



How to handle leadership change in your organization

Although a change in business leadership can be complex, it's usually necessary in every organization at one point or another, regardless of the organization's size. Making sure that you're thoroughly prepared is essential to ensuring that the business will continue to function without interruptions or setbacks.

Preparing for change in leadership

Jeannette Seibly, business coach, advisor and consultant with SiebCo, LLC in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, recommends that when a change in leadership is planned or imminent, it's important to begin communicating with employees sooner rather than later. "New leadership will mean change, and change is often thought of as negative," says Seibly. She also advises to "be open to considering current employees that may raise their hands to be considered" for the open position.

A change in leadership is an important time to review the business with an eye toward potentially updating the organization's mission, vision, values and strategic plan. Don't just assume that everything will, or should be "business as usual." Gaining clarity and consensus around the desired culture and environment for the organization when bringing new leadership on board is important to ensure continuity and consistency. "Be clear as to the type of leadership style required for the company to accomplish its vision, goals and future," says Seibly.

Leila Bulling Towne, an executive coach with The Bulling Towne Group, LLC, in the San Francisco Bay Area, says to recognize that, "at least initially, teams will experience a loss of productivity," when a leadership change is announced. "If possible, consider the timing of your message and how it will affect immediate projects at hand," she says.

Key takeaways



Change in business leadership is usually necessary in every organization at some point.



Being thoroughly prepared is essential to ensuring that the business will continue without setbacks.



When change is imminent, it's critical to communicate with employees as soon as possible.

Informing employees

The most important factor in informing employees of a business leadership transition is to tell them first. Too often, word leaks out to the media, and employees learn of the transition in the news. Your employee audience is a critical one and should be informed before the general public.

How you tell them will be different depending on the circumstances of the transition, points out Dan Hill, CEO of Hill Impact. “Communications will vary based on whether the existing leadership was fired, entered retirement or if the organization is going in a completely new direction. If the business is going well, communications should be centered around operations continuing uninterrupted,” says Hill. “If there are negative factors around the leadership change, communications should focus on preserving the good and changing the rest.”



Handling the most difficult aspects of a leadership change

Change, of any kind, can be disruptive. Ongoing communication, openness and transparency are critical.

“Don’t assume you can send one email or hold a single company meeting and, as a result, everyone will get on board and be ‘over it,’” says Towne. People need time to process new, and potentially disruptive, information. She points to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work on how humans process grief as a good model to consider. “We have adapted, loosely, her five stages of grief into the SARA model: shock, anger, resignation and acceptance.”

While it’s impossible to say how long these stages will take, and some may adapt more quickly than others, you can’t rush this process. Instead, you can set some expectations and share with people what is going on as well as why and how the new leader will help them.

Conclusion

A leadership transition is a process, not an event. Multiple stages may be necessary to transition leadership effectively. Taking the time to handle a transition well by following these steps can help maximize productivity and minimize disruptive drama.

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Best practices for a smooth transition



Laura Kellers Queen is the founder and managing partner of Colloquia Partners, LLC, a business performance consulting firm based in New Hope, Pennsylvania. While every situation will be different and will require careful consideration of the specific circumstances, Queen says that her organization recommends the following best practices:

- Share messages early and often. Communicate what you know and why, with candor and transparency, as early in the process as possible.
- If you don’t know something, or you don’t have an immediate answer, say so.
- Use multiple channels of communication and ensure that clear and consistent messaging comes from a credible source.
- Messages may need to be staged and repeated frequently to ensure that all impacted employees have necessary and correct information.
- Wherever possible, involve the impacted employees in the process of envisioning and creating the new future state of the organization. This process can enable discovery of hidden areas of strength or concern. It promotes trust, builds relationship success and often leads to greater employee support for changes yet to come.
- Show respect and dignity for the outgoing leader, the incoming leader and all of the impacted employees. Some employees may experience symptoms of grief at the loss of a beloved leader and friend. At a minimum, they may simply need time to adjust to a new normal.
- Address behavioral concerns, acting out and negative statements quickly, privately and compassionately. Don’t let a bad situation fester, it will spread.

