

## Hit the ground running

**It used to be that companies cut new executives some slack: Take a few months to ease into the job. Not any more. The world now demands immediate, measurable success. And with the economy stumbling, proving your mettle is all the more crucial, experts say**

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Here's the new reality of executive life that Stephen Smith discovered when he became regional vice-president for Canada of Servisair Inc. in March: Get offered the job on Thursday, take up new responsibilities on Monday, start making an impact immediately.

"There was definitely no honeymoon. I had to hit the ground sprinting," recalls Mr. Smith, who oversees the Canadian operations of Paris-based Derichebourg Group, with responsibility for 2,300 employees at nine airports across the country.

"There was a huge agenda of things I was expected to do immediately."

That very first week he had to start to make personnel changes and renegotiate contracts the company has with airlines to provide ground support, baggage handling and aircraft cleaning services.

It wasn't like that in the past, says Mr. Smith, who, over the past decade, has held executive roles with Air Canada and its low-cost division Zip, as well as with WestJet Airlines Ltd.

"There was time to get to know everyone and a feeling of let's take our time and check with everybody before we start making changes," he says.

Not any more.

Gone are the days when an executive could ease into a new role. Instead, it's now a world in which markets demand immediate, measurable success. And with the economy turning gloomier, proof in the pudding is all the more crucial, experts say.

"You have to show a material impact on the business in the first 60 days," says Howard Pezim, managing director at Toronto-based search firm Bedford Consulting Group.

"If you don't make an impact right out of the gate, they're going to wonder why they hired you. Companies have no patience for even one quarter in which they are not showing gains," he says.

"And those who falter out of the starting blocks can find their jobs are on the line," adds John Burdett, a partner at Bedford Consulting and author of the advice book *Leaders Must Lead*.

How to hit the ground running? Here's advice from the pros:

### GET AN AGENDA

The process should begin even before being hired - during the job interview itself, career experts advise.

**"I advise executives to be very inquisitive," says leadership coach Martin Buckland, president of Elite Résumés in Shanty Bay, Ont. "You have to do a lot of pre-research to uncover**

**the specific problems management wants you to fix and the goals they want you to achieve."**

**In the past, candidates might have hesitated to ask pointed questions during the job interview about the new role and expectations for fear of sounding presumptuous or uncertain, he says. But companies today are willing to help those they hire make an immediate impact.**

**"So my executive clients say they are encountering no barriers if they ask companies to open up about the expectations and agenda. In fact, companies will think of you as a stronger candidate for being realistic about the challenges involved."**

### **CREATE A SCORECARD**

Drafting a checklist of goals and deadlines is invaluable for setting an agenda and keeping on track, Mr. Burdett recommends.

Bruce Wood found that to be an effective strategy when he took over as chief executive officer for the Hamilton Port Authority in March. He was given 30 days to make a progress report to the board of directors.

In the interview, he had management clarify what he was expected to achieve in terms of financial results, human resources

development and growth strategy.

Knowing these were his assignments, he spent two weeks before he actually started the job doing homework to examine the existing operation, and wrote a scorecard for himself of what he wanted to accomplish in one month, two months and longer term.

At the board meeting, Mr. Wood made a presentation with his scorecard to provide an update on his progress in achieving management's expectations. "It proved very effective in demonstrating that I understood the targets and was hitting them."

### **GET TO KNOW EVERYONE**

Mr. Wood also realized he would have to get 50 employees pulling together if he was going to show immediate results. So, from the first day, he arranged 90-minute meetings with each of them, from all levels of the organization - "to get to know their background, their experience with the organization and their aspirations," he says.

"It was time consuming, but I think it built a lot of goodwill and got the team aligned with where we wanted them to go," says Mr. Wood, who previously had been president and CEO of the Canadian Automobile Association.

Such individual introductions are a good way to build immediate trust, Mr. Buckland says, because when you are parachuted into an organization, it can be difficult to break the ice. "People fear they are being sized up and are nervous that the axe may be falling on them. They will relax and be more confident if you let them know that you may be the leader but are also someone they can communicate with."

### **DEVELOP A CORE TEAM**

Mr. Wood realized that he would need to have the four other members of his executive team as well as key customers and suppliers onside if he was to show immediate progress in profit and growth.

