
How to Help Your New Boss Succeed

By John Durel

On average, when a new CEO takes over an organization, more than 25% of the senior managers leave within a year, either by their own choice or the CEO's.¹ New chief executives tend to make decisions about who will be on their leadership teams within 60 days.

How can you make the team? A better question, one that will help to ensure that you are on the team, is: "How can you help your new boss succeed?"

The new CEO is under a lot of pressure. The Board has high expectations. There will be a honeymoon period, perhaps six months, in which she must show that she can lead the organization forward, manage the operation effectively, and build strong relationships with all of the key stakeholders. How can you help her succeed?

Here are some suggestions.

Step Forward

Early impressions count. The new boss will rely on her instincts about you. Don't wait to see what she wants. Rather take the initiative to talk about your responsibilities and how you see them contributing to overall organizational success. Let her know that you want to cooperate and support her.

Look Forward

Don't talk about how bad it was, or how good it was, in the past. If you feel you were not treated well back then, forget about it. It's a new day. Don't deny problems that continue to exist, but present them as challenges with possible solutions.

Be Honest

When your new boss asks you to bring her up to speed on your own department or function, be positive, but don't sugarcoat any of the problems or past mistakes. Give an honest assessment of the situation and outline what it will take to address the problems going forward.

Take on a Special Project

Offer to take the lead on a special project, one that will bring you into frequent contact with the new boss. This is a great way to demonstrate your abilities and commitment.

Adapt to Your Boss' Style

Talk to him about the way you tend to work and ask about his preferences: How should I communicate with you? How should I disagree with you? Indicate that you are ready to adjust to match his style. Establish from the beginning a relationship that allows you to talk about your differences and how your respective styles can complement one another.

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See Your Boss' Perspective

Your new boss has a lot to learn about your organization and the universe in which it exists. She has to get to know and build positive relationships with employees, trustees, donors, community and government leaders, partner organizations, the organization's members and other constituents. She also has family obligations. Try to see the challenges she faces from this broader perspective and offer to help in ways that are appropriate to your position and function in the organization.

Demonstrate Your Commitment

Show up to meetings with your boss on time or early. Come prepared. Be an active and positive participant. Be reliable on assignments made at the meetings. Follow through and keep the boss informed.

Create an Early Success for Your Boss

Your boss needs to be able to give the board and the public good news early on. Find something that you or your department can achieve during the first couple of months. Although the work may have been conceived and executed under the previous director, make it possible for him to present it as not his achievement, but as continuity of success under his leadership. At the very least, you should demonstrate that active projects are moving forward without delay.

Anticipate

Think ahead and be prepared for your boss. Think about what is likely to happen, or what might happen, as she learns about the organization and meets everyone involved. Clue her in on situations she might not yet understand.

Support Your Boss' Agenda as it Takes Shape

Listen carefully as your boss begins to articulate her agenda and goals for the organization. Ask questions and seek to understand what she is thinking. Help her to clarify her own thoughts. Challenge her with respect, and offer your own perspective. Always emphasize that your intent is to help her and the organization succeed.

Help Others Understand and Support the Boss

Others may be intimidated, wary, or even resentful of the new boss. Actively help them to let go of the past and look forward. Help them to understand the boss and to see the boss' perspective.

ⁱ Kevin P. Coyne and Edward J. Coyne, Sr., "Surviving Your New CEO," *Harvard Business Review* (May 2007)