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HEAD ABOVE WATER
NEW EXECUTIVE
TRANSITIONS

SURVIVAL GUIDE
DEALING WITH
TOXIC CEOs

SO CLOSE YET SO FAR
AUSTRALIA'S CULTURAL
DIVERSITY FAILURE

HEAD ABOVE WATER: NEW EXECUTIVE TRANSITIONS

‘Hit the ground running’ features in so many ads for executive positions, but is there anything in it? **Iain Hopkins** explores how employers can ensure new executives not only have their heads above water but are on their victory lap by the time their first appraisal rolls around

THINK OF ALL THE TRANSITIONS a new executive needs to make before they can even start to settle into their new role. There is increased responsibility and complexity, as well as enhanced visibility, new reporting lines (sometimes to former peers) and possibly even the need for cultural transition if the job involves a move overseas. Now magnify that experience by four and you have the situation SEEK found itself in.

Earlier in 2015 SEEK announced the departure of two senior executives (CFO John

Armstrong and MD SEEK International Jason Lenga). Both planned to leave during FY16. On the back of this announcement the company undertook a review of the executive structure and its succession plans for executive roles. The changes included the internal appointment of three senior staff to roles such as MD of international operations and director of corporate development. In addition, one external appointment was made: Geoff Roberts will join the company as group CFO in November 2015.





COACHING

If one new executive has its challenges, the appointment of four new executives can backfire dramatically if they are left to their own devices.

“The appointment of new executives is always challenging because there is less time to have them settle in and find their feet,” suggests Meaghan Callaghan, HR director, SEEK. “Often they have large teams and always have big agendas, so people are expecting them to deliver as soon as they start. This is tricky because no one can just fit into a culture and a way of operating on day one.”

SEEK quickly realised that a three-day induction course for these executives was not going to cut it. What was needed was a tailored, long-term approach.

Who's next?

The groundwork was laid early via a talent mapping process. Every year the executive team reviews the performance and potential of the senior managers they work closely with. The assessment is based on SEEK's ‘attributes’ – those aspects of performance that have been proven in the past to be successful at the company. These attributes are known by everyone at SEEK and form part of its recruitment and induction processes. One outcome of the assessment is to identify those who demonstrate the potential to move into executive roles in the future.

“No specific timeline is agreed, but it's generally understood to be within one to five years,” says Callaghan. “Also, no specific roles are necessarily identified; it's more about identifying those who are operating at a level beyond what their current role expects.”

All the internal appointments mentioned above were made through this process, so the candidates had been developed and assessed at an executive level for some time. The sponsorship of the people in this group is owned by the entire executive team.

WHO MAKES A GREAT COACH?

As an honorary fellow at Sydney Business School and a lecturer on the masters of business coaching program, O'Sullivan says almost a third of any class he teaches hail from an HR background. Most say they hope coaching skills will help them in their current HR roles, and others view it as the next career step when they leave the industry.

O'Sullivan advises anyone with an HR background looking to make this switch to understand they will be selling a service when they are coaching. “The word ‘selling’ frightens a lot of HR people because they've never had to sell. They don't actually know the mechanics of ‘we need to secure some clients’.”

Those who do it well, he adds, demonstrate the following traits:



Listen – and listen deeply. “It's fine to listen to what the client is saying, but you must also listen to what they're not saying or doing. That's almost more important.”



Business nous. “Really understand the business. I think a lot of executive coaches understand coaching but they don't necessarily understand what the business is trying to achieve. It's important, if you're going to work at this level, that you understand what the business is trying to achieve, then understand the role the person will be fulfilling. Finally, understand what the person is trying to achieve. A lot of work cultures go the opposite way: they start with the person and forget to go higher.”



Understand each of the client's stakeholders. “For me an executive is successful as per their stakeholder's view, so aim to learn something about the six or seven key stakeholders who regularly interact with the executive.”



Technical know-how. “Understand how teams work. How are high-performing teams coached? Understand complexity. This is really important – to help the client navigate through complexity. Understand self-management, self-leadership. Look at resilience and coping strategies. Ultimately what you're trying to do is help the leader manage themselves.”

Development

Next, the development plan was put in place. Offering a helping hand to these new executives was Pdraig O'Sullivan, managing partner of executive transition specialists O'SullivanField. With years of experience helping executives move from one level of responsibility to another, typically at the C-suite level, O'Sullivan says his role is to

ensure the executive hits their ‘effective points’ as quickly as possible. An effective point is when that person is fully involved in the role and is making a positive impact.

