

Career

The six biggest stumbling blocks for new executives – and how to avoid them

Once they're in the new job, the honeymoon period for managers is short. Experts share tips on how executives can get off to a successful start with their new employer.

Claudia Obmann, Düsseldorf – For executives, the job merry-go-round continues to spin despite the pandemic: managers are still leaving their positions voluntarily because they get promoted or because another employer tempts them away with a more interesting role, better prospects or a more substantial salary. Others are having to look for a new job because their company is restructuring or cutting costs in the face of the tense economic climate.

Regardless of where the reasons lie, anybody who takes on a new leadership position has to prove what they're capable of quickly. And regardless of whether they're a divisional director, CEO or chairperson – the honeymoon period for managers lasts a maximum of 100 days. But expertise alone isn't enough. Business and leadership coach Ines Thomas: “As a rule, it's not a question of the newcomer's professional qualifications and suitability; it's often totally different factors that determine whether they succeed in the new company.”

Two experts point out the six most serious stumbling blocks when navigating a changeover and explain clever ways to avoid them. They also share tips on how to steer clear of the pitfalls and get off to a flying start in the new position.

> Stumbling block 1 – knowledge transfer: “The biggest hurdle for a new executive is putting together a nuanced picture out of lots of different puzzle pieces as quickly as possible,” says Raoul Nacke. The head of global leadership consultancy Eric Salmon & Partners has been helping clients fill leadership, executive and governance positions for 20 years.

In the case of an orderly succession, he says, it's an advantage when an outgoing manager shares their experience and tells their successor about the strengths and weaknesses within the leadership team or organisation in person, as well as informing them about the status of key projects. That enables the new leader to gain traction more quickly.

Ideally, there will be a period of overlap. But he also advises: “This introductory phase should be as short as possible, because the new manager can only take full responsibility and set the direction once their predecessor is no longer on the scene.” A few days should be enough – in part to avoid the new executive seeming weak. The exception, according to coach Ines Thomas: “When the successor consciously takes over as a guardian of the status quo rather than a reformer or innovator.”

Tip: If the induction phase is short because the predecessor is about to start a new job, or if the

incoming and outgoing managers can't meet in person, it can be helpful to record voice messages on individual topics. It's practical because the new incumbent can listen to them whenever they have time. And voice memos don't just save having to work through masses of documents; they're particularly useful when it comes to personal assessments, which are often not written down anywhere.

What is actually revealed needs to be given careful consideration and is a question of trust more than anything else. But headhunter Nacke believes it's in the outgoing manager's own self-interest too: "They should want to help the person who comes after them to succeed: then the incoming executive will have all the less reason to point to their predecessor as the root cause of any problems."

> Stumbling block 2 – contacts: For the incoming manager to be able to work successfully, it's important for them to introduce themselves to key internal and external contacts quickly. "Within the company, you should give priority to your own team and immediate superior," says headhunter Nacke. "Depending on your rank, that might mean the relevant member of the executive board or even the supervisory board. Equal-ranking members of the leadership team and colleagues at the same level as your superior should be next."

The outgoing incumbent should introduce their successor to these crucial decision-makers and offer advice on the best way to interact with them.

Tip: It's customary for the manager who's leaving to send a goodbye message to their team and important decision-makers within the company, as well as to clients and suppliers. Besides saying thank you, it's an opportunity to introduce your successor as well. Nacke: "This introduction can also be used to announce that the new person will be getting in touch soon."

And leadership expert Ines Thomas advises: "Draw up a four-week plan and make sure you

arrange at least one appointment for a personal conversation with all your team members and important contacts. It's a good way to get to know one another, clarify expectations and set your focus."

> Stumbling block 3 – communication: It's important not to underestimate the many issues that come up when there's a changeover or how much unrest they can cause: What kind of personality will be taking over? What does the new executive stand for? What should the staff expect? What will the future be like under their new superior? "It's vital to ensure clarity right away," advises Ines Thomas.

Tip: To make sure the leadership team settles down again after a change, it's a good idea to make contact as soon as possible. Headhunter Nacke sees video conferences as an ideal way to introduce yourself and create a first impression – at global level, if necessary. The crucial thing is to set a direction.

