

## Executive Fit

By Thomas J. Fuller

### Planning an Effective Transition When Hiring Senior Executives

**Both the individual and the organization share responsibility for planning an effective integration.**

The new executive seemed perfect for the job. His resume was impeccable. Having received an MBA from a well-respected business school, he had moved quickly into the management ranks of a *Fortune* 50 company. When the software development firm hired him as senior vice president of finance, they expected that his credentials would give him instant credibility.

Soon after his hiring, however, there were signs that things would not play out as planned. The executive's straitlaced approach clashed with the free-wheeling style and laid-back attitude of most of the rest of management. He was described by some as uptight, a by-the-book kind of guy who did not know how to relax; he always seemed to be on one urgent mission or another.

Some in senior management took his hiring as a direct threat. They felt that this polished outsider suddenly had the inside edge to the chairman's office. That, coupled with his abrupt style, quickly created a wide chasm between him and the rest of the executive team who questioned aloud the prudence of his hiring. It soon became apparent to everyone that this was not working.

Some situations involving executives mismatched to positions or companies cannot be resolved - more care should have been taken to find the right person during the search

process. But often, major problems can be avoided by attending to important aspects of executive integration. This requires attention by both the newly hired executive and the organization as a whole.

Proper conceptualization and implementation of an integration process can greatly enhance the chances of a smooth and productive relationship between the new executive and the organization.

#### Five-Point Executive Integration Plan

##### 1. Recruit realistically.

When recruiting an executive from the outside, it is crucial that the organization portray the company as accurately as possible to reduce disenchantment upon entry. While organizations clearly don't want to scare off attractive candidates, such realistic portrayals lay the groundwork for a productive long-term relationship built on trust and openness.

Carefully consider the types of leadership skills AND styles that will most likely succeed in the organization's culture. Becoming blinded by a candidate's credentials during the courting period of the recruiting process can create disaster. It is essential that a company recognizes the key compelling attributes of its executive group and builds these attributes into the specifications for positions.

For example, a global high-tech manufacturing company had grown so quickly that it needed to

bring in a much more sophisticated senior executive to be in charge of manufacturing. The company's senior executive group was so intellectually gifted that only individuals who could think as quickly and as comprehensively as the rest of the executive team would succeed in this position. This company was wise enough to recognize the intellectual capacity of the other executives and made intellectual power a key criterion of the position.

##### 2. Strategically plan entry into the company.

Once an individual has been selected, smoothing the way for the newcomer's arrival and entry into the company can pay big dividends. Press announcements and articles in the company newsletter can highlight how his/her background fits in with the corporate strategic direction. When a fast growth organization that wanted to expand globally brought in its new president of the international operation, the company had a major story about the individual in the company newsletter, using this as an opportunity to reinforce the company's global aspirations.

It may be appropriate to alert people that the newcomer will do things somewhat differently than has been done in the past; point out that this is part of the reason the company selected the executive. Having private discussions with key veterans likely to be affected and making the new executive's success one of the job responsibilities of the rest of the senior executive group is a key point.

As the new executive comes on board, there are many opportunities - and also pitfalls. Now is the time for the new executive to listen and grasp the complexities of a new environment. It is vital that the new executive not be swept away by his/her understandable desire to appear especially knowledgeable.

One fatal error is to repetitively refer to how things were done in their previous company. It is important to bring the content of what was done in other places without identifying the source.

**3. Build in a plan for two-way feedback early and often.** Another set of interesting dynamics typically involves

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Tom is a frequent speaker on leadership and high-performance organizations, creative talent acquisition and retention strategies. While active in many civic and community organizations, Tom is the founder and President of Freedom Riders Cycling Club, a not-for-profit cycling team dedicated to Cancer research.

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the boss/new hire relationship. The individual's boss does not want to be seen as lacking confidence in the executive, and thus often manages in a hands-off fashion. Likewise, the new executive wants to demonstrate competence and seeks little supervision. However, the first few months are the very time when the new hire most needs help and guidance from the boss.

It is important for both to recognize these natural tendencies and schedule more time with each other initially. The boss can help the new executive interpret the culture and its implications. He or she can also collect data about other people's reactions to the new executive and discuss any need for fine-tuning.

The CEO and the new international executive communicated extensively with each other during the first six months to determine how the new executive was fitting in. They both made sure that the he did not go too far - too fast, potentially leaving the rest of the organization behind. The CEO also made sure that the other executives had as one of their job responsibilities the successful integration of the new head of the international operation. After about a year, the new president of the international operations had made significant progress in growing the international business as well as educating the rest of the company about how to be a global company.

### 4. Forge effective alliances.

One of the key tasks for new executives is to establish effective networks of support throughout the organization. The first step is identifying key individuals inside the organization who will be crucial to continued success. Building effective cross-relationships increases the sphere of influence of the newcomer.

Executives should carefully

explore others' mental models and actively seek out common ground where multiple parties agree, leading to subsequent focus of effort and resources. New executives should avoid "quick wins" that sacrifice key long-term objectives and relationships. It is important to look beyond the formal organizational chart and identify informal ways of building support and coalition for change.

Be particularly careful to not come in with all the answers and not to denigrate any existing systems or procedures. Begin the development of these relationships by assuming he had something to learn from each of your new colleagues. This respectful approach and careful listening to the needs of his or her colleagues will allow the new executive to develop the types of alliances necessary for success.

When a software development company brought in a new senior vice president of human resources, the CEO expected the new executive to precipitate change in the company but not get too far ahead of the culture. The senior vice president of human resources established a biweekly, hour-long meeting with department leaders in which feedback about how things were unfolding was the main issue. Thus, the new senior vice president was able to engineer the needed change and accomplish the progress for which he was hired.

### 5. Honor tradition - Pioneer change.

Celebrating past success and valuing key pieces of an organization's culture, while at the same time advancing new ideas and vision, is a critical challenge for executives integrating into new companies. The ability to discriminate between those cultural norms that are vital and immutable and those that are less pivotal and more malleable is critical. This central theme will assist the new executive to successfully communicate a

new vision to his or her organization and successfully transform it.

## Integration Is a Shared Responsibility

The success of an executive who is new to an organization hinges on many factors. The acceptance of the individual, as well as his or her acceptance of the organization and those within it, should not be left to chance. Both the executive and the organization share responsibility for planning an effective integration effort. It can be helpful to think about executive integration as spanning three critical time periods: (1) recruiting and selection; (2) orientation; (3) organizational socialization.

The process should begin even before recruitment and continue for a lengthy period after the executive comes on board. This helps to eliminate expensive hiring mistakes and false starts, ultimately ensuring that business momentum is maintained.

**Recruiting.** Successful integration requires a realistic description of the needs of the position. Outlining job-related skills and abilities is an important first step in this process. Honestly assessing the organizational culture and factors that are key in navigating successfully inside the company is another key component to consider prior to launching the recruiting process. Selecting an external executive who fits well with both the skills required by the company and the culture of the organization provides important momentum for the executive to quickly have an impact on his/her new company.

**Orientation.** Psychologically, orientation to the new company begins once the individual has accepted the position. Orientation incorporates a wide range of activities, including introductions to key people,

learning new policies and procedures, and surveying the lay of the land. Executives often describe their orientations to new organizations as "drinking from a fire hose," as they rapidly try to assimilate as much information as possible in a short time frame

**Organizational Socialization.** Too often, organizations stop thinking about executive integration after a month or two of orientation. For ultimate success, a longer-term process known as organizational socialization takes place. Important milestones during this period include fitting into the culture of the company and learning the informal rules of it, while at the same time not having the new executive's fresh perspective co-opted by the new organization.