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# Three Things Your New CEO Needs to Know

A new CEO means a whirlwind of change for any company. From top to bottom, internally and externally, the shifts are sweeping. Internally, a new CEO brings new policies, updated initiatives, and cultural shifts. And, both internally and externally, a new CEO means a change in communications.

That's especially true in the age of social media and the 24/7 news cycle – and it's a big deal. Today, more than ever, CEOs are the public faces of their companies. The CEO is the individual that people turn to for insight into a company when times are good. And, of course, the CEO is the one called to account when crises arise.

Because the new CEO so critically affects company communications, it's essential that he or she be able to communicate well.

And, that's not a given; while the individuals who rise to CEO status tend to be intelligent people and able communicators, there is a unique set of skills integral to communicating in this role that's often not fully acquired in previous positions.

Fortunately, these skills can be taught. With that in mind, in the midst of the corporate shifts that accompany the change at the top, here are three things your new CEO needs to know to navigate the role successfully.

## 1. How to Be Prepared

It's easier said than done: new CEOs need to know how to prepare to communicate well.

For all of our cultural mantras about the value of plans and preparation, most of us fly by the seat of our pants most of the time. Unfortunately, CEOs are no different. In fact, they may even be more likely to neglect preparation, because they're so often able to rely on their abilities and experience to navigate situations in real time.

For highly skilled people, that approach often works. But, when it doesn't, the results are disastrous.

Here are three things your new CEO needs to do to prepare for good communication.

### Ask the Core Communication Questions

[We've written before](#) about the correct approach to communication preparation, and those principles still apply to CEOs. Before every communication situation, a CEO should always ask:

- Who is my audience and what matters to them?

- What is my goal in speaking with this audience?
- Based on the above, what message will have impact?
- How much time do I have?

Reviewing these essential communications questions will greatly improve the quality of any CEO communication.

### **Schedule Time to Prepare**

One of the greatest dangers for new CEOs lies in their extreme busyness. Often, each hour on a CEO's schedule is accounted for weeks in advance, and he or she may grind through meeting after meeting on a given day with barely a breather in between.

The truth is that no person can persevere through four back-to-back meetings and be at their peak for the final one. It's not possible. And, too often, busyness snuffs out preparation time. When preparation gets squeezed into the tightest windows possible – or neglected altogether – communications suffer. That can lead to problems small and large.

We recommend taking at least 30 minutes to prepare for each commitment. If at all possible, schedule that preparation time into the calendar, and make sure it's a commitment that's kept as strictly as the next meeting.

### **Be Aware of the News**

Finally, a tactical tip for new CEOs: be aware of the news, especially within your industry and especially when speaking with the media.

If there is a story swirling, [reporters will ask about it](#).

For example, we worked with one company to prepare for a communications situation in the wake of the [Deep Water Horizon crisis](#). Although the company wasn't involved with the situation, they were a part of the industry, and they anticipated that questions would be asked about the tragedy. It was crucial that they were prepared to address those questions while not losing focus on their message.

With our client, we crafted a response along these lines: "Deep Water Horizon is a horrible tragedy, and we as an industry are watching it very closely. However, I don't think it would be prudent for me to comment on it at this time."

While acknowledging the situation, this created a bridge back to the intended focus of the event. It allowed our client to deliver their message instead of being steered off track, and that focus was all thanks to preparation and an awareness of the news.

New CEOs should seek to stay informed, so that they can avoid being caught off guard by questions around developing stories.

## **2. How to Simplify the Message**

In addition to preparation, another skill that new CEOs need to hone is the ability to simplify a message.

Granted, a well-crafted message is often a direct result of preparation, but the ability to communicate with succinct clarity is something that transcends preparation for individual events. It's part of a way of thinking that applies to communication as a whole.

Here are two skills that enhance message clarity.

### **Don't Use Jargon**

Many of the CEOs we work with represent companies that offer complex products or services. Some of their fields are highly technical, some are infused with industry jargon, and many are both.

In these industries, there's often a perception that speaking in technical, complex terms reveals intelligence. The truth is that distilling complexity into simple clarity often reveals more intelligence; and, simplicity always results in a more memorable message.

Your new CEO should be able to explain what your company does clearly, in one to two sentences, using terms that fifth