

IMPROVING HUMAN PERFORMANCE

Training the Next Level

Why new leaders fail and what they need to learn.

By Scott Eblin

RESEARCH CONDUCTED over the past 10 years has shown that as many as 60 percent of new executives fail within 18 months of taking their jobs. All too often, those new executive leaders find that while the expectations of them at their new level are high, they are rarely explicitly stated. That disconnect in communication places workplace learning and human resource professionals in a pivotal role to help new executives successfully grasp and respond to higher expectations.

New executives commonly respond to the pressure by doing more of what has made them successful in the past. Unfortunately, at the executive level, the skills and knowledge that got them the job won't necessarily keep them in it.

As an executive coach, I regularly work with clients who are challenged to let go of comfortable behaviors and instead adopt new behaviors that are required of them as executive leaders. For example, I am currently advising a brilliant scientist who, at the vice president level, has moved from doing research to leading several teams responsible for research and development. Early on in his new role, he told me that he felt a bit unsettled and would ask himself on the drive home, "What did I do all day?" Instead of working in the lab, he attended meetings to learn about what the people in the lab were doing. Several months later, however, he built support for a product launch by setting aside his technical knowledge to focus on leading his team and building peer relationships.

I asked more than two dozen seasoned and successful executives to provide their insights about the behaviors and mindsets that executives need to "pick up" and "let go" of to meet a new

set of expectations. Here is what several had to say.

Build a presence

The first challenge for new executives is to quit relying on the technical knowledge or functional skills that have been the foundation of their success. To succeed at the next level, they must replace that comfort zone with an understanding of the broader work that executives are expected to do. Workplace learning and performance professionals can help them do that through individual and group coaching, which creates opportunities for new executives to assess what is needed and adjust their behaviors to demonstrate greater executive presence.

Executive presence is a frequently used, but not well-defined term. The executives interviewed were asked how they would coach newly appointed executives to make a successful transition into their new roles. An analysis of those interviews revealed three distinct categories of executive presence—personal presence, team presence, and organizational presence—and three pairs of behaviors to adopt or quit in each of those categories. The table on page 58 presents a snapshot of how these elements of executive presence fit together. WLP professionals supporting new executives can use this table to help diagnose the executive's strengths as well as developmental opportunities. Let's take an in-depth look at each of those components. **Personal presence** is the foundation of executive leadership and starts with the individual picking up confidence that she can contribute at the next level and letting go of doubt about how. Jason Jeffay, a partner with Hewitt Associates' leadership development practice notes that "most people have more ability

than confidence." Jeffay says he counsels new executives to "know that you are where you are...because you should be in that role. So you neither have to formally prove yourself, nor be intimidated."

In a fast-paced environment, successful executives enhance their personal presence by regularly renewing their energy and perspective and letting go of the temptation to run until they crash. Ron Heifetz, a professor at Harvard University and the author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, believes that leaders need to regularly "get up on the balcony." He explains: As a leader, it's easy to find yourself down on the dance floor where all you can see is your partner and maybe a few of the dancers around you. When you take the time, however, to leave the dance floor and get up on the balcony, you can get a perspective on everything that is going on. You see the patterns that sweep across the floor, and you see who is dancing well and who is struggling. After you regain perspective, you can then return to the floor and apply your attention where it is needed the most.

The third component of personal presence is to connect with diverse stakeholders by using a custom-fit approach to communication instead of a one-size-fits-all communication style. A key behavior of custom-fit communications is to tune into the needs of specific audiences. As an example, Ed Sannini, a managing director at Morgan Stanley, explains: "When you go to a senior executive presentation, their expectation is for you to tell them what it means, not how you put the answer together." A common mistake that new executives make is to focus too much on how they came to their conclusions. Doing that, they run the risk of getting labeled as someone

IMPROVING HUMAN PERFORMANCE

The next level leadership model of executive presence

| | Pick Up | Let Go Of |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Personal Presence | Confidence in your presence | Doubt in how you contribute |
| | Regular renewal of your energy and perspective | Running until you crash |
| | Custom-fit communications | One-size-fits-all communications |
| Team Presence | Team reliance | Self reliance |
| | Defining what to do | Telling how to do it |
| | Accountability for many results | Responsibility for a few results |
| Organizational | Looking left and right as you lead | Primarily looking up and down as you lead |
| | An outside-in view of the entire organization | An inside-out view of your function |
| | A big footprint view of your role | A small footprint view of your role |

who, when asked the time, explains how to build a watch.