O'Sullivan had been working with SEEK's executives prior to the promotions, so he was familiar with the company.

“There is so much about being an executive that is about your ability to effectively interact

COACHING

with others and understand your own strengths and weaknesses,” says Callaghan. “Padraig has been brilliant in working with several members of our team to work through these aspects of their performance. We tried other development options, but this has by far delivered the best results. This type of work is very individual, and hence coaching seemed a good option.”

While many coaches concentrate solely on developing the individual, they may fail to take into consideration the broader picture. The role, the business, the stakeholders and the individual all need to be considered.

“With any new executive there are multiple transitions happening at the same time, and often for the first time,” O’Sullivan says. “For example, a new executive may have once reported to other members of the board; now they are promoted to be a peer of the former boss. That’s an interesting dynamic. One may have reported to another in the past. That brings its own dynamics. Some have responsibilities across parts of the world where they haven’t worked before. So there’s an international dynamic.”

O’Sullivan paints a picture of how he might help a client – in this instance the MD of the Australian arm of SEEK, who was previously the head of product development and also head of strategy. As head of product development he had six people reporting to him. He grew this team to 250. Today he has 850 people reporting to him through the organisational structure.

“For this person, one of the first things I’d start with would be whether he is good at articulating a vision for this organisation – can they articulate the future needs of the organisation? Are they good at putting discipline into an organisation? Are they good at leading their own team? Have they got a clear structure for leading their own leadership team?

“My starting point is always ‘what does the role require of the person in it?’. So when working with a new leader we’re firstly looking at what is the role you’re taking on: what do



“Often executives have large teams and always have big agendas, so people are expecting them to deliver as soon as they start”

Meaghan Callaghan

we need to achieve? And then we map that against this person’s abilities. There are always gaps, as one would expect, but these are the development opportunities.”

O’Sullivan will also map out hoped-for outcomes. “Who are their key stakeholders? It might be their boss; it might be some of their peers; it might be two or three direct reports. We map out six or seven key stakeholders. I would interview each stakeholder in terms of what they need to see happen over the next 12 months. Then we do a pulse every quarter – we interview those stakeholders: how is the exec doing relative to those objectives we set?

“There’s never any surprise. The exec is always informed how they are going in the view of the stakeholders, and the stakeholders are always informed how the exec is going. Hence we can get really clear business results.”

The sessions themselves will usually last between six and 12 months and O’Sullivan will see them every three weeks for two hours. Participants can have as much contact as they need in between sessions. In the intervening period the executive will read articles or work on specific behaviour to develop or change.

Does O’Sullivan utilise the countless psychometric and personality assessments

an executive is likely to have taken during their career? “I certainly use the high-end 360-degree assessments. There are hundreds on the market, but only a handful are useful when you’re a senior executive. Usually they’ve done so many already so they tend to know themselves as people. What they may not know is the impact they’re having as the executive.”

Making it a success

Rapport is key to any coaching relationship, and O’Sullivan concedes that “if the executive doesn’t get on with the coach or doesn’t trust the coach, they’re not going to work with them”. However, O’Sullivan has an added incentive: payment for his services depends on building a solid rapport. In an unusual commercial

arrangement, he is paid half his fee up front; the rest is paid one year later, provided the executive is successful.

“It’s an interesting dynamic,” O’Sullivan says. “On one hand I need to help them navigate behaviour change, and I need to give them very clear feedback, because sometimes I may be the only person who is honest with them. Sometimes I’m the only one they will truly trust because I have no agenda other than their success. At the same time I’m being paid based on how successful they are.”

So far so good. SEEK has had positive reactions to the structural changes and appointments. Employee engagement hovers around 80% – a reliable lag indicator that the decisions being made are good for the company. And of course, having three people

promoted now creates space and opportunity for SEEK to focus on the next group of successors.

For other HR practitioners setting out on a similar round of executive changes, Callaghan offers the following advice:

1. **Be clear** what your criteria are for high performance at executive level, and be 100% transparent about it throughout the company.
2. **Favour promoting** from within where possible. Cultural alignment is so critical to someone being successful in an executive role.
3. **Use executive coaching** strategically in your company to develop those who are already showing potential for executive level. **HRD**



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