

Room at the Top – Honing People Skills is Key to Keeping High Level Executive Positions

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Think you're ready to move to the top? If the answer is yes, maybe you'd better think again. More than 40 percent of newly appointed leaders fail in the first 18 months, according to a study by Manchester, a Jacksonville, Fla.-based executive development and training firm. But the failure rate may be even higher than that, said Valerie Frederickson, CEO of Valerie Frederickson & Co. in Menlo Park, California.

"The failure rate of outside CEOs coming into a company is 80 percent within the first two years. The failure rate of CEOs who move up within a company is 50 percent," said Frederickson, who works with executives across the state, including several in Fresno. One reason for the high failure rate for first year executives is that the skills required for top level jobs might be completely different than skills needed at the middle level. High level executives generally spend about 90 percent of their time on people-related problems rather than doing work they used to specialize in.

"People don't always realize that with the glory of the job, you lose the joy. You may find you're working more hours and no longer doing work that you enjoy or are particularly good at. For many people, it's like being a tennis player for 20 years, and then all of a sudden being asked to play basketball and having to play it well or risk getting fired," Frederickson said. One of the most crucial skills an executive has to acquire right away is learning how and who to assign work to. "It all becomes a game of delegating and having the right people to delegate to. Your own success or failure is pretty much out of your own hands."

Frederickson, who counsels high level executives, many of whom make salaries in the six-figure range, said there's a tremendous amount of pressure on new executives because every single thing they do becomes amplified in the eyes of their employees, compared to when they were mid-level managers.

"A simple move of criticizing or complimenting an employee or not getting back to an individual right away can take on so much significance. Executives are like politicians or ministers. They are put on both a pedestal and under a microscope," Frederickson said.

As an example of this, at a staff meeting at one of the company's Frederickson consults with, an executive made an offhand comment that was perceived as negative to an employee.

"This executive didn't realize that his comment came across as devastating to the employee and shut the entire group down. They no longer viewed him as safe." After the meeting, Frederickson advised the executive to apologize in private to the staff person.

"Employees are very forgiving. They have to be forgiving of those people who are signing their

paychecks," Frederickson said. Executives can generally make a good impression on their employees by emphasizing the interdependency that exists between management and the employees.

"Humility is the most attractive trait in a senior executive," Frederickson said.

Executives who seem to have the highest success rates are also generally those who move up from the lower ranks of the company up to the top, said Tom Burns, a lecturer at California State University, Fresno who helps runs the MBA program in business. One new trend that more companies seem to be engaging in is "fast tracking" employees who have a certain level of technical expertise and who have good people skills and an overall vision for their company. General Electric, for instance, found one of its top executives working as a chemist.

"They found out he understood the business and put him in charge," Burns said.

For those employees who want to move to top level positions in their companies, the most important thing they can do is to make themselves invaluable to the company, Frederickson said.

"You can volunteer for projects, especially for those that will expose you to as many parts of the organization as possible. You can develop new products or find new customers. You can go to your manager and say, "I've got some extra time. What can I do to help take something off your 'to do' list?"

Even just being a "gopher" on an important committee can be a good way to put yourself in contact with top level decision-makers, said Diane Decker, a lecturer in the human resources department at the Sid Craig School of Business at Fresno State.

The good thing about today's corporations is that they tend to have more constellation rather than pyramid type hierarchies, Frederickson said. This means that if things aren't going well in one area of a company, there's nothing wrong with switching to another division where an employee might find more growth opportunities. For those people who want to advance, it's important that they market their accomplishments, said Decker.

"You almost need to talk about your accomplishments to people, so people are aware of what you've done. It's hard because there's a fine line between boasting and making sure people knew you were a contributor in the project," Decker said.

(Picture omitted) Tom Burns, a professor at California State University, Fresno who helps chair the MBA program in business, says that in order to be successful, executives generally need to have an area of expertise, which they can translate to a company-wide vision.

For people who are doing all they can in their companies and still aren't getting promoted, they might want to take a hard look at their careers, Decker said.

"If people are being promoted over you to a position you feel you're qualified for, you have to look at the hand- writing on the wall. If this is happening, I wouldn't stay around for more than two more years," Decker said.

If the reason someone isn't being promoted is simply because he/she is working in a small- to medium-sized company where there aren't that many higher-up positions, that's a different story, Decker said.

"You might want to stay in a position like that for about five years and gather as much experience as you can to put on your resume and then look for another position. But keep your position until you find another one. You're much more employable if you're already employed," Decker said.