Hiring in the Time of Coronavirus:
How to onboard senior leaders in a virtual environment

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> *Many companies are following the playbook that we outlined in the first two parts of this series. They've made a mission-critical hire and the candidate accepted the offer, aided by a best practice selling plan. Now the question is: How do we successfully onboard a senior leader in a virtual environment?*

Ineffective onboarding can be disastrous for a company and candidate. After the euphoria of hiring a top-caliber talent, things can quickly spiral downward, resulting in the agony of a mis-hire that means having to hire yet again. Our experience suggests that after companies have hired a leader using a data-driven, structured hiring process, one of the primary reasons that leader "flames out" is due to the lack of a disciplined onboarding plan. On the other hand, companies that overinvest in onboarding can accelerate the time to full potential for that leader by more than 30% (from 6 months on average to 4 months)[1].

How do we design an onboarding plan for virtual conditions?

The first three months are the most critical for new leaders, so companies need to be diligent and thorough in designing the key elements of the onboarding plan. The fact that their initial months may not include any in-person interactions increases the importance of having a well-structured and rigorous plan. Based on over 21,000 leadership assessments, our research at ghSMART has found that the most successful leaders do three things well. They align and focus on the right **Priorities** ("P"), they build the right team or **Who** ("W"), and they foster **Relationships** that deliver results ("R"). We call this Full PoWeR leadership. An effective onboarding plan is designed around accelerating the leader's ability to deliver on these three

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[1] https://hbr.org/2017/05/onboarding-isnt-enough?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom

dimensions. We have helped our clients launch hundreds of executives using this framework, and based on this experience, we have distilled the most important things you can do to onboard leaders during this time:

- **Priorities:** Clarify the most critical priorities and help the new leader align to them.

  - *Refine the scorecard.* Set up a series of weekly videoconference meetings with their boss to develop, and align on their "scorecard" (i.e., key outcomes for 30 days, 90 days, and one year). Their boss should use this time to uncover what they have learned about each priority and adjust the scorecard based on these learnings. You can pivot this discussion to a monthly meeting after the first month.

  - *Accelerate their knowledge of the business.* Set up structured sessions with each peer/function as well as with the CFO. In these sessions, ensure the leader gets a thorough overview of each business unit and a deep dive into company financials and recent board-level materials.

- **Who:** Offer feedback to the new leader on their readiness to achieve the priorities. Encourage them to evaluate their team to understand its ability to achieve the priorities.

  - *Share feedback on strengths and development areas based on observations in the hiring process:* Have their boss highlight the strengths that will best position them to deliver on their priorities in the new context. In addition, offer coaching on how to make progress against development areas that were identified in the hiring process. Together, they should agree on the key components of a leadership development plan that offers the new leader the support they need to move quickly to deliver on the mandate.

  - *Support them to develop a perspective on their key team members' ability to deliver on their scorecard.* Have the HR business partner share profiles and past performance reviews of the team the new leader is inheriting. Schedule one-on-one intro meetings with each person on the team via videoconference in the first two to three weeks. The new leader can use these calls as an opportunity to get to know their team and to understand each direct report's perspective on their role priorities. Within the first two months, have new leaders meet with their supervisor to share their emerging evaluation on the team including their level of confidence that each team member will achieve the outcomes in their role scorecard as well as any changes (e.g. talent upgrades, new roles) that they are considering.

- **Relationships (the most critical area to invest in in a virtual context):** Ensure the new leader builds relationships and sets up operating routines with the right people to drive results.

  - *Establish expectations for a team operating model.* Organize a virtual team meeting where the new leader facilitates a discussion on team culture, working norms, and expectations. This is a great opportunity for the new leader to share their vision for how they work together, and also a practical way for them to start to get a feel for each member of their team. In advance, have the team anonymously submit questions on their biggest fears/questions, and as part of this session, have the CHRO facilitate a no-holds-barred "ask

the new leader anything session." Also, take the time to understand the constraints on your team given the challenges with working from home and caring for families at home (e.g., childcare issues, sick family members, college kids at home, etc.).

