

AA information

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Lessons from the Cathie Black failure -- for anyone starting in a new leadership role. How not to crash and burn at the start of your job.

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Starting a New Job How Not to Crash and Burn



Earlier this year, two high-profile executives crashed and burned in their new jobs. Jack Griffin survived for less than six months as Time Inc.'s CEO. Cathleen Black lasted only three months as head of the New York City public schools. Though in retrospect both flame-outs may have been inevitable (Griffin was the first CEO to come from outside Time Inc., and Black had no experience in education), there are steps that people in new leadership positions—whether CEO or a team leader within a department—can take to improve the odds...

Don't move too fast. Management psychologist Paul Powers, PhD, president of the executive consulting firm of Powers & Co., notes that new leaders generally have a three-month honeymoon before they need to make some major moves (or begin putting their imprint on the organization). Often higher-ups will use the time to assess whether the person is the right fit.

During the honeymoon, new leaders should resist attempts to get them to articulate a grand plan. Instead, use the honeymoon period to listen, observe and collect information. Steer clear of preconceptions. Give people a chance to prove themselves. After the honeymoon, you usually have another three months to show some headway and make your mark, such as by bringing someone new onboard or other personnel changes...or initiating a new strategy.

Understand what objections there may be to your hire. People may feel that you don't know the business (as with Black) or the company (Griffin). To help remedy this, communicate

what you bring that the group may not have had before—new markets, for example—but don't make any promises until you are ready to roll out a plan.

New leadership roles require projecting an amazing amount of confidence—yet humility must be obvious, too (a trait that Time Inc.'s Griffin appeared to lack). New leaders should acknowledge that they don't have all the answers and that others have valuable input to provide.

Understand your constituencies, and meet with them. Black failed in this regard, Powers told me. He cited her inappropriate public remarks, which suggested that she did not know how to deal with neighborhood and minority groups. And school administrators and other key groups felt excluded.

Analyze and learn from your past mistakes. Ask colleagues from previous employers what you did wrong during your tenure there and might have done differently.

Solicit other outside viewpoints. Create and use a "personal advisory board" of people outside your new company to offer you guidance. Develop a brain trust of five or six people who know you well, have a variety of skills and talents and will be brutally honest in group or individual meetings.

Finally, know who will be assessing your performance and how good performance is defined. You both need to be on the same path.

Marjory Abrams