



HOW TO SURVIVE A NEW CEO

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We're always amazed at the lack of personal transition planning both by managers and the troops when a new CEO appears. Common wisdom seems to be that nothing much will change. As a weary vice president of a troubled hospital said, "We've already been through hell - twice. How much worse could it get?" The answer, of course, is "For you, much worse. You could be fired!"

A new CEO means everyone in the organization is now a new hire - an unknown quantity who must demonstrate enthusiastic and tireless support of the new CEO's agenda. Few wannabe survivors realize this in time. They believe they can think things out before they plunge in, not so. Remember, the Board of Directors has charged the CEO with making visible changes, usually pronto.

The clock starts on the day the CEO's appointment is announced

This is mandatory, or the CEO will be dangling from his/her golden parachute in short order. Those who want to stay on the payroll then, must avoid a business-as-usual attitude and demonstrate that they share the CEO's dedication to change.

Many new CEOs believe the troops are eager to justify past performance rather than move forward. That view precipitates departures. Have you noticed how often the chief financial officer is an early hit? He/she may have had nothing to do with the organization's troubles - other than documenting the financial side - but he/she is often replaced immediately. Ditto the head of HR. Could it be that both usually appear entrenched in the past, burdened by loyalties to the previous CEO?

If you're in a staff job, it's important to show you're essential to the new regime, quickly and convincingly. One CFO in outplacement said, "I just wanted to do my job and keep a low profile until the CEO got things set up the way he wanted. By the time he did it, I was too late. In my exit interview the CEO told me, 'You didn't define your position. I need someone with initiative.'"

Few CEOs arrive committed to dumping anyone (especially with the current labor shortages), but the inertia and self-justification of managers and workers often provokes a slash-and-burn scenario. A whole new team arrives shortly after the CEO. They may not be better than the inherited team, but the CEO believes he/she can count on them to cooperate.

Rather than watch yourself turned into cannon fodder for organizational tragedies you had little to do with, act decisively - but only if you want to stay. Otherwise, a discussion about severance and outplacement assistance makes sense. If you initiate it, you may get more severance because you evoke no guilt.

Do your homework

It's astounding how few people run a background check on the new chief, although it's simple to do. Public relations departments of virtually all organizations have press handouts on the senior management team. The CEO's former employer undoubtedly had a PR department that would give anyone who asked a copy of his/ her biography. An online or library search of the trade press could produce more data—the good and the bad news.

All those association meetings and networking lunches can pay off big now. Unless the new CEO has sprung full-grown from the brow of Zeus, he's/she's known in circles you can access. What has the CEO's MO been in the past? What's his/her agenda? Someone who knows will tell you if you ask. The executive secretaries knew a lot about the front-runners before the announcement. Rarely does anyone ask what they think, so they'll be delighted to spill all the beans.

Anticipate the CEO's needs

Provide the CEO with information and background as objectively as possible. Stick to the facts. Any attempt to spin results will hasten your departure. New CEOs, hungry for information, go ballistic when it's not supplied immediately. One said to us, "Why should I have to ask? What do these people think I'm interested in, their golf handicaps?"

The clock starts on the day the CEO's appointment is announced. Be prepared to act quickly. There should be a rush to fill in the blanks for the CEO, but usually there's a momentary calm as people wait to gauge which way the wind blows. This creates both a power and information vacuum which will be filled in by what-ever information sources the CEO can muster. If he/she is an outsider, the CEO may rely on industry gossip and former employees who aren't impartial, not even factual. Don't risk it. Prepare your case in writing.

One deposed vice president complained to his outplacement counselor, "I never had a chance to talk with the CEO until he'd already decided I wouldn't fit in."

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Maybe, but why didn't that VP approach the new CEO on the day of the announcement with a job description, summary of work in progress, and future plans? Managers should always present an agenda while the situation is fluid rather than after the CEO's ideas have firmed up. Show your hand immediately.

One of our clients, a human resources manager, decided he wasn't going to wait and see how his future would turn out. He called his counterpart at the new CEO's former company and asked for advice. That contact had nothing to lose by describing the CEO's MO and giving advice. Before the CEO even moved into his new office, our client sent him updates on his department. Two years later, he is still employed there. Four hundred others are not.

Be supportive and nonpolitical

Don't prime the grapevine with casual comments. The number of managers and workers doomed because they said that they were waiting to see "how good this guy is," has kept outplacement firms in business and profitable. The worst thing any employee - especially a manager - can do is appear to be playing politics during a transition. Not only will the CEO hear about it, your peers will sharpen their knives.

Consider the CEO's view of office politics: The Board that hired the CEO couldn't brief him/her. They don't know enough. The departing CEO probably won't volunteer information, or he may have reasons for withholding it. The new kid on the block can trust nobody so he's/she's hypersensitive to every nuance in the grapevine and hungry for details. Don't voice any question about his/her ability; that will sound like potential opposition. For those who wish to survive, silence is golden and that means keeping direct reports quiet, too.

Be realistic with your direct reports

A new CEO means all bets are off. Promises made in the past are null and void. Do not try to calm subordinates' anxieties with new commitments. We can't think of a promise you could be sure to keep while the CEO is assessing his/her options. If you can't deliver on a promise, your direct reports will blame you, not the change in leadership. Don't let your troops be misled by statements the CEO makes about everyone continuing in place. If someone asks you about the CEO's intentions say, "I don't know." Learning to handle a transition is an essential lesson. If one of your subordinates feels seriously threatened by the prospect of new management, he/she is better off somewhere else.

Seem poised to leave willingly/quietly, and you may not have to

Someone who appears to have options elsewhere is more desirable than someone who is willing to be a human sacrifice. Martyrdom will not solve the company's problems. Ditto for doom and gloom. The outgoing CEO may have given his successor profiles of key players, but if he's /she's smart, the new CEO has researched the senior managers independently. (If you were new, wouldn't you want to check with objective sources?) Even so, the new CEO has no way of gauging how quickly key people can move in a new direction. During a transition, this makes your attitude more important than past performance.

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