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The crucial first 100 days

When communication managers take on new leadership roles it can be a tricky situation for the company as well as for the manager. How to succeed in the new position? New research offers some insights.

BY ALEXANDER GUTZMER

On January 10, 1999, television history was made. The first episode of the ground-breaking series "The Sopranos" aired for the very first time. Viewers were shocked, not only because of the frequent bursts of violence but also because the violence clashed with the family orientation that was also part of the show. Both elements were embodied by the lead character, Tony Soprano.

The show established Tony as a complex character, but also as one who is very conscious about the way he represents himself in his professional environment. Tony is a mobster and his major career move is to take over the New Jersey branch of the New York mafia. In the first episode, he positions himself for this role through a display of pure (in his case, criminal) energy. He chases a man who owes him money, and eventually runs him over with his car. The poor man then gets a beating, together with a great deal of "Where's my money!" being shouted.

This display of violence has three target groups: a) the victim, b) Tony's nephew Christopher, who will spread the word among the other New Jersey mafiosi, and c) the general public, represented by a couple of bystanders witnessing Tony's performance. If we subtract from the scene all the elements of criminality and mafia-style misbehaviour, what remains is an example of very conscious – and also quite smart – career management. Tony knows he will soon take over New Jersey so he establishes himself as a strong leader, a man who knows what he wants and who is clear in his actions if he does not get it. Tony symbolically creates a sense of respect (externally towards the bystanders) and belonging (internally towards his nephew, with whom he bonds throughout the scene). And he signals: "Once I reign, the rules of what we do will be rewritten." Obviously, Tony has a clear plan.

The management situation Tony finds himself in (preparing to take over New Jersey) is by no means untypical. Each day, new leaders take on power somewhere, especially in change-prone environments such as internationally operating firms. It is clear (and we know this from business literature as much as from reporting on politics, business or sport) that the first 100 days are crucial to succeed in a new job, not only for new chief executive officers but also on lower hierarchical levels. Whenever someone takes on a new job that involves leadership elements, the question of how to prepare for the new role must be answered. Do you have to bring an elaborate strategy with you? How distinctly are you supposed to position yourself beforehand? And, once in the new office, how much change makes sense in the first few days? How do you communicate the change?

And what to do with employees who hinder the implementation of the change processes? These questions are particularly nagging for someone taking over a leadership position in communications.

In order to answer some of these questions, I conducted a survey among communication professionals who recently took on new jobs that included leadership responsibilities. We used a public relations newsletter and sent a questionnaire to candidates whose change to a new position had been reported in the newsletter.

My first question was simply: "When taking on the new job, did you have an elaborate plan about the strategic measures to be taken?" Only 14 per cent of all interviewees definitely had such a plan. Apparently, a clear strategy on what to do once in the new job can by no means be seen as standard. Now, this can be read either as conscious flexibility or as lack of preparation. Whatever the reason, the call for careful strategic preparation found in several management books can by no means be seen as fulfilled.

Questions, plans and strategies

Interestingly, most of those interviewees who had a plan had agreed about it explicitly with top management (80 per cent) and they usually managed to execute their plan successfully (70 per cent). This indicates that a clear written plan can reduce the inherent insecurity of what to tackle first within the initial 100 days on the new job .

But what about those managers without a plan? Should they have formulated one? Only 15 per cent felt that this was

a deficit in their strategy. The majority apparently did not miss having a plan. The question is, of course, to what extent is self-delusion at play here. After all, the respondents are still relatively new in their job. They might be worse off without a plan, without yet having felt the full consequences.

This poses the question: what does success in public relations leadership roles mean? On a professional level, success can be defined as the realisation of strategic communication goals – for example, getting through with new external communication messages. On a personal level, however, the first and primary success of a new communication head is simply to retain one's job. "I am still there, so my strategy must have worked", the manager might reason. The question is at which point an eventual lack of strategic planning backfires.

However, even an existing plan means little if not backed up with measurements for success. Management practice in most organisations seems to reflect this: the (minority of) public relations managers that have an explicit plan back it up with quantitative data. Only two of the 10 respondents with a plan did not formulate targets to measure whether they succeeded and, rather remarkably, all those with quantitative measurements claim to have reached them.

This could indicate that the targets had been set too low. But top management was involved, so merely fishing for compliments cannot be assumed to have been at play. Rather, it seems as if the quantification of targets does indeed create a higher degree of effectiveness. The mindset of a decision maker is then geared towards these goals. And the direct internal environment (the management team) can also be steered more effectively, because quantitative targets can be used as an orientation tool.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• Whenever someone takes on a new job that involves leadership elements, the question of how to prepare for the new role has to be answered.

• A new head of public relations faces a highly complex job with many interest groups to be reckoned with, internally as well as externally.

• Clear preparation and an explicit plan with quantifiable success measures can help the new manager, but these need to be balanced with the respective organisational culture for any progress to be made.

