



VIEWPOINT

Dynamic On-Boarding: Helping New CEOs 'Hit the Ground Running'

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HIRING A NEW CEO for your organization is arguably the most important decision your board will make. Having handed over the reins of the hospital to this individual, the pathway to success or failure of the organization becomes highly dependent upon his or her abilities. The importance of this decision thus demands an interview process where one must make sure that the candidate chosen has both sufficient skills and is the right fit for the institution. However, ensuring a new CEO's success doesn't stop once the employment contract has been signed. Rather, this is the point at which the hard work really begins.

It is our experience that a CEO's "newness" to an organization often temporarily slows progress and sometimes has a negative impact on results in an otherwise successful organization. Because transition leadership skills are seldom practiced on a frequent basis, they are typically underdeveloped in even the most successful executive. The result? Good executives may fail—both themselves and their organization.

Enter executive "on-boarding." By guiding the CEO through a structured process that focuses on the highest leverage activities and the most effective practices during their first few months in the role, trustees can help the new hire adapt to his or her new place and position and make significant progress in running the organization. According to the CEO of Forum Group, however, many companies seem to leave their executive on-boarding to chance, and, as a result, new executive failure rates can be in excess of 50 percent. We strongly believe that it

is the clear responsibility of the board of trustees to provide the means to ease the CEO's transition. Properly exercising this responsibility is a sign of a high-integrity organization that is interested in setting its people up for success.

On-Boarding through Debate

In the past, executive coaches often advised new hires to get a feel for the organization, its culture, staff and issues before making any significant changes. New CEOs might take a year or more to "turn an organization around" or to get moving in a new strategic direction. In today's rapidly changing health care world, however, it is critical for executives to be able to "hit the ground running" and be prepared to take action quickly. Executives inevitably find it hard to get to the root of performance issues when key department heads disagree or when direct reports are positioning themselves to "look good" to their new boss.

So we frequently suggest a more direct approach to assimilation—engaging in constructive dialogue. Instead of dipping one toe in and waiting until one is used to the water, we advocate that a CEO jump right in head first, by selecting and debating a critical issue head on with staff. Through intentional constructive dialogue, the new CEO can work with his or her new leadership team to consider all sides of a tough issue.

Staging a constructive debate is more than a tool for solving a problem. It is a powerful method of exposing the new CEO to the working dynamics of the health care organization, the abilities of the executive team, and the cultural practices that determine how decisions are made. Further, it provides an opportuni-

ty for the board and executive team to see their new CEO in action.

Staging an Argument

In a healthy environment, arguments are very helpful; they serve to pull people together, forge the basis for agreement and get them aligned and moving in the same direction. The key is having an argument where everyone can ultimately win. We recommend that you stage such an argument, bringing key members of the board—i.e., the chair and a few other trustees that have an interest in a particular issue—together with the CEO and the leadership team. Have the CEO assign staff and the appropriate trustees into protagonist and antagonist roles through which people can expose all aspects of an issue. The protagonist outlines suggested actions, proposes possible solutions and/or advocates for giving one side in the dilemma more power and resources. The job of the antagonist is to challenge or critique the proposal, give constructive criticism, find flaws in logic, identify what is missing, list the probable effects of proposed actions and identify the likely emotional reactions of stakeholders.

By using this technique, we have found that the negative emotions and personal attacks that often characterize passionate arguments do not materialize, but in their place are creativity, humor and most important of all, some really great thinking on both sides as the participants work to understand, adopt and defend a new position.

To be truly enlightening, reassign individuals and have them argue the opposite position during round two—it further opens their minds to come up with the best strategic decision possible.

Changing the players around helps to ensure that no one gets stuck on a particular position, simply because he or she is assigned to it. When people get stuck, intellectual debate cannot happen, because rather than you “having a position,” the position “has” you.

Benefits

This exercise allows the CEO to get to know how members of the team think and work together; in addition, it is an excellent way to help the new leader quickly identify and learn about the pros and cons of a given issue. It also helps the new CEO garner a better understanding of how the board thinks, works and acts. Because the exercise requires people to adopt the contrary viewpoint, they are free to bring their intelligence—both cognitive and emotional—to the table, resulting in an environment where all sides of an issue is weighed and examined.

Using this method as an element of your on-boarding strategy does not necessarily lead to a final decision. Indeed, it

may simply serve to illuminate issues for the new CEO and demonstrate how the players might work together as a team. This method can be used beyond the on-boarding process and throughout the CEO’s tenure.

Because participants view the debate as more of an exercise than a formal presentation (of the kind they are accustomed to making to defend their views), it allows boards and staff to approach problem-solving on a more objective level. The result can be that each side of the issue has a voice that provides thoughtful examination and advocacy. Participants must constantly ask themselves “Can I set aside my point of view to see another?” This kind of dialogue allows for the creation of alternative scenarios and therefore more options from which to choose.

Boards and new CEOs no longer have the luxury of a six-month honeymoon to help new leaders become indoctrinated into their new culture. An institution cannot sit by and idly wait until the new

leader becomes “used to” his or her new work environment. Given the relentless focus on quality, physician relationships, revenue cycle and careful cost control—especially in today’s economy—new CEOs must be able to make critical decisions rapidly.

Trustees can fast-track the acclimation process by using the constructive dialogue model described above. This practice ensures that the CEO becomes more quickly engaged in the thorny world of the organization’s strategic decision-making, thereby becoming a true partner with trustees to release new energy, creativity and excitement about the hospital and its systems. **T**

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