- *Schedule a weekly virtual team happy hour (or lunch) via videoconference.* These less formal interactions serve as replacements for hallway and cafeteria talk. Suggest that the new leader to use this time to get to know their team and vice versa. Have specific topics (e.g., sharing about hobbies) and give each person on the team an opportunity to share. Encourage them to let their guard down virtually, using the work-from-home format to your benefit to make things less formal.

- *Set the stage for new leaders to forge personal connections with key peers and stakeholders.* Set-up recurring one-on-one "coffee chats" via videoconference with a defined set of stakeholders in the first two to three months. Encourage the new leader and colleagues to get to know more about each other's family, big career wins, and personal interests.

- *Develop stakeholder maps.* Have a videoconference meeting with the new leader and the HR business partner to map the key stakeholders, and then make a plan on where to invest time and how to engage with each key stakeholder. Think through the key priorities and motivations for key stakeholders to understand how to work with them and how best to influence them (if needed) on your projects. This step will help them to navigate the organization faster.

- *Share best practices on what is critical to succeed.* Have the CEO, CHRO and other tenured executives develop a guide that calls out the company's ways of working and idiosyncrasies that a new hire could easily fall afoul of. For example, a CEO may prefer to be involved early in the "sausage-making" versus being given a final product with a set of options on which to make a decision. By explicitly sharing these expectations, you can help the new senior hire avoid pitfalls.

What additional onboarding challenges do we need to address in the virtual context?

Another challenge that is heightened in the virtual environment is how to get new senior leaders engaged in meaningful work. Since you uncovered this leader's towering strengths in the interview process, you need to find a project that capitalizes on their strengths so they build quick credibility and have a real-life assignment to add value and learn the environment.

One of our clients recently hired a Chief Strategy & Business Development Officer, whose mandate is to drive an aggressive acquisition strategy. Since that plan is largely on hold, the CEO decided to designate this leader as the executive sponsor for the COVID19 customer taskforce. As a result, this leader is engaging with her team and a wide range of her peers to coordinate this initiative, giving her a crash course in understanding the business and an opportunity to collaborate in a meaningful way.

What should we do to monitor the effectiveness of the plan?

COVID19 has created "fog of war" conditions for business leaders. Just as you are remaining flexible in order to navigate the ambiguity for the business, you need to apply this same nimble mindset to onboarding senior leaders. One way to ensure this happens is to assign an "onboarding conductor," a senior leader (CHRO, COO, etc.) who is accountable for directing the onboarding plan and remaining in close contact with the new senior hire to evaluate progress and adapt the plan as needed. Practically speaking, the onboarding conductor should hold biweekly pulse checks that are dedicated to understanding how well onboarding is going and identifying new tactics to close gaps as they are identified. At ghSMART, we use a targeted set of 60- to 90-day "first impressions" 360 discussions with two or three key stakeholders, followed by a fulsome set of 360 feedback discussion with bosses, key peers, and direct reports at the six-month mark. The onboarding conductor can play a similar role soliciting quick feedback from the new hire's manager and a few key stakeholders at the three- and six-month point—regardless of when COVID isolation ends.

Principles to remember in onboarding senior executive hires virtually:

Do:
- Design a robust onboarding plan that leverages technology to ensure successful integration of new hires.
- Overinvest in ensuring new senior hires set the foundation for strong relationships with their boss, peers, and team.
- Identify a "real-life" assignment that capitalizes on the new hire's strengths and gives them an opportunity to add value.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the onboarding by assigning an "onboarding conductor" and performing periodic pulse checks.

Don't:
- Hold off on having a new hire start because of the virtual environment.
- Assume that new senior hires will integrate into the organization on their own, because of their previous track record.
- Let issues linger in a new executive's onboarding.
- Give a senior hire a checklist of onboarding to-dos and then let them go off on their own.
- Assume a new hire knows their priorities and where to focus time.