> **"A clear strategy on what to do once in the new job can by no means be seen as standard."**

A question of culture

Each company has a unique culture, and every change process initiated by a new communication head can only succeed if it takes that culture into account. By no means are all public relations managers aware of this: less than half of the respondents analysed the culture of the organisation whose communication they are about to manage (40 per cent).

This divide indicates that the concept of organisational culture is present among public relations practitioners, but not universally deemed relevant for leadership. I would argue that a cultural analysis has two benefits. On the one hand, the manager demonstrates to the team that he is not uninterested in their old ways of doing things. By engaging with the culture, he demonstrates a cultural sensitivity that might create a stronger acceptance once potentially harsh change measures are initiated.

On the other hand, the strategic fit between change measures and organisational culture might prove to be a problem. The changes might make sense in theory, but be unsuitable for the organisation in question. In this situation, a cultural analysis can help avoid mistakes.

A lack of sensitivity towards organisational culture is also reflected in how new public relations bosses define their success. Apparently, the most crucial factor for many communication managers is their reputation with their superior: 40 per cent deem this the most important measurement for success. Taken together, all reputation-related criteria (reputation with their boss, within the company as a whole, or within their team) are seen by 53 per cent as most important. Of the 47 per cent that finds other, more strategic factors most relevant, the majority thinks that customer-related communication targets are most important (43 per cent), followed by a successful restructuring of their department.

If convincing their boss is key for the majority of decision makers, then how do they achieve this? Here, it seems that success lies within the organisation itself rather than in the opinion market 'out there'. When asked how to raise one's reputation with their boss, 74 per cent answered that efficiently managing the department is quite or very important. 63 per cent think that keeping their people motivated will raise one's profile with the superior. A successful restructuring of the department and customer communication are both seen by 56 per cent as important.

This 56 per cent shows that, in terms of external communication, customer communication is the central way to enhance their image with the boss. Compared to this, 44 per cent think that communication towards the general public is good for their image. Only 13 per cent think that communication towards suppliers counts in this respect, compared to 38 per cent who believe in communication towards potential new employees as a tool to raise their profile. This indicates that the war for talent has gotten to many companies, and that CEOs want their communicators to strategically position the company in that respect.

Targets and obstacles

Interestingly, once we look more closely at the reputation of the manager within the organisation as a whole, things look differently. In general, most people find it harder to enhance their image across the company. An efficient management of their department seems to be key for many managers here. 56 per cent believe this helps, as opposed to only 31 per cent who think a successful restructuring might improve their image in the organisation. This might indicate that restructuring measures in general are seen as problematic by the staff of many companies.

Despite this, the rebuilding of their department is often an integral part in

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a new manager's strategy. But it is only one cornerstone of the entire change programme. Whatever the plans for the new department, I found that the most important factor in deciding the success of these plans is the CEO or managing director of the organisation. 85 per cent of my interviewees think that without his or her support, no plan can work. This contradicts the popular myth that the key people for a new department head are the employees or other department heads. No, what really counts for 85 per cent is the CEO (the other 15 per cent believe the communication department to be the most central factor). The picture remains rather hierarchical when we look at the second most important element: 31 per cent believe that the other board members are decisive factor number two. All of this means that without those on top, no change plan for the public relations department can work.

When asked about the biggest obstacle for their targets, 38 per cent believe that an unclear corporate strategy is the major factor. This is worrying, as it indicates that even today, more than 50 years after AD Chandler wrote Strategy and Structure in the History of the American Enterprise, not all companies seem to have a clear and generally-understood corporate strategy.

Compared to this, the second major obstacle seems rather mundane: 31 per cent of my respondents think that the most pressing problem is lack of resources. This also explains why no one mentioned the controlling department as one of the key drivers of their programme: controllers simply do not always seem to finance change in the way they ought to.

Conclusions

When considering the results of my research, we see that a new head of communication faces a complex job with many parties involved and many interest groups to be reckoned with, internally as well as externally. Clear preparation and an explicit plan with quantifiable success measures can help, but still need to be balanced with the respective organisational culture. And in the end, organisational complexities notwithstanding, it is the CEO who decides success or failure.

What must also be emphasised is that while the communication head is necessarily a change master, he also has to maintain a credible self-image while initiating change. Not every person is a good fit for every corporate proces:. not everyone can credibly represent the tough cost cutter or the creative image driver. An honest self-analysis should indicate whether the role one is about to give oneself is really suitable.

Which brings me back to my initial unlikely change master, Tony Soprano. Tony never really gave up his tough-guy attitude. And yet, throughout the series, he balanced his brutal image with surprising acts of graciousness. In particular, he brought his family into the game: he simultaneously positioned himself as hardball and caring family man.

And lest we forget, the key twist of the show is that Tony regularly saw a psychiatrist. Dr Melfi was able to help him better understand himself. Perhaps he knew that if you want to be a successful leader, you first have to know who you are. ●