FROM DREAM TO NIGHTMARE

Lessons learned from an executive’s onboarding process

By Executive-in-Residence Kees van der Graaf and Professor Suzanne de Janasz - October 2011
While leadership transitions can be revitalizing, they often prove difficult for both the incoming leader and his or her new team. Although we all know that communication is key in any changeover situation, too often, it gets lost in the shuffle. News of a new boss can send waves of uncertainty, confusion and even resentment through an organization. To get the transition and the team back on track, an incoming leader’s first task often involves forging effective relationships.

I learned that I would be the next director of Unilever’s Foods Division in the back of the co-chair’s car on the way home from a black-tie dinner. I had been sounded out about the opportunity a year earlier, but at the time, it was stressed that it was strictly confidential and absolutely nothing was being offered. The appointment meant a seat on Unilever’s board and executive committee and responsibility for a division that was more than half the size of Unilever. I was stunned. It had never occurred to me that I would be a candidate, especially since my position was a full layer away from the board. It was a dream come true.

My dream, however, quickly turned into a nightmare when I went to my first Foods executive meeting the next morning. Most of the Foods executives, who had learned about my appointment secondhand that morning, greeted me with ice-cold congratulations. I felt horrible. They were also upset by the injustice that a subordinate of one of them was the new boss. Unfortunately, the new CEO (my predecessor) had been too busy dealing with the press after the announcement hit the newswires to give his attention to the internal communications or to attend the meeting with the Foods executive. When I took a seat at the table in the meeting room, the others sat as far away from me as possible. They were closing ranks on me. At that point, the HR VP and I decided to stop the meeting and develop a process to get me fully introduced to the team.

A session for the entire executive team was organized the evening before the next Foods executive meeting. The purpose of the session was to help me build an effective relationship with the team by positioning myself properly and addressing any misconceptions they may have had about me and my leadership style. Before the session, each team member was interviewed by the HR VP, and a list of general questions was prepared for me to address. At the session, I shared my motives, beliefs, drivers, values and behaviors. I also spoke about my family and the FSHD Foundation, which my wife and I started after our oldest son, Bart, was diagnosed with FSHD. After sharing my lifeline and addressing the questions, I felt the atmosphere in the room begin to change.

The HR VP ended the session with a summary and asked each team member, one by one, if there was sufficient mutual ground for a fruitful cooperation between us. In the end, all agreed they should not have offloaded their frustration about the communication process on me. There was some handshaking and hugging, and over dinner, the team toasted me as their new leader. That night, I was dreaming again.

Lessons learned

• Communicate, communicate, communicate. In this case, communication was governed by the rules of the stock market. Leadership changes at Unilever were and still are considered price sensitive information, which means the company is obliged, by law, to inform the stock exchanges immediately. Despite the rules, one should always respect the feelings of those who are personally affected by a decision, ensuring that they hear the news directly from the boss. In today’s world, with e-mail and SMS messages, it requires little effort to prepare messages that will go out to individuals at a pre-determined time. However, don’t hide behind electronic walls when the news is

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1 FSHD or Facio Scapulo Humeral Dystrophy is a rare, hereditary form of muscular dystrophy caused by a genetic defect.

• **Trust your team.** Trust creates a more pleasant and productive business climate. It is possible to share confidential information with a member of your team if you trust the individual not to breach the confidentiality. If you don’t trust the individual, then maybe he or she should not be part of your team … or organization. Trust is a two-way street. Be the first to trust, by showing your consistency, humility and willingness to share and listen. Others are more likely to reciprocate your trust.

• **Put the proverbial fish on the table.** Once the damage is done, and particularly if the team is closing ranks on you, it is sometimes best to share your perceptions and validate them with the group. For example, “Judging from the obvious tensions that are being displayed, I sense that you are surprised and upset about the news. Correct?” This approach could invite a tense discussion, but ignoring the underlying conflict would not bring about a productive discussion. Allowing the team to air its grievances can be a good place to start when a new leader is trying to earn the team’s trust and respect … and vice versa.

• **Demonstrate humility and empathy.** In these kinds of situations, it is important to show both humility and empathy. For example, “Some of you are surprised by my appointment. If I were in your shoes, I’d be surprised too. Besides wondering why I hadn’t been selected for the position, I’d be thinking, ‘Who is this guy, and how is he going to lead us?’ How many of you are wondering the same thing?” It may be counterintuitive, but humility actually raises your credibility as a leader.

• **Be courageous.** Be prepared to discuss your experiences, but with an eye toward showing your readiness and expertise to lead the new team. In a defining moment, it is important to demonstrate your leadership through courage, a willingness to address conflict directly and respectfully and an ability to build your team by listening to their concerns, wishes and expectations for the future. It is important to show that you are willing to listen without being defensive, willing to learn and that you have some concrete ideas about the future of the business.

• **Be authentic.** By showing your real self—your motives, beliefs, drivers, values and behaviors—you will be perceived as being more authentic. Say what you mean, mean what you say, and walk your talk. If your subordinates perceive that you are less than authentic, they will push back. If they do, accept their feedback graciously; it is a gift. “So you’re saying that I’m not delivering on my promise? Say more about that.” And after you’ve heard the specific feedback, summarize to show you heard, and then thank the person. “So you’re saying that when I did this, it conflicted with my earlier message. I’m sorry about that, and I appreciate your pointing it out. I’ll look into ways to remedy this situation, and will let you know by Friday.”

• **Encourage the team to share information.** Once the team is back on steady ground, the next step would be to ask your team members to share their views about what is working well and not so well in their business units. Listen, paraphrase to confirm your understanding, and probe for more depth and examples when appropriate. “What about working with the production manager is problematic? Can you share an example so I can better understand the problem and how it might be overcome?” By encouraging them to share this information, they will begin to look at future challenges as a cohesive management team. Moreover, by allocating resources and authority to address current and future challenges, the team will feel empowered to act, and become engaged in the process and outcomes of their improvement efforts.

While proper communication can help temper negative reactions in these types of situations, we all know that it often falls between the cracks. Therefore, if the damage has been done, it is critical that the new leader get the team back on track as soon as possible because the fact is a leader is not a leader without any followers.


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