



## Lessons for Executives on President Obama's Onboarding

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By Adrienne Fox

Recession. Increased global threats. Poor performance. One could be describing the challenges ahead for President Barack Obama or a newly hired executive in your organization.

Whether your leader sits in the Oval Office or in the corner office, he or she has a lot on the agenda with the added pressure of high expectations for quick results.

“Given the current state of things in the economy and with global competition, there is increased scrutiny on performance of new executives,” said Erika Lamont, partner at Connect the Dots Consulting, an onboarding consulting firm in Worthington, Ohio. “We used to say [executives] have 100 days [to make an impact], which is what the president is measured by, but the honeymoon period is more compressed.”

Deborah Rubin, managing director of the Philadelphia office of RHR International, a global leadership development firm, said executives have to strike the right balance between acting quickly and acting rashly.

“People are expecting more action from Obama—and from all executives,” she said. “But there’s a balance because you have to show that you are taking the time to listen to different stakeholders and assess the situation before making decisions.”

Rash decisions can lead to mistakes in today’s compressed timeframe, as Obama has learned with three of his political nominees marred by tax problems. That means executives—with the help of HR—need to do their homework before they walk in the door.

“You need to start working with executives in the pre-start time, which is analogous to the transition for the president,” says Jan Margolis, co-founder and president of Applied Research Corp., a leadership development company in Metuchen, N.J. “Obama started setting his agenda during this time, and that’s what executives need to do.”

Five steps, along with assistance from HR, can smooth the onboarding process:

**Build relationships early.** During that time between offer acceptance and start date, HR can arrange meetings between the new executive and key players. “If an internal person interviewed for the job, the executive should reach out to that person as well,” advised Lamont, to ease any tension. “Obama even reached out to Sen. John McCain to get his input on issues of national security. You need to get people on your side before you make changes.”

**Understand the challenge.** HR needs to inform or make sure the executive’s boss is advising the new hire on challenges or changes in the landscape between the job acceptance and start date. “The executive needs to understand the history, culture, politics, relationships, what’s been tried, what’s failed and what’s possible,” said Margolis.

**Identify weaknesses and potential cultural hiccups.** Executives know their weaknesses and should, with the help of HR, identify those people who can help shore up those flaws. In addition, the organization’s culture might uncover new weaknesses. “HR is extremely important in providing that cultural feedback,” said Lamont.

**Gain early wins.** Identify low-hanging fruit that the executive can make quick decisions on to gain credibility. “With Obama, that decision was closing Guantanamo Bay, signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and making executive orders that set the tone of his administration,” noted Lamont.

**Execute and seek feedback.** “Obama faces two huge issues—economic crisis and national security,” said Margolis. “Any new CEO is faced with the economy and global competition. Obama has to visualize what he wants the country to look like in 2040 and make decisions today based on that vision. A CEO does the same thing, on a shorter time frame, say five years in the future, but it’s the same process.”

Margolis advised HR not to forget about the executive once the 100 days are over. Usually, three months in, employees’ expectations ratchet up and the executive’s enthusiasm wanes. That’s the time to check in with executives and with their direct reports and colleagues.

“Executives need to know: What should I keep doing? What should I stop doing? What should I start doing?” added Lamont.

Economic challenges are changing investment in onboarding training by the way it’s delivered and to whom. Lamont noted that companies aren’t spending as much on technology but are, instead, relying on internal expertise and resources.

Rubin said training is being reserved for the most critical positions. “HR is paying closer attention to the key roles that the company can’t afford to go wrong,” Rubin said, and focusing onboarding resources there.

*Adrienne Fox is a freelance writer in Alexandria, Va., and former managing editor of HR Magazine.*