In the first two weeks, he had almost daily huddles with these key players to discuss their personal goals and ideas for the organization. "It set the tone that we were facing a challenge and by working together we could meet it."

At Servisair, Mr. Smith decided on a similar strategy and, in the first two weeks in his new job, he flew to each of the nine cities in which the company had airport contracts and spoke individually with the managers and executives of the company's 12 operating groups.

But continuing to fly across the country weekly was impractical, so he put technology to use. In the past, it could take days just to get the word out to everyone and agree on something that had to be done, Mr. Smith says. But with conference calls and polling by e-mail, agreement on a course of action can be reached with everyone in one day.

He set up weekly teleconferences with managers to provide a venue for discussing the issues they face and talk about strategies they had tried.

Such close and regular sharing of information is important, he says, because "I didn't want to be surging ahead and having everyone behind grumbling because they didn't have any say in the decision."

### **BE A GOOD LISTENER**

In the first couple of months, you are still a rookie and there is a lot you can learn from listening to the voices of experience, Mr. Smith says. In the process, everyone feels that they had a role in the decision-making. "I did a lot of listening initially. As a leader, the worst thing you can do is come in and start telling people what to do and making changes just because you think they should be made."

### **RALLY SUPPORT**

Mr. Wood arranged town hall meetings to explain his strategy, describe everyone's role and why it was important that they all participate. He supplemented these with written surveys of needs and wants that went well beyond the employees, and included tenants in the port's facilities, its clients and the City of Hamilton.

"When you are coming in as a new leader and pushing the envelope, you've got to make very sure the entire organization is following you," Mr. Wood says.

And the bigger the organization, the more important that buy-in becomes, adds Mr. Smith. "You've got to be very careful because a quick decision you think is simple can have complex ramifications when they are applied to a team of 2,300."

### **DON'T LOOK BACK**

Despite the speed with which they had to move, neither Mr. Wood nor Mr. Smith say they would have changed much about their first 60 days on the job. Now more than 90 days into their roles, they say that laying careful groundwork paid off in results that met all expectations.

"There always are choices you make that you might question in hindsight, but if you start second-guessing yourself you'll never move forward," Mr. Smith says.

"Once I make a decision, I don't look back. And if there are things I need to change later, I change them.

"But as long as you start with a clear focus on what needs to be accomplished, it's remarkable how fast you can make things happen and how little you'll need to change."

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### **GROUND RULES: FOR A QUICK START**

You can't afford a stumble when you hit the ground running. Here's some advice from John Burdett, a partner of Bedford Consulting Group, which has developed a leadership training program called Quick Start.

#### **Find a mentor**

This would be someone in a senior position who has an overview of management's thinking and can advise on avoiding the pitfalls a plan could face.

#### **Build a support team**

Identify a dozen or so people you must have on your side if you are going to succeed, and meet with them weekly. This could include senior executives, as well as key suppliers and customers.

#### **Write a plan**

Prepare a list of goals for the first 30 and 60 days, and

check them off as they are achieved.

### **Get to know everyone**

Meet with staff members individually to learn about their aspirations and concerns, and discuss how their role fits with the company's future plans.

### **Seek out war stories**

Veterans of the organization can tell you what has succeeded in the past and what is likely to meet resistance.

### **Identify the gatekeepers**

Get familiar with opinion makers - who could be as junior as mail room staff - who know how to get things done and can influence others' thinking.

### **Forget old solutions**

Keep in mind that the way issues were tackled at your previous company likely won't apply in the new organization.

### **Don't make false assumptions**

Never assume that you know enough. Do your homework and get a range of opinions.

### **Ask dumb questions**

As a rookie, you have the right to ask advice no matter how mundane it may seem. This also gives others the

feeling you value their experience.

### **Get off the high horse**

Listen and be humble until you have the basis to comment on the issue at hand.

### **Don't go by appearances**

Just because someone in the new organization looks or acts like someone you had a problem with in your previous role, don't assume that the person has the same personality.

### **Forward focus**

Talk about the here and now. Reminiscing about your previous job sends the message that you would rather be there than here.  
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