

Confidence, self-assessment and good choices lead to success

The rising leaders of today often lack critical skills needed to do the job they were promoted or hired to do. They also tend to practice unhelpful professional habits that need breaking. Sadly, organizational studies suggest this lack of leadership preparedness is more the rule than the exception.

Research conducted by Scott Eblin, executive coach and former Fortune 500 vice president of human resources, resulted in similar findings. Eblin interviewed some 30 successful executives from a variety of industries and sectors, including organizations such as Avon, Northrop Grumman, Capital One, the U.S. Army, Sallie Mae and America Online. He selected leaders with five to 15 years of tenure in their senior-level positions, and asked them to remember back to their experience of being “new.”

These leaders told him that what got them to the top—the knowledge and skills that made them successful on the way up—wasn’t enough to enable them to succeed in their executive-level position. To thrive at the top tier of leadership, they needed to pick up some new beliefs and behaviors while they let go of some others—or risk failing as executives.

The high rate of failure

Workplace surveys reveal that 40 percent of new executive leaders don’t last 18 months. This is because moving successfully to the senior level requires three things that aren’t instinctive or commonly taught in executive development programs. According to Eblin, who wrote “The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success” (Davies-Black, 2006), those three keys require new executives to:

- Confidently step into the executive role. Most new leaders feel like imposters during their first few months on the job. “To succeed,” said Eblin, “new leaders must project a strong executive presence in spite of how nervous they may be feeling inside.”

- Clarify and confront their own, individual leadership weaknesses. This can be done through self-assessment and by soliciting feedback from trusted peers, bosses and subordinates.
- Choose to change by picking up the new skills and behaviors needed to become an effective leader, and letting go of unhelpful habits that get in the way.

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Let go of self-doubt. As a new leader, the first challenge is to show up with confidence. “It’s normal to feel uncomfortable in the new role,” said Eblin. “A new leader that feels otherwise is likely underestimating what lies ahead.”

Joni Reich, senior vice president of administration for student loan giant Sallie Mae, admits she felt like “a fish out of water” when she was promoted out of middle management and into her senior position. “Mostly it was about listening, first, to see what was going on, what needed to get done—and then doing it.”

To show up confidently at the executive level, encourage new leaders to:

- **View themselves as a peer from the get-go.** Remind these nervous employees that they were promoted to the next level because those who are already there deemed them to be fittest and strongest.
- **Silence their inner critic.** We all have an inner voice that questions our ability to overcome obstacles and succeed. New executives should be en-

couraged to ignore it.

- **Be ready for executive meetings.** New leaders should make the effort to learn all they can about what’s to be discussed, to prepare their position and key points, and to actively participate.

New leaders must pace themselves. “When faced with a challenge or crisis, many leaders believe they’ll pull through as they have in the past—by driving themselves relentlessly until the problem is solved,” said Eblin. “The trouble with this approach at the executive level is that beyond every challenge is another one waiting to take its place. If new leaders keep it up, they’ll eventually drive themselves into the ground.”

According to Eblin, HR may find it beneficial to promote a kind of “recovery and renewal” routine at the executive level. Executives may find value in participating in regular physical activity, some form of spiritual revival, or in other ways realizing their potential at home and in the community at large.

Accept a helping-hand

Leadership means turning work over to a team and supporting their efforts even if—today—they aren’t able to do the work as well as the new leader may be able to. Lucien Alziari, a senior vice president at global beauty products leader Avon, says leadership is about coaching, mentoring, and monitoring others as *they* do the job. Companies look to executives to provide “broader organizational and leadership skills,” he says. Good leaders “work with their team to define what the agenda is, so that the mission, the longer-term strategies, and the priorities are clear.”

Turn self-reliance into team-reliance. New leaders will enjoy greater success if their focus is not on what can be done single-handedly, but on what can be accomplished by a team of employees who are all interested in contributing to

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LEADERSHIP

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the success of an organization. Therefore, HR should encourage new leaders to:

- **Stop competing with the team.** Encourage new executives to direct their competitive drive to the external world while collaborating internally.
- **Get the right people in the right roles.** New executives should hire people who have the capabilities to contribute to the successful outcomes that the leader envisions.
- **Redefine their value-add.** A new leader should ask, "What is it that only I can do?" The answer to this question should be short, but high in organizational value.

Let go of only looking up and down. Four out of five new executives neglect to build partnerships with peers and wind up failing in their jobs as a result, according to research conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council. These executives are plagued with what Eblin calls "vertical tunnel vision: A tendency to look up to the boss and down to subordinates—and to virtually ignore their peers."

"Encouraging new leaders to broaden their field of vision by looking left and right offers a 360-degree picture of the organization and the leader's role in it," said Eblin. To build relationships with peers, encourage new executives to:

- Learn their business by asking peers about their work and how they would like to be supported;
- Share their business by being open and honest about objectives and challenges; and
- Show up as an equal by finding give-and-take opportunities to streamline operations, overcome obstacles, and back one another's efforts.

Appreciating the significance of the executive role

An executive is always on stage, always in the lime-light. Everything he or she

does or says has a ripple effect and new executives must be encouraged to appreciate the significance of this fact. Eblin suggests that HR encourage their new leaders to keep potential liabilities of their higher profile in mind by practicing these strategies:

- Act like an ambassador for the organization by thinking before speaking and practicing diplomacy;
- Listen to what others have to say and beware of pushing personal views too hard; and
- Choose effectiveness over being right. Marc Effron of Avon says, "The *right* solution is the one that actually solves the problem with all members of the

group being relatively happy they are moving in that direction."

Leading at the executive level.

"Success at the executive level of leadership depends on one's ability to step up with confidence that he or she can do the job," said Eblin. "New leaders must not be afraid to clarify and confront their leadership weaknesses, and should feel free to choose to change what isn't working."

"Insanity has been defined as doing things the way you've always done them and expecting different results," said Eblin, who encouraged HR to facilitate an environment in which new leaders can pick up the skills and behaviors they need to succeed. □

ETHICS

Prevention of "big shot" misbehavior is critical, but HR can't do it alone

What can HR professionals do when it is the "big shots" in the organization—senior executives, top producers, long-term "untouchables" or brilliant professionals—whose behavior does not follow policy or ethics codes or, even worse, actually may violate the law? Judging by the robust attendance at the "Teaching Big Shots to Behave" session at this year's SHRM National Conference, the problem is not isolated. Attorney Stephen M. Paskoff, a well-known presenter, told attendees the consequences of uncontrolled big shot behavior can be devastating for customers, coworkers, and the organization itself, but all too often the big shot doesn't bear the brunt of those consequences. Prevention is critical but if HR doesn't have allies at top levels of the organization willing to enforce behavioral standards, HR alone can't change big shot behavior.

To begin to change behavior, Paskoff recommended three steps. First, make a business case: balance the business benefits of appropriate behavior against the business risks. Second, use real examples—from cases—to support the consequences that result from inappropriate behavior. Ask the big shot "why are we different? Why would we escape these same kinds of consequences?" Third, realize that telling big shots why they're wrong and how they should behave won't change behavior. Instead, ask them why it works for them, why they choose to behave that way. This helps them think about their behavior in a new way. When you can follow up your questions with more questions that challenge their implicit assumptions, you may be able to get them to reconsider their approach.

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Source: "Teaching Big Shots to Behave," presented by Stephen M. Paskoff, Esq., president, Employment Learning Innovations, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia, at the SHRM National Conference, June 25-28, in Washington, D.C.