

PEOPLE: LEADERSHIP

A LONELY LIFE

Talented executives need to be given adequate support as they take on new leadership roles.

Alison Clements

finds out how retailers ensure senior executives aren't left to sink or swim

Landing your dream executive job takes some doing. You spend years gaining experience and building an industry reputation that will wow employers. When a top job opportunity comes up, you do your utmost to convince the panel that you're an energetic achiever, you can hit the ground running and orchestrate strategic change that will deliver fantastic results.

"But, all too often, senior managers and executives who are parachuted into new posts or promoted internally spend the first few months feeling confused, bewildered, alone and with no real understanding of what is expected of them," says chair of coaching consultancy The Turning Point, Bridget Farrands.

"Suddenly, they are responsible for hundreds or even thousands of people. They're faced with Herculean tasks, full diaries, constant interruptions and, very often, no one to talk to," she says.

Farrands, who worked for Boots for seven years, and fellow consultant Richard Elsner are co-authors of a new book on what happens when leaders embark on top jobs. Called *Lost in Transition: How Business Leaders Can Successfully Take Charge in New Roles*, the book is based on research into the experiences of leaders across many different business sectors.

Overwhelmingly, the authors found that leaders struggled to cope in new top jobs, were unsupported by the organisations that had hired them and, because of the nature of executive management – particularly City or private equity pressure – felt obliged to forge ahead blindly, feigning a bullish confidence, which, in many cases, had withered on day one of the job.

"Many executives underperform or fail in the first six months of their role, largely because they are given too little time to learn about the company, the culture, what is required in the job and, crucially, what kind of person they are," says Farrands. "There is a tendency to rush into decision-making too early, often without adopting the right psychological approach needed to do it. All too often, mistakes are made."

Meanwhile, bosses who have hired the talent typically step back – not wanting to crowd the pitch – rather than acting as a mentor, says Farrands.

One retailer who took a divisional directorship in a leading high street chain says she felt isolated, because her immediate boss barely

communicated with her. "I reached a point where I was feeling out of my depth, but help wasn't forthcoming," she says. "The culture was very much 'sort it out yourself', but, with some discussion and guidance, I would have delivered much better results."

Farrands and Elsner argue that retailers hoping to get the most out of their talented directors need to spend more time and effort on a process that has been dubbed onboarding in the US.

Onboarding is not solely about meeting the practical needs of a new employee, giving them a company induction and providing relevant training; it also takes into account the psychological impact that shouldering new responsibilities will have on the individual.

"The key to success for incoming leaders is not to hit the ground running, but to spend time thinking, reflecting, watching, listening and asking questions," argues Farrands. "It's about deciding what kind of person you are going to be. Rushing in, proving what a great dynamo you are and doing things too fast is a recipe for disaster," she says.

Zara UK managing director Mike Shearwood is living proof that taking time to understand the business, culture and the task ahead and taking a personal approach pays off. Spanish fashion group Inditex carefully nurtured his understanding of the company for many months before Shearwood got stuck into the day-to-day running of Zara in the UK.

"I spent six months in Spain working in stores, meeting department heads and building relationships, which was invaluable," says Shearwood. "Systems and procedures are relatively easy to





learn, but understanding how an organisation makes decisions, the tone they take and the chain of command takes time to digest. Doing this is essential groundwork for any incoming executive, both practically and psychologically," he says.

Inditex recruiting manager Maria Gonzales-Regalado says ensuring the directors who run stores in 56 countries feel supported and in control is central to the harmonious running of the business. "Our large HR and training departments provide practical support and act as a point of contact for managers who might be feeling a bit remote or in need of extra help," says Gonzales-Regalado.

She says directors can take six to nine months to undergo full training and orientation, while head office and regional managers may take two or three months. "This is a great way for arrivals to build up a network of company contacts. Making friends across the organisation – knowing which people can support you in the coming years – is time well spent for the individual and for Inditex," says Gonzales-Regalado.

John Haggerty, UK chief operating officer of Ilva, which opened its first UK store in Thurrock last month, says the Danish furniture retailer is very forward thinking about orientation and has adopted a confidence-injecting approach to supporting freshly installed management in the UK.

This involves divisional directors spending time in Denmark and installing a few Danish experts within the UK teams running systems, logistics, operations and so on, as well as engendering a spirit of integration across the fledgling organisation. The aim is that employees who are new to Ilva will have support and knowledge to hand while large-format stores go live.

"The whole recruitment process, from director level down to store assistants, has been driven by inclusion," says Haggerty. "Surely this is the best way to

make people feel appreciated, supported and part of a team?"

He says 1,500 people have been hired for the launch of the first three stores and, thanks to constant support from the mother country, his job in overseeing this massive project has been rewarding, rather than daunting.

Haggerty's view is that the Ilva culture of good communication and inclusion will filter down to the shopfloor. "We set out to find people who will embrace Ilva's values. By involving them in everything about the company and letting them experience the whole story of Ilva, we feel we will get the best from them," he says.

Store staff have been project-managing the opening of stores and, in the process meeting and working with people from other divisions. "At Thurrock, we asked the team to come up with the best way to merchandise stores and it rose to the challenge," says Haggerty. "Buyers came in to talk to store assistants about the product – the five grades of leather, types of wood and so on – which has instilled great confidence in the team and is the ultimate demonstration of support from head office."

Giving time and support sounds simple, yet it is rare in practice. "Companies need to shift their mindset on this," says Farrands. "Executive coaching can help, but it can't be the sole solution. Patience and support from the top is required too. A successful person comes as a bundle that should contain confidence and self esteem, as well as practical skills and intelligence. If you lose the psychological strength and self belief, you aren't getting all you originally paid for. And, as we all know, executive directors don't come cheap."

● *Lost in Transition: How Business Leaders Can Successfully Take Charge in New Roles* is published by Marshall Cavendish and Cyan Books (available in hardback for £18.99) **RW**