



FEBRUARY 5, 2007

MANAGING | Head Starts

How To Take The Reins At Top Speed

Getting a jump on a new job before you begin is critical. Enter coaches and consultants

BY JENA MCGREGOR

Borrowers have their grace periods. Married couples have their honeymoons. And new corporate leaders have long had their "first 100 days." For CEOs, at least, that's the approximate time between a new job's starting line and Wall Street's first quarterly day of reckoning.

But that window of forgiveness, often characterized by promises to go on listening tours and polite calls for patience from investors, is closing quickly. In today's era of increasingly activist investors and boards, a heightened focus on fast results is making the first few months feel more like a trial by fire than a honeymoon. "Boards are more willing to toss people out and [are giving CEOs] a much shorter leash," says Michael Watkins, author of *The First 90 Days* and a former Harvard Business School and INSEAD professor. "Many senior executives feel they have a much shorter time frame to prove themselves."

That may be wreaking havoc in some boardrooms, but it's creating opportunities in others. Executive search firms, leadership coaches, and consultants are building specialized "executive onboarding" services to add to their client offerings. Onboarding, as the name implies, helps new managers get a running start through coaching that assists them with detecting cultural nuances, accelerating strategic plans, and navigating the personality mine fields of their new teams. The term is also now used to describe orienting new hires.

Despite having a name only a consultant or HR professional could love—onboarding is also known as management integration or, worse, assimilation coaching—the practice is taking off. Headhunters Egon Zehnder International and Heidrick & Struggles International both report rising levels of interest from companies for their onboarding services. In 2005, Korn/Ferry International, which also consults with new leaders through its coaching division, helped launch a "CEO Boot Camp," a two-day seminar for new chief executives, in conjunction with the Wharton Club and PrimeGenesis, a consulting firm that specializes in executive onboarding and which says demand for its services tripled in 2006.

EARLY WARNINGS

If such coaching strikes you as either common sense or as the kind of skill you would expect top executives to have already developed, you wouldn't be alone. Tamara Minick-Scokalo, who hired PrimeGenesis managing director George Bradt three weeks into her last job as senior vice-president for Europe of Elizabeth Arden Inc., was skeptical at first, too. "I thought that a company hiring you in at that level would expect [that you'd have those skills]," she says. But Minick-Scokalo, who had worked with Bradt at Coca-Cola Co. in the past, knew her new job would be a challenge. Not only was she switching industries, from wine (she had been European general manager of E. & J. Gallo Winery) to cosmetics, but her role would be a new one, designed to help accelerate the company's international growth.

Bradt, who has also worked with Merrill Lynch, MTV, and Miller Brewing, helped Minick-Scokalo spot peculiarities in Elizabeth Arden's culture. He assisted her and her team in crafting a strategic plan in three months—about half the time, she says, it would have taken her on her own. And he helped alert her to potential clashes with new colleagues who would no longer have direct access to people who now reported to her. "He spotted things I would have tripped over," says Minick-Scokalo. In her newest post, as president for global commercial at Cadbury Schweppes PLC, she hired Bradt again, this time to work with her and her team, but also to help her prepare during the weeks preceding the new gig. By the time she started on Jan. 2, she had already had face-to-face meetings with all of her direct reports and had drafted an agenda for her first 100 days.

For some of the biggest search firms, onboarding is part of a trend toward providing broader leadership assessment, development, and coaching services. Since August, Korn/Ferry has acquired a leadership development and a coaching firm. Heidrick & Struggles, which explored acquiring PrimeGenesis in 2004, is building its own leadership development practice in-house and has begun consulting with HR departments to help them improve their onboarding processes. At a time when CEO failure rates are running at 40%, after all, helping executives "stick" makes sense. "It's like an insurance policy for your placement," says Rich Rosen, a partner in Heidrick's leadership consulting practice.

It also raises questions about inherent conflicts. Watkins, whose leadership consulting firm has a relationship with coaching outfit Lore International Institute, questions whether executive search consultancies can also make good coaching partners. "The culture of search and the culture of coaching and onboarding are like chalk and cheese," Watkins says. "One is much more transactional, and one is much more relational." He notes, too, that companies can be wary of search firms hanging around after placing an executive. "They don't necessarily want search firms any deeper in their talent pool," he says.

Executive search firms counter that where coaching relationships exist they're careful to make leadership teams off-limits to recruiters. And they note that headhunters aren't necessarily trying to double as coaches. "We're training our search consultants to recognize a need," says Joseph E. Griesedieck, Vice-Chairman of Korn/Ferry International. "And then they bring in the people who are experts."

Other large search firms have avoided making onboarding a formal service so far. "We really like to think of this as an integrated part of our recruitment process," says Spencer Stuart's James M. Citrin, who heads the company's media and technology practice. For Citrin, who co-wrote the new-leader guide *You're in Charge—Now What?* with fellow kingmaker Thomas J. Neff, onboarding can be as simple as giving a client a copy of his book and sharing insights over a leisurely breakfast. Whether it's for a couple hours or a couple months, with a coach or without, a serious head start is something top executives really need when they enter a new job these days. "There's so little time to make an impact," says Citrin.

PLAYBOOK

BEST-PRACTICE IDEAS

From 0 to 60 in 100 Days

Don't plan on hiring an "onboarding" specialist? Here are ideas for a great start from consultants who help senior executives switch into new jobs:

NEVER WAIT FOR DAY ONE

Getting started before your job officially begins can help make the first day feel more like the 15th. Hold one-on-one meetings with key reports and customers, create a strategic agenda for the first 100 days, and carefully study the company and its financials.

UNEARTH NEW STORIES

In those early meetings, ferret out lesser-known anecdotes about the new company you can share when trying to illustrate a point. Telling tales about your former company will only alienate your new colleagues.

THINK IN THREES

It's easy for new leaders to get overwhelmed by all the goals they set—and confuse people in the process. Three broad themes, says Spencer Stuart recruiter James Citrin, are easy for people to remember, and help clarify and organize priorities.

FIND YOUR "SHADOW BOARD"

New leaders should quickly ascertain who the people are that their boss will turn to for perspective on them. Fail to impress those people, and "they can bury you," says onboarding consultant George Bradt.

MAP OUT QUICK WINS

Don't plan on a honeymoon. Early on, come up with a few important but easy-to-reach goals you can point out to the board, Wall Street, or employees as proof of what you or the organization can achieve.