

Leadership instalments

The Newcomer Challenge

By Dan Gaynor

AS A NEWSPAPER EXECUTIVE I WAS CLOSELY involved in three integrations. I led the integration of the St. Catharines Standard as the senior executive in 1996. Foremost among the lessons I learned was that while most people focus on integrating assets the key to success rests on integrating people. Until newcomers find their places in a new and sometimes very different culture they are not very productive. They are distracted and in the extreme they can be resistant. New relationships must develop before high performance can be expected. Most integrations never reach their potential because the integration of people fails.

In St. Catharines, a new union organized in one department and we had to overcome a three-week strike. The vote was almost evenly split and we lost by the narrowest of margins. We approached the integration with care and by all measures it was a successful one and still when I reflect on that period I think that we might have avoided the disruption and strike and still pulled off the substantial changes we needed to make if we'd have gone just a little bit slower.

This is the time of year when many leaders turn their attention to strengthening their rosters. Seats sometimes shuffle and newcomers join the leadership team. The way they are integrated carries the same risks and rewards. It makes a lot of sense to watch over them carefully. Go slowly at first. To succeed and build a strong high performing team, every new leader must earn the trust and support of his or her team and the first few weeks and months are the critical period. So here a few thoughts to help:

New leaders need to build strong relationships with colleagues as well as employees. They must also adopt the new mission and this takes a little time. Showing some deference to those who have been there in the trenches much longer, particularly in the early weeks, is important. They have the battle scars. They know the systems, products, customers, competitors, pressures and challenges much better. When a new leader creates the impression that he or she has all the answers or is going to transform the place without first taking the time to learn something about it, it puts people off. These are the leaders who seem arrogant and uncaring. They alienate their colleagues and their teams.



Even when the newcomer has been appointed to lead change, he or she is wise to spend the early weeks building relationships. The remedy is listening much more than speaking in the early months. A new leader who schedules time with employees and colleagues to ask about challenges and opportunities will get off to a fast start.

The new leader's boss can often unwittingly contribute to the problem by assigning work that creates pressure or confrontation too early. Before you know it the newcomer is in his or her department taking what looks to be a demanding position with people he or she barely knows. Setbacks happen when new leaders are set up to "draw a line in the sand" before they should. Try to avoid creating these circumstances in the early weeks. When the newcomer is given the opportunity to build relationships first it will be much easier to

develop the accountability and responsive relationships that are important to performance for the long run.

Take care with the integration of new leaders, don't rush the process. Don't create too much pressure too soon. If you're a leader joining a new team go slow at first. Give relationships a running start and the bigger changes you want to make will be much easier to achieve.

For more on the fundamentals of building strong productive teams call for a workshop.