

# Keeping In Touch

For Supervisors

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## Helping New Leaders Succeed *Leadership Assimilation*

Congratulations! After several months of searching and interviewing, your organization has finally hired a new senior manager. The hiring process was carefully planned and executed to assure that the person getting the job would be able to meet the organization's needs. After all that work and attendant organizational upheaval, everybody can relax and watch the new leader achieve the expected results.

Not so fast. Research suggests that almost half of the senior managers and executives hired into a leadership position fail to achieve desired results within the first 12 to 18 months of their new assignment. Failure includes not achieving the desired performance objectives, failing to grow revenue, missing opportunities for new market penetration, and related goals. The good news is that organizations can significantly increase the chances that a new leader will be successful by having a purposeful plan of assimilating the leader into the organization. A good leadership assimilation plan can directly address some of the major reasons for new leadership failure.

Why the high failure rate of new leaders? Some of the common reasons for the failure of new leaders include:

- The organization presents an inaccurate or too general definition of the purpose, need, role, responsibility or accountability of the leadership position.
- There is a poorly executed process of "on-boarding" or assimilating a new leader into an organization.
- The new leader loses credibility by taking on too many major projects at the beginning and is unable to deliver on them.
- The new leader fails to spend an adequate amount of time building relationships throughout the organization.

By creating a leadership assimilation plan, the organization can assure that a new leader has the opportunity to develop relationships with people who can provide insight, guidance and historical information. A good leadership assimilation plan outlines a road map to be followed by the new leader for the first three or four months of the new assignment. A leadership assimilation plan requires open participation by the new leader, the person he or she reports to, key colleagues and direct reports.

Steps in developing a leadership assimilation plan include:

1. Identifying key goals of the organization and defining the new leader's role in accomplishing the goals.
2. Establishing a strong role description of the new leader's position that includes key accountabilities and performance measures.
3. Developing specific 30-day, 90-day and 180-day goals for the new leader.
4. Assuring that the new leader has the resources to fully understand the organi-

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## What is Succession Planning?

Succession planning is a process that ensures that there are highly qualified people in all positions, not just today, but tomorrow, next year, and five years from now. Succession planning establishes a process that recruits employees, develops their skills and abilities, prepares them for advancement and retains them in the organization. Four key elements of succession planning are:

- Identifying the current and future needs of the organization.
- Identifying the current ability of the workforce to meet both current and future needs.
- Identifying the specific gaps between organization needs and workforce capability.
- Creating recruiting strategies to add needed talent and establishing developmental opportunities to grow capabilities within the organization.

Often succession planning will include identifying key individuals to be developed to meet future needs. With good succession planning, employees are ready for new leadership roles as the need arises. When someone leaves, a current employee is ready to step up to the plate.

# How Storytelling Builds Next-Generation Leaders

Executives know they need to develop their company's next leaders, but many are disillusioned by all the once-promising fads that have come and gone. Some, however, have discovered how an approach that's as old as Homer can be one of the most effective means of developing high-potential managers.

For more than a decade I have led a series of large-scale studies to identify the most pressing leadership development challenges in over 45 global companies. My findings have come together in one approach that has, in my experience, been a powerful way of building leadership effectiveness: storytelling. When done the right way—and it's not as easy or simple as it may sound—storytelling by a company's senior executives is a way of providing potential leaders with the necessary context from respected role models. It can produce impressive results that help position a company to succeed when the current generation of leaders has departed and a new generation steps in to take the helm.

Storytelling has been an effective means of communicating important substantive and cultural messages for thousands of years. The Bible is one of the best examples of how storytelling has been used to shape behaviors, cultural norms and core values. Great stories create a rich visual imagery in our minds, and great storytellers invite us to walk the landscape that is created by this imagery. Consciously or not, these are undoubtedly some of the reasons that storytelling has emerged as the preferred approach for teaching leadership effectiveness in many companies today.

### The Elements of Effective Stories

Storytelling is not a matter of having the CEO come to the first 10 minutes of the company's leadership program to welcome people and encourage them to "engage." Nor is it about asking any senior manager who happens to be available to have a discussion with the group about the company's top three strategic priorities. It is certainly not about letting senior executives wing it when they are in front of an audience. Storytelling, as strange as it may sound, is hard work and very labor-intensive for those who choose to try it. There are a number of ingredients that must be combined to make storytelling an effective approach to teaching leadership.

I've identified five key components that must be in place in order to shape and tell great stories that build leadership effectiveness.

**Effective stories are context-specific.** Storytelling, when linked directly to a company's strategic and cultural context is a powerful means of simultaneously building strategic competence (the "doing" aspects of leading) and strengthening organizational character (the "being" aspects of leading). This does not mean that an executive who is serving as a leader-coach cannot tell a story set outside of the company's environment. A storyteller might reflect on an experience during an earlier stage of his or her career, even one that happened at another company. The important thing is to relate the experience to the company's current challenges.

**Effective stories are level-appropriate.** For stories to be meaningful, tellers should frame them around experiences they had when they were at the same level of responsibility as the program's participants. After all, a manager of a small-town clothing store interested in improving operational efficiency wouldn't benchmark against Wal-Mart. The same lesson applies to leadership development. Most managers, even those identified as high-potentials, would

gain little from listening to speeches by Jack Welch or Lou Gerstner about how they transformed their companies. Even though the speeches might be motivational and stirring, younger managers will not be able to learn much from them because of the gap in experience. The challenge for the leader-coach, then, is to frame a story so that participants can see themselves in it and reflect on what they might do to resolve the problems it poses.

