executive knows what is expected and has a benchmark for success.



Invite rigorous feedback.

It is essential that the executive knows his or her staff, board members, company partners, etc., and what they need. Throughout the integration process, the executive should have ample opportunity to give and receive both formal and informal feedback. Personal interviews and 360-degree reviews are the best way to do this, especially in the early phase of integration.

Both the executive and company should be open to the feedback process, and treat it as developmental rather than evaluative. In other words, the emphasis should be on providing the executive with feedback on what he or she is doing right and what he or she is doing wrong, solely for the purpose of improving the fit.

"Early impressions take a life of their own," says organizational psychologist Guy Beaudin, managing partner of the Toronto office of RHR International, "and you need to address them within the first 90 days." For example, 10 years after joining a company, one executive he knows is "still fighting the perceptions of his first few months on the job."

And what about the staff? What can staff do?

Fasten your seat belts.

Things will change. In some organizations the change is minimal and in some it's substantial. No matter what, employees should prepare themselves for change and be strategic about their careers. Any time there is a shakeup at the top, everyone's job is undoubtedly on the line. On the flipside, a change in leadership is also the time for employees to shine -- a new opportunity to impress management. So, be strategic about it. Ask questions and find opportunities to make life easier.

Avoid rumours at all costs.

When new executives come on board, the water cooler tends to get crowded (or in today's workplace, messages start flying). Although it's an easy topic for the rumour mill, corporate chatter has a surprisingly powerful and negative effect on the organization.

Executive integration is a lengthy and process-rich experience. A successful integration merges the personality and style of a new executive with the unique culture of an organization. You can make sure your fish tank thrives.

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