

jobs & money

After The First Year

From Integrating Yourself to Integrating Others *By Gail Golden, MBA, Ph.D.*

This is the third edition of a three part series on new female executive integration.

It's hard to believe, but it's been a year since you started your new leadership role. It has been a rollercoaster year, with emotional highs and lows, achievements and setbacks, and rapid learning about the company, the job and yourself. Many challenges still lie ahead, but you have made this job your own.

Of course, you'll continue to work on your own development as a leader. Highly successful business leaders are constantly stretching and challenging themselves. But in addition, you have a responsibility to contribute to the development of other leaders, including helping to integrate those coming on board. Since women are rare at senior levels in most companies, other women often look to them as role models, coaches and advocates. One senior leader told me that women in her organization said to her, "You give us hope that someday we can be like you."

Women are often drawn to the mentorship role. Many of us feel a kinship with others climbing the corporate ladder. We find gratification in contributing to the growth and achievements of others. And it feels good to be acknowledged as a leader and an expert who has something to contribute.

At the same time, it's important to note that mentorship is not just about women helping women. Both men and women are often skilled and dedicated mentors, and others can benefit from their guidance. Cross-gender mentoring relationships are a very valuable part of leadership development.

Mentoring others is rewarding and fun, but it's not as easy as it looks. There are some common pitfalls that can undermine the value of the coaching relationship. There's more to mentoring than being a wise old guru who offers sage advice.



Listen, listen, listen.

A large body of psychological research has demonstrated that much of the power of any helping relationship lies in the helper's ability to really listen. If you think back to the people who have helped you most in your life, they didn't drown you with good advice – they listened intently and helped you to find your own answers. In the over-stressed, hyper world of business, one of the greatest gifts you can give someone is a quiet space in which they feel truly heard.

Don't over-generalize from your own experience.

Telling your own story is often satisfying, and it can be both interesting and useful to the person you're mentoring. But the path that worked for you may not be right for them. If you focus too much on your own choices, you may unintentionally give the message that there's only one right way. Share your story only when it's directly relevant to the person you're coaching, and be sure to share your difficulties and challenges as well as your successes. Remember, the focus of the conversation should be on the person you're mentoring, not on you.

Coach by asking questions.

The "Socratic method" is as old as, well, Socrates. It encourages people to build their thinking and problem-solving skills by wrestling with challenging questions, rather than being spoon-fed the answers. Whether you're analyzing a specific situation or exploring broad leadership issues, asking the right questions is a powerful way to help someone else grow. The questions you ask demonstrate the care with which you've been listening. Asking questions acknowledges that the problems are complex, rather than quickly solved with some potentially superficial advice.

Help to build strategic relationships.

Your knowledge of the company can be extremely helpful to a new person, especially by identifying key players with whom they need to connect. Helping new leaders to draw a "political map" of the company enables them to prioritize which relationships to give the most attention. Providing introductions and opportunities to interact with important strategic partners can help new leaders ramp up to full effectiveness more quickly.

Provide candid feedback.

Tell people the truth about how they're doing. Offer plentiful praise and accolades for their efforts and successes. Provide kind and clear information about areas where they have opportunities to improve. Most people find this very difficult and avoid offering direct feedback. People with a high degree of empathy sometimes shy away from giving candid feedback because they know it can be painful to hear. But honest feedback, presented skillfully, is one of the most powerful tools for accelerating a leader's growth.

Know when to let go.

Almost everyone has a story about a boss or a teacher who was a great help and support – until you were ready to pull back from the mentoring and become more independent. Instead of recognizing and supporting this important developmental step, the mentor responded defensively or angrily, perhaps even undermining your attempts to be successful. Such a mentor has lost sight of the goal of the relationship and has become pre-occupied by his or her own needs. For a mentor, feeling satisfaction as you watch the person you have been coaching succeed on his or her own, perhaps even surpassing your own accomplishments, is the mark of a truly effective developer of leaders and the reward for having done your job well.

Putting it all together.

Business leaders are really busy people. Women business leaders are usually the busiest of all, for both personal and professional reasons. Between the demands of getting your job done and working on your own ongoing development, it can be hard to find the time to dedicate to integrating and developing others. But you cannot be an outstanding business leader without devoting time and energy to people development. The good news is that serving as a mentor can actually make your other tasks easier. As you mentor others, you also learn about yourself, and you develop co-workers who can help you and the company to get the job done. ■

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