**Effective stories are told by respected role models.** Stories designed to develop new leaders must generate relationships based on learning between mentors and their “students.” Before such relationships can form, an executive must command the trust and respect of those participating in the leadership program. A story told by someone without high standing will be met with skepticism, which is why stories cannot be scripted and then told by training specialists in the company’s HR department. At the same time, executives must walk a fine line in which their high standing does not render them unapproachable. Storytellers must be both highly respected role models and highly accessible coaches.

**Effective stories have drama.** A compelling story draws in participants and grabs their attention. Thus one story, for example, might be about an incident that challenged the storyteller’s ethics or adherence to the company’s values. Another might show the storyteller struggling with a new assignment that had skill requirements far in excess of his or her capabilities at the time. A third might have the storyteller recounting the need to remove key members of his or her team in order to push the business in a new direction. In each case, the drama centers on the storyteller’s need to make tough choices, usually without perfect information or the complete alignment of the stakeholders involved. The drama challenges participants to reflect on whether they want—and will be able—to make the similarly tough choices that are required of today’s complex organizations.

**Effective stories have high learning value.** For a story to be effective it must stimulate learning, and for learning to have impact, it must produce changes in behavior. Different companies want to emphasize different skills and behaviors as components of effective leadership, and they should map those elements against the stories they want to tell. In one company, for example, stories might be mapped against a comprehensive framework of leadership competencies (or skills), while in another, the stories might be mapped to a shared set of values (based on behaviors). The most effective stories do both: They build a cadre of leaders who understand the importance of strengthening the company’s strategic competence and its organizational character simultaneously.

### Implementing a Storytelling Leadership Program

Storytelling can be a very effective means of developing leaders, but is by no means the path of least resistance. For a storytelling initiative to succeed, hard work and dedication by a number of parties are necessary. Companies should be prepared to follow these steps.

- **Get the top team actively engaged.** A leadership initiative of this magnitude should not be the pet project of a lone senior executive; nor is it sufficient to have the passive support of the top team. Top teams must be highly engaged and visible throughout the process.
- **Develop a collective point of view on leadership effectiveness.** Warren Bennis (author of “On Becoming a Leader”) is fond of saying that “a point of view is worth 50 IQ points.” A top team should heed his advice, as they will find it simpler to teach leadership effectiveness once they have thought deeply

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- zational culture and the history of the position he or she has taken.
5. Familiarizing the new leader with the management style of those to whom he or she reports.
  6. Providing a mechanism for the new leader’s direct reports to identify the new leader’s management style.
  7. Create opportunities (e.g., facilitated focus groups) for the new leader to receive feedback on a regular basis from other leaders, colleagues and direct reports.

It is in the best interest of the organization to help new leaders succeed. Having a plan to “on-board” a new leader gives both the organization and the new leader a way to fully utilize the skills, abilities and experiences of the individual.

about what effective leadership means for their company.

- **Consider all available alternatives.** Don't fall into the trap of thinking that every lesson to be taught about leadership must be framed as a story. Storytelling isn't the only way to develop leadership skills and behaviors. Other techniques and approaches—such as structured coaching, action learning, university-sponsored programs and even carefully planned benchmarking—are also helpful and can work well in conjunction with storytelling, which is best used as a vehicle for simultaneously building strategic competence and organizational character.
- **Get the right team in place to carry out the program.** The most enthusiastic members of the top team should serve as leader-coaches; passion leads to success, and success is contagious. An effective team will also include HR executives, who should be able to identify high potentials and should have developmental tools already in place. In addition, some companies may want to partner with external advisers who are well-trained in coaching senior executives and facilitating high-level dialogue.
- **Coach the storytellers and orient the participants.** An adviser who specializes in leadership should help the leader-coaches shape their stories for optimal learning and should also lead the executives through rehearsals so the stories have the intended impact. The program's participants must be chosen carefully. They must be well briefed on the objectives of the program and their responsibilities as partners in a dialogue. They should reflect on the specific leadership stretch challenges they have before participating in the program, either by participating in a 360-degree feedback process or some other form of development planning.
- **Use stories to stimulate dialogue, reflection and action.** Stories in this setting are not speeches; they are catalysts for discussion. Executives have to be

prepared to speak from the heart since effective stories must be about the “being” as well as the “doing” aspects of leadership. With that in mind, stories should be kept relatively short, perhaps 30 minutes long. A facilitated dialogue should follow in which participants and storytellers talk in more depth about the leadership challenges raised in the story. Following the dialogue, participants should be encouraged to reflect on the leadership stretch objectives they prepared before attending the program and to develop action plans that will reinforce their learning and help them become more effective leaders.

### **Safeguarding the Future**

Storytelling should by no means be viewed as a panacea. Seen in those terms, it runs the risk of becoming another passing fad. Like other managerial techniques, it can help build an important part of an organization's capabilities, but only in conjunction with other tools and the hard work required to use them well.

At the same time, storytelling may turn out to be one of the more important tools of the next decade. The reality is that developing the next generation's leaders is a task of pressing importance. Companies need to have leadership capabilities that are broadly distributed and operational at all levels of the organization. A company's high-potential managers are the equivalent of its crown jewels, and it is vitally important for top teams to accept the responsibility to help form those who will follow them as enterprise-wide leaders. And they, in turn, must challenge these next-generation leaders to do the same for those who work for them. By fostering the development of engaged leadership at all levels, such efforts make it possible for companies to build their strategic competencies and strengthen their organizational character.