

Executive Onboarding: Effective Out of the Blocks **Bruce E. Roselle, PhD, LP**

If you watched any of the sprint races in the Beijing Olympics, you undoubtedly heard commentators explain how important it is to get out of the blocks effectively. Whether you saw swimming or running, relays or hurdles, the key to winning often occurred at the very start, as the athlete pushed off the blocks to begin the race.

According to recent research, the same is true for executives starting a new position. For outside hires and internal promotions, the first six months “out of the blocks” are often the most critical. The August 2008 edition of the Training & Development Journal cites data indicating that 30 percent of senior leaders hired into new companies and 21 percent of leaders transferring within the same company fail in their new positions, due to a poor transition in the first year.

Though the ramp-up time for new external senior hires tends to be six to nine months, compared with three to six months for new internal leaders, there are more similarities than differences between the factors that predict success for these two groups of leaders. For example, both groups perform significantly better when some amount of time is invested in a carefully designed onboarding strategy.

The cost of recruiting and bringing in a new senior leader, waiting for him or her to get up to speed, and then replacing that individual within the first year if they are not successful is astoundingly high. Research indicates that the price tag runs into hundreds of thousands of dollars. Minimizing this risk, Roselle Leadership Strategies assists client companies in two major ways to insure a successful and profitable start for new leaders. We provide:

- Pre-hire assessments that look for subtle nuances in behavior, particularly interpersonal ones, that can complicate a new start
- Coaching support for the first six months of a new hire’s tenure

Pre-hire assessments. We work with our client organizations to screen applicants during the interview process. Through in-depth interviews and personality tests, we consistently and accurately identify characteristics that might run counter to the organizational culture or that might significantly undermine the individual’s capacity to build critical relationships and social networks. The result is either a “do not hire” recommendation, or a qualified recommendation with a clear idea of development areas to address as the new executive comes aboard.

Onboarding coaching. Our approach with new hires whose pre-hire assessment identifies problematic development areas has two primary dimensions. One dimension is to provide a clear structure for creating an impact. The other is to help leaders recognize how their own fears and faulty beliefs undermine their effectiveness, especially in building relationships and networks.

We first developed the Influence model, below, when working with an external hire for VP of Account Services for one of our clients. Before “John” assumed his new role, his boss met with him and directed him to make his first order of business to “change the ‘country club atmosphere’ that had developed and get rid of the ‘dead wood’ in his group”. Dutifully, “John” began to conduct stern conversations with his direct reports, and to threaten them with termination if they did not turn things around. Within a week, the agency’s human resource manager called us to step in to help.

Helping you select and develop great leaders

It did not take us long to determine that John had tried to make an immediate impact without conducting any of his own investigative intelligence to determine what was, objectively, happening in Account Services. To “stop the bleeding”, we immediately initiated Onboarding Coaching and, among other things, introduced the new leader to this proprietary model.

INVESTIGATION	INFLUENCE	INTERCONNECTION	IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn as much as possible about the situation in advance • Diagnose the challenges, opportunities • Shed assumptions from past that might get in the way • Create a strategy for addressing issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate relationships • Test early assumptions, experience culture • Develop productive relationships with key stakeholders • Establish credibility via early wins aligned with agenda • Identify problems, opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen relationships with key stakeholders • Build, contribute to a strong team • Develop influential coalitions, networks • Create a vision and a plan of action • Begin to enroll others in the plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align strategy, skills, systems • Enroll, actively involve others • Listen to others' feedback, insight, perspective • Work the plan • Manage successful implementation(s) • Experience maximum results <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Roselle Leadership Copyright 2005</p>

With this structure and overall picture in mind, “John” started over with his team. This time, he scheduled open dialogues to learn how each team member viewed the department and its challenges; he created a forum for an exchange of specific ideas to address identified concerns. The turnaround in his sphere of responsibility was so dramatic that, within a year, the agency rated “John” one of their top managers.

How did he drive the turnaround? He unleashed the power of using personal investigation to underpin influence. He moved forward and focused on facilitating effective interrelationships between people, vision and action. With the stage set, he was then able to lead the group to achieve their goals with powerful impact.

Even with a battle-proven strategy in place, leaders are, more often than not, derailed by underlying irrational fears and faulty beliefs about themselves and others. This type of derailment is sometimes subtle and “below the surface”, but it always impedes maximum performance. Moreover, virtually no one is exempt.

In John’s case, his faulty beliefs told him that he must convince others how smart and competent he was, and that he should be the one coming up with the great, strategic business ideas. He thought that he needed to act right away so others did not see any hesitation or lack of confidence. These faulty we helped him see how these fears and faulty beliefs acted as roadblocks to high performance, “John” was able to engage in what we call [Leading Fearlessly™](#).