When it comes to giving an introductory speech, coaching expert Thomas advises: "Even though in most cases you won't be able to go into detail because you're new, you should outline your fundamental goals, what expectations you have of working together and what drives you."

And by all means make it clear if there's something you don't have a concrete knowledge of yet, she adds. For instance by saying: "I won't make any decision on this or that aspect until I have a clear picture." In general, says Thomas, the more convincing you come across, "the faster you become tangible as a person and the faster the uncertainty will settle down".

> Stumbling block 4 – leadership style: Right from day one, the new executive will be watched to see what signals they're sending, what goals they're setting – but also how they support others and help them succeed. "The days of superhero managers who appear to keep

the company running all by themselves are over,” says executive search consultant Nacke. Nowadays, in view of the complex challenges to be overcome, a well-functioning team is much more sought after as a way to achieve the goals that have been set.

Tip: Ines Thomas explains how to present yourself as the right choice for the executive post early on: “Find out what problems are on your colleagues’ minds. Whether it’s rigid working hours, the lack of certain software or needless bureaucracy – see what improvements and solutions you can come up with quickly. Besides demonstrating that you’re effective, it will also give you time to prepare for bigger changes properly.”

In order to work out what form those changes should take, the manager should enlist the help of experienced staff at the new company. Like this, for instance: Start by putting your eight to 10 closest managers into groups on various topics and ask them to develop solutions that point in the required direction. The results are presented to everybody, followed by a discussion as to whether and how they can lead to the intended goals. Eventually, you should end up with a consensus on a joint way forward.

Headhunter Nacke recommends this method because it allows you to kill three birds with one stone, as it were: “You demonstrate that you’re not an autocratic boss. You generate a collective spirit and rally everybody together behind a joint plan for the next 12 to 18 months.”

And in the process, he adds, it becomes clear if somebody doesn’t fit in with the team because they don’t cooperate openly and respectfully, or where there are weak spots in the organisation that could hinder the implementation of the jointly developed plan.

> Stumbling block 5 – corporate culture: The management team shapes the corporate culture. So it’s vital to understand how the company

ticks. How hierarchical and formal things are, for instance, how mistakes are dealt with, how transparent decisions are and to what extent staff are involved. Both your predecessor and your initial talks with the team can give you an impression of all that.

Tip: In order to broaden their perception, new executives should ask to be invited to meetings with a larger number of participants, even if the content doesn’t strictly require their involvement. It’s an opportunity to experience colleagues in action and get a sense of the dos and don’ts as far as the corporate culture is concerned.

Leadership coach Ines Thomas also recommends asking team members to describe the leadership and team culture up until now and then asking them which aspects of it should continue and which should not. It’s also useful to enquire about who else you should definitely talk to. “That way, you’ll find out who the important, informal ‘influencers’ outside the hierarchy are,” says Thomas. “And having that type of contacts and information about the unofficial distribution of power often plays a crucial role in deciding whether and how well you establish yourself.”

> Stumbling block 6 – building trust: “Although communicating virtually can speed up the process of settling in to a new organisation, it can’t replace personal exchange and doesn’t generally lead to a solid personal relationship,” says headhunter Nacke. But that’s necessary in order to build the trust required for a resilient bond.

Ines Thomas’ advice for ensuring get-to-know-you meetings turn into valuable encounters: “Deliberately steer the conversation from a factual to a deeper level.” She mentions a few examples of “deep talk” questions that help connect with the person you’re talking to: “How did you feel when you first started here? What was the best piece of advice anybody gave you at the time? What advice would you give me?”

Tip: Common ground is a way to build trust and establish a connection too. So the new manager should listen carefully and find out which professional or private topics the other person is enthusiastic about. Is there any overlap? “Then out with it!” says leadership coach Thomas.

It doesn't matter whether it's what you studied, your hobbies or family: “Discovering and emphasising common ground is a real boost when you want to build trust,” says Thomas. “And that makes it the best way to build dependable relationships and find allies for implementing your ideas.”



Raoul Nacke

is CEO with global responsibility at Eric Salmon & Partners, an internationally operating executive search and leadership advisory firm. Eric Salmon & Partners works with executives and boards of public, private and non-profit enterprises to support them in developing sustainable management. He says: “The days of superhero managers who appear to keep the company running all by themselves are over. Nowadays it's team players who are in demand.”