

## Management POV: Communications and the Revolving Executive Door

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By Mike Mcdougall

The outgoing CEO, still stung after being dismissed an hour earlier, spun around in her high-backed chair. Looking at the chief communications officer, she was quick to make her point: "You can't let my replacement conduct media interviews for at least a couple of weeks. I need time to shore up my own support. Agreed?"

What's the role of the communicator in this scenario? Do you maintain loyalty to your former chief, someone who's been in command for years, if not decades? Or do you immediately swap allegiances, taking your lead from the incoming executive instead?

When senior executive transitions occur, communications pros are often caught in the middle. They're among the first to know of a pending change, at times have the closest personal and professional relationships with those most affected, and--because of the sensitive nature of many changes of control--have few peers inside the circle from which to seek advice.

Likewise, looking for external guidance on the subject often comes up short. Between strict confidentiality agreements, overzealous legal teams and general sensitivity around the topic, many public relations practitioners are hesitant to share their knowledge.

Annual double-digit executive change is here to stay--[Crist Kolder Associates projects 13.3% CEO turnover and 14.1% CFO turnover in 2011 among Fortune and S&P 500 companies.](#) Sooner or later (and I'm betting sooner), you'll come face-to-face with it.

Many principles of communicating executive transitions are readily apparent--they're the same foundational elements used for other programs. But change at the top has its own idiosyncrasies that today's practitioner must understand.

\*Managing Dual (or Dueling) Masters: As the opening anecdote illustrates, an outgoing executive may still believe that the shots are hers to call. This places you on dangerous ground. The worst thing you can do is to try pleasing everyone; dual masters can devolve into dueling masters, with you getting maimed. Have a candid conversation with your former colleague, explaining that you're required to act in the best interests of the organization, and have to put any personal views aside.

\*Guiding the Exit: Within minutes of being dismissed, former Yahoo, CEO Carol Bartz had e-mailed the entire company with her news. Less than 48 hours later, her candid remarks to Fortune about the board's action caused a stir worldwide. During transitions, too many teams solely focus on telling the story of the newly appointed executive. In the interests of keeping public comments at least civil, it's critical to guide the person who has been displaced. You'll help them save face and temper a bit of the emotion that comes with the exit.

\*Counseling the Survivors: Common refrains: "What have you heard? What are my chances of staying?" When a new executive comes on board, his team will often look to the PR practitioner as having the scoop on changed organization design, business strategies and more. In fact, the incoming executive's direct reports--no matter how senior--are some of the most insecure employees during a transition, despite the stoic face they're showing to others. Without violating any confidences, the "in the know" communicator should serve as a river guide for fellow executives, helping them navigate the swift, unfamiliar waters they're suddenly facing.

\*Humanize the Chieftain:

In a time of rapid executive turnover, a newcomer may be viewed as a commodity--someone keeping a seat warm until his or her own inevitable departure in a few years (or months). To engender greater levels of support, move to the heart of the matter. Show that the executive has a soul; that she's human. Go beyond noting philanthropic board appointments and charitable gifting, which are de rigueur. Does she have children or grandchildren? Work a mention of them into a set of remarks. How about an "everyman" story she mentioned in passing? Turn it into a metaphorical blog post.

\*Sustain Team Confidence:

When change at the top occurs, the communications team runs into the fire, shoring up confidence among the senior executive team, employees at large, shareholders, media and more. But don't forget your own team, which is watching the sausage be made. Level with them about what may happen; it's not uncommon to see shifts in the communications programming or leadership. Acknowledging their concerns will go a long way toward sustaining their trust and ability to perform under stress. PRN

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