Team presence captures the behaviors that executives need to exhibit to leverage the potential of their functional teams. The starting point for team presence is for the new executive to develop a reliance on the team instead of himself. Steve Linehan, a senior vice president with Capital One, learned the importance of team reliance in a senior management role with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation earlier in his career. "I was very much a control freak... (but) I began to delegate work. The biggest thing for me was accepting that the work was good. It might not have been the way I would have done it, but it was really good. Accepting that was incredibly liberating. From that point on, I think I began to accelerate."

Executives need to adopt two more behaviors in the domain of team presence to delegate effectively. First, they need to pick up the habit of defining what to do while letting go of their tendency of telling how to do it. They also need to accept accountability for many results and let go of responsibility for a few results.

Organizational presence can be the most overlooked and least understood aspect of executive presence. Many new executives initially fail to recognize that with

their promotion to the executive ranks, they are part of at least two teams: the functional team that they are responsible for and the leadership team of the broader organization. The first habit that executives have to adopt to build their organizational presence is to look left and right, rather than primarily up and down, as they lead.

Challenged with broader business responsibilities, new leaders need to strengthen their peripheral vision by paying more attention to what their peers are doing. Donna Morea, the president of information systems integrator CGI-AMS, offers this counsel to new executive-team arrivals:

"The one thing I would do, if I were new to a team, is meet with every single person on that team to understand who they are and where they are. What I would not do is come to my first executive team meeting and start stabbing around about the issues, without knowing much history or much about the dynamics of the team."

While new executives need to take steps to build bonds with their peers, they must also establish themselves as equal players at the table. To illustrate that point, I share this story from Jay Marmer, senior vice president of Norsk

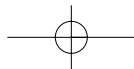
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"Earlier in my career, I was working in an organization at General Electric where I was the junior guy on the management team. One guy was a former professor at Princeton and the other was running a big part of the business. Both were extremely intelligent, but overwhelming. I remember my boss telling me, 'Whenever you get in a meeting with these guys and they lay four or five things on you to do, you come back and give them one or two things that they have to do.'

"I did that and it really formed a partnership where we were dependent upon each other—as opposed to them just dumping on me. It highlighted for me the concept of working together for a shared result."

To further establish themselves as leaders with organizational presence, executives must show that they have changed perspectives—from an outside-in view of the organization to an inside-out view of their function. That can be a challenging shift. Avon Product's senior vice president of human resources, Lucien Alziari, summarizes the required mind-set as "business first, function second." Alziari believes that people need to think about the business as a whole and then about how their function supports the business. "It isn't about getting the best functional agenda. It's about getting the right agenda to support the business as a whole," he says.

The third aspect of organizational presence is for new executives to think strategically about picking up a bigger view of their role, and letting go of the idea that they can operate effectively with a small footprint. They need to understand that an executive is under constant observation. Steve Rippe, a retired United States Army major general and current chief operations officer of the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation, shares an Army aphorism that should remind leaders of their visibility and exposure: "The further up the flag pole you climb, the more your rear end shows." Because their words have a higher degree of impact on and in the organization, executives need to always think before they speak.



IMPROVING HUMAN PERFORMANCE

Make a lasting impact

Along with that “big footprint” view of themselves, new executives must understand that they will be expected to make a significant and positive impact on a regular basis. Catherine Meloy, president of Goodwill of Greater Washington (D.C.), spent most of her executive career with broadcasting giant, Clear Channel Communications. “The part that changes is the immediacy of action,” she says. “If the top leaders think about it today, it needs to be done this afternoon. And that is the part that I think people who are getting into this, especially in the profit and loss business of a large corporation, need to know. It’s not that the approach is rude; it’s just a very fast-paced world.”

When leaders move to the next level, they are advancing into uncharted terrain. This journey is easier when there are savvy people to guide them. By adopting a real-world framework for describing the appropriate behaviors of new executives and providing real-time opportunities for them to assess what is working and what isn’t, learning professionals can ensure that their executives’ journeys to the next level are successful ones. **TD**

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