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## CHANGE AT THE TOP

A two-part series about making the most of management changes

BEING THE NEW BOSS

SURVIVING THE NEW BOSS



# TAKING OVER

**You're the new honcho leading a team used to someone else. How do you make it work?**

by Lucy Webb Staff Reporter

Jill Ririe, a principal with The Wynhurst Group, a human resources consulting firm in Arlington, earlier in her career got what might have been the job of a lifetime as vice president of HR for a large global bank. She left the U.S. to take the position, and when she got there Ririe spent some time with her predecessor learning the ropes.

The team was very functionally sound, she was told, and knew HR.

Except, it appears, not everyone shares her definition of "functionally sound." And it turns out a top member of her team was dealing drugs. That was generally known, but no one had mentioned it to Ririe. This team member was also stealing from employees' pension funds.

Not every new leader inherits an embezzling drug dealer, but every leader who comes into an established team takes on their values, standards and loyalties. So what can you do when you're

the new kid, tasked with managing a team that someone else hired and that may be going through growing pains of its own?

In a word, communicate.

Get to know your people as people, let them get to know you, ask questions, listen to the answers.

Here is some advice from the experts:

**Hold assimilation meetings.** Ilona Birenbaum, Ririe's partner at The Wynhurst Group LLC, suggests asking your new company to hold assimilation meetings.

Have the company bring in a facilitator so employees can submit questions to you — about everything from communication style and pet peeves to your outside interests.

And you should ask them questions. Get some background on your team members, their challenges and what they're proud of.

They want to know what you are like, Birenbaum says, and

you want to know whether they will embrace your vision.

You all want to know what to expect from each other because your idea of stellar performance might differ from what they are used to.

These assimilation meetings (and you can have more than one) provide a chance to get those answers before any head-butting begins.

Ask “getting to know you” questions, but also deeper questions to determine individuals’ (and the team’s) values.

**Learn what’s there.** It is important to work hard to understand the organization as you found it, says Rob Bader, the months-old director of operations for the National Maritime Heritage Foundation in D.C.

The foundation has lots of programs that serve their own purposes and have their own structures. It has been a challenge to learn them all, Bader says, but the better understanding he has, the more smoothly things go.

**If you can, talk to those who came before.** Bader had to fill some big shoes when he started his new job. His predecessor and friend, Duncan Hood, is a big character well-known in the community.

Hood got Bader up to speed and helped him get ready, with almost a month of overlap between them.

**Manage by walking around.** Maria Stanfield, director of administration at law firm Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP, took on that role about a year ago after Pillsbury Winthrop and Shaw Pittman merged.

She kept her door open through the process but realized that wasn’t enough. She needed to “walk the walk, literally,” Stanfield says.

She made a point of getting out from behind her open doorway and asking employees questions. She put out frequent e-mails. She held town meetings. She sought feedback and steeled herself for the possibility that it wouldn’t all be positive.

All that communication can sound overwhelming, but it’s worth it if it makes things easier and more efficient down the line.

In her case, Stanfield says, people were not necessarily going to just come to her, especially the employees working at the

lower levels of the 181-person staff she oversees.

She made a point of talking to those employees, hoping they would become comfortable coming to her. A year later, they’re letting her know when something is on their minds.

**Manage those who manage the rest.** Stanfield realized the importance of getting buy-in from managers who work between her and lower-level employees.

Managers who feel comfortable talking with people both above and below them can help smooth the transition for a new boss.

Stanfield also took the management team on a half-day retreat hiking on the Virginia side of Great Falls, letting everyone get to know each other.

**Look for bonding opportunities.** Bader found at the maritime foundation that a lot of boat maintenance has to be done — work that brings people together.

What’s your boat maintenance? Where can you find time to dig in, work hard and talk with your people about their own concerns?

**Know that every transition is different.** Birenbaum at Wynhurst Group says things won’t always go smoothly. Be honest and upfront, especially about problems.

Let your staff know what you are finding and ask for their thoughts.

Involving your people “buys you a lot,” Birenbaum says. It not only gives you some potential solutions you might not have considered but also sends a signal that you are interested in what they think and recognize their expertise.

Talk about problems, rather than letting them fester. It’s OK to take a stand against popular opinion, Birenbaum says, but include the team in the dialogue.

Be willing to adapt, re-prioritize and let go of what you think you know.

**If you can, build in some flexibility.** Some organizations provide flexibility in function and personnel.

Knowing that there is some flexibility with each employee’s assigned responsibilities helps encourage people to work well with each other.

**Have regular ongoing meetings about your collective vision.** Assimilation meetings get you off on the right foot, but to

## Something old, something new

If your company has the luxury of bringing on a new leader before the old one leaves, you might consider a “knowledge transfer” process.

Talk with your outgoing leader, says Ilona Birenbaum, principal at The Wynhurst Group LLC, a human resources consulting company in Arlington that focuses on leadership development and change.

Interview the departing boss and the employees that person worked with. Ask about their experiences, what they’re proud of, what their great successes were.

Then pass the results on to the incoming leader. It gives the new person information while giving the old person closure. And, Birenbaum says, it lets the new manager hit the ground running, while minimizing the amount of institutional knowledge that walks out the door.

■ Lucy Webb

keep moving forward everyone needs to see the path, Birenbaum says.

Employees want to know, “How does this affect me?” Tell them.

You won’t get everyone 100 percent onboard, Birenbaum says, and that’s OK. But by keeping everyone in the loop, you show even the naysayers that they can be part of the vision.

And by treating all your employees with dignity, you teach them how to treat you, while also teaching them to trust you.

**Where you can, focus on the positive.** A new leader provides opportunity for the whole team to grow and try new things.

Let people see the new opportunities that came in the door with you.

**Talk about what’s going on.** People would rather hear news, even unpleasant news, than not.

People fear the unknown. Taking away the unknown takes away the fear.

As Stanfield says, “Address the water cooler talk.”

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