

Q & A with Michael K. Burroughs

The following interview was for the Cable and Telecommunications Human Resources Association (CTHRA) newsletter in advance of Michael's keynote address at their annual symposium on May 2, 2013.

You are a thought leader in the emerging field of Executive Integration. How did you become interested in this subject?

I first witnessed a model to integrate new leaders when I was an active duty army officer. The idea resonated with me, but the methodology used then had much room for improvement. I vowed to myself that if I were ever in a position to design and implement a better process, I would do so. That opportunity did not present itself until many years later. I was the organization development executive for a multi-divisional company. Several of our new leaders, both hired and promoted, were not successful. For those who were surviving and thriving, it still took them way too long to get up to speed. I designed, implemented and refined a process over several years that had the right impact on the organization. Many people later suggested that I share this integration process with others, and their encouragement prompted me to write my book, *Before Onboarding: How to Integrate New Leaders for Quick and Sustained Results*, advise organizations how to design and implement their own new leader integration programs, and even to blend this process with executive recruiting projects.

Why must companies reexamine their new leader integration practices?

There are several studies that all point to the same conclusions: Far too many new leaders are ultimately unsuccessful. The numbers vary from 40 to 50%. Many of those who fail will do so in less than two years. What a new leader does or fails to do in the first three months on the job will carry over for a long time. When one considers that over 500,000 managers at all levels change roles in the Fortune 500 alone each year, and the staggering failure rates of new leaders in general, it is a problem long in need of serious attention. Most companies do nothing special to integrate new leaders—either those hired from the outside or promoted from within. Turbo-charging the selection process is only half the challenge. What organizations do to ensure that new leaders achieve the right results quickly, avoid costly mistakes and build key relationships early in their tenure, has a direct impact on their long-term success—and thus the ongoing success of the organizations.

Why are many organizations ineffective at integrating new leaders?

In my many years as an executive recruiter and coach, I have repeatedly seen how the culture of organizations can impact a new leader's success for better or for worse. There is a value system often seen in top executive ranks that, if we have hired the right person, that individual ought to thrive here. It is a "sink or swim" mentality that is pervasive in many organizations. Most organizations are ineffective at integrating new leaders because they have not yet seen the value in doing so. When new leaders fail, the solution seems to be to "double down" on the selection process in hopes of being more successful next time, as though it were the selection process that let them down rather than some other factor. But the studies clearly show that new leaders left to make it on their own during the first critical 90 days in their new role, miss opportunities to be more productive, sooner, and in some cases, make mistakes that can be career stoppers. This is as true with internal promotions and transfers as it is with external new leader hires. In short, the "sink or swim" mentality is the most significant factor in new leader failures and is also very costly to organizations in the long run.

What are the keys to successfully integrating new leaders?

To begin, there must be a commitment from the very top executives in any organization to make an effective new leader integration process a part of the culture of the company. Also, the HR organization must not only fully buy in to and promote this process, but lead it as well. This means having the right staff on hand to do the work, or at a minimum, having a pool of coach/process consultants who are ready on short notice to integrate new leaders. In my research I have examined a myriad of organizational processes for integrating new leaders, in addition to the model I outline in my book, *Before Onboarding*. At a minimum, a very effective new leader integration process must 1) begin before the new leader's start date, 2) be overseen by a new leader integration facilitator/coach, 3) directly include input from the new leader's boss, peers and direct reports, and 4) extend beyond the start date for anywhere from 90 days to one year.

You mention the need for early successes in a new leader's tenure. Why is this important?

It is important for new leaders to get some early wins. People need to see that the decision to put a new leader in place was a smart one. And the longer it takes for a new leader to fully assimilate, the higher the likelihood for missed opportunities and even costly mistakes. One study said that it takes 6.2 months before a new leader is adding more value than he or she has consumed from an organization. Another study says six to nine months. For most

organizations these delays are simply unacceptable. An effective new leader integration process can shorten this curve considerably. Everybody wins. And it sends the right message to the organization that we invest in our leaders' success, and moreover, many people are part of that process—boss, peers and direct reports—so in a way, everybody has some ownership in a new leader's success.

What is the most common mistake you see regarding new leader on-boarding? How can companies improve their efforts?

The most common mistake organizations make is that they do nothing special to integrate their new leaders and instead, focus all of their efforts on the recruiting and selection process. Believe me: organizations that do integrate new leaders are few and far between. And the ones who do it have varying levels of success for a variety of reasons. Companies can improve their efforts by getting buy-in from top management to implement a structured process for new leader integration. This buy-in begins with ensuring the right resources are on hand and that every leader in the organization will be expected to participate effectively in this process.

What levels of the management ranks are targeted for new leader integration?

As new leader integration programs are still in their infancy, most organizations that have implemented them focus on senior leaders, VP and higher. The majority of these organizations have plans to extend the integration process to all levels of management. They're just not there yet in most cases. The answer to the question is a simple one: ALL new leaders should be integrated into their new roles. It is only the details of the process that will be tweaked for different management levels. Everyone who leads other people needs to undergo a structured integration process before they start their new jobs. Organizations committed to developing a new leader integration program should make the decision early on to provide this process for all new leaders, regardless of their level in the organization. One could argue that the closer a new leader is to the people who make things happen in an organization, the more critical is the need.

How is new leader integration linked to recruiting?

In our organization, that is an easy question to answer. We provide our clients the option of having us integrate all new leaders that we recruit. But we are a relatively small firm, and to our knowledge, we are the only firm that does this. So it is far more important that organizations committed to designing and implementing their own new leader integration

program include their talent acquisition people in the process. All candidates need to know that if they are hired, they will undergo a very structured integration process that is designed to better ensure their success. This is actually a strong selling feature for an organization. It sends the right signal to candidates. Keep in mind, though, that the best programs start the integration process when an offer is accepted rather than after the start date. That's why we call our process, "pre-boarding."

Who facilitates the new leader integration process? What training does that person need?

The first question that needs to be answered is: Will the facilitator be an employee of the organization or an outside consultant...or both? There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. Depending upon the size and dispersion of the organization and the demand for integration support, it may need to be both. Typical internal resources are the top HR executive for very senior hires and HR Partners (or directors) for other executives down to manager level. If there is an organization development director or VP on the staff, that individual would be a likely candidate, as well as the talent management leader. If the organization needs outside support, the best candidates are local organization development consultants or very experienced executive coaches, who are in private practice. The skills needed are strong consulting and executive coaching talents that emphasize effective data gathering through active interviews. Being an organized and clear writer is also important. The most crucial attribute for a facilitator coach is trustworthiness and candor, and a total commitment to keeping all communication with everyone concerned, strictly confidential. If there are very well-trained professionals on staff who have a tendency to gossip, those individuals should be passed over for assignments as new leader integrators. In the final analysis, confidentiality is the most important attribute.

What are the differences in applying integration strategies to externally hired new leaders versus those who are internally promoted or transferred?

The studies are clear on this. While internally promoted or transferred new leaders fair better than those hired from the outside, it is not by much. Both groups need this process. For external hires, much of the process can be accomplished between the time an offer is accepted and the new leader's start date. For internal new leaders, there is a temptation to move them into their new roles immediately. The HR organization must hold off on the physical move of internal new leaders into different roles until the critical mass of the integration process has taken place. There are no steps in this process that differ based on the new hire being externally hired or internally promoted or transferred.

The cable and telecommunications industry is experiencing increased competition for talent at all levels. How can effective new leader integration programs help companies attract and retain good leaders?

Most organizations I work with are experiencing similar challenges with respect to competition for the best talent. Retaining good leaders is a multi-faceted process that involves the company's culture, the authenticity and transparency of its leaders, growing leadership talent and proper recognition and reward systems, among other important factors. It is important that new leaders have a sense loyalty to their organizations. This is increasingly rare these days. One way to do this is to invest in your new leaders' success from the moment they accept your offer. The chances are very high that no other company will have ever done this for them. I have never integrated a new leader into an organization who lacked a deep appreciation for having had this support in their first weeks on the job. It is important, though, for all new leaders to go through this process. If the new hire is the only one going through this process, it can possibly send the wrong message to him or her regarding the confidence the organization has in one's perceived abilities to do the job. Institutionalize this process for all leaders and you have a much better chance of having better leaders at all levels that remain on staff longer and perform better, sooner, than might otherwise be expected.

Is there any additional insight or advice you would like to share with CHTRA's members?

Yes. It's a challenge to your members. The CTHRA is in a position to be industry association trend setters and lead the way with regard to new leader integration. You are fortunate to be so well organized. I challenge all CHTRA organizations to have reached a point within two years where all member companies have a new leader integration program in place and that you are continuously sharing best practices and concerns with each other through networking and through your annual symposium. It is a very achievable goal.

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