

Transitional Tactics

By Dan Ciampa

Making the right first impression as a new CEO when your predecessor has already left the company is hard enough. But the situation gets all the more complicated and delicate if you're coming in as part of a planned handoff and find yourself working under the departing CEO for a transition period.

Generally, such transition periods are a fine idea, assuming that the departing CEO has done a good job, is leaving willingly, and will step down on a specified date. Well-planned handoffs assure stakeholders that the transition will be smooth, keep the political intrigue of who the successor will be to a minimum, and enable clear communication between the CEO and his successor. But the transition period can also be a treacherous time for the CEO-to-be, simply because of the powerful emotions involved. Many CEOs are reluctant to retire, even though they have agreed with their boards of directors that they should. While the demands of being

*DAN CIAMPA is an adviser on CEO transitions based in Weston, Mass., and co-author of *Right From the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (Harvard Business School). He wrote "Building Momentum" for the November/December 1999 issue.*

the person of last resort can be hard on these people the power and visibility are nonetheless intoxicating making it difficult for many to leave. Add to this the fact that many successful CEOs have no serious interests other than their jobs, and it's unsurprising to imagine that they're sometimes less than enthusiastic about stepping down.

Also, overselling on both sides during the recruiting process for the new CEO can contribute to the problem. The job and the candidate are often presented as more attractive than they actually are, making disappointment a real danger once the CEO-to-be comes on board.

If you're designated as the next CEO, however, there are several ways you can help make the transition period as smooth as possible:

Take responsibility for creating constructive relationships with the key power brokers and thought leaders. Regardless of what has been said in the courting phase, the burden for your success lies squarely on your shoulders. Especially if you've come from the outside, you've left your mentors and other support systems behind. You have the most to lose here; don't assume that someone else such as the departing CEO or a board member will be looking out for your interests.

Do as much as possible to build a strong working relationship with the departing CEO. Spending time listening, seeking the CEO's input, and acting quickly on his advice can go a long way toward showing the CEO that you appreciate his past efforts and the legacy he is handing off to you. Doing this, of course, requires some empathy for what the CEO is going through emotionally as he departs.

Make sure you have the right people on your management team. If you stay too long with people you have inherited, they'll become your problem and be more difficult to replace. Also, make certain that the people on your team are loyal to you and share your vision of what the company should become.

The sooner you establish an advice network, the better. People who have an interest in your success can provide feedback on your behavior that you may not receive any other way. Further, if they enjoy credibility in the organization, they can be influential advocates supporting your positions and actions. Find technical advisers as well as a political counselor—the former to fill gaps in your knowledge of the company's strategy, markets, technology, customers, etc., and the latter to be a sounding board on changing the culture and gaining a critical mass of support to implement your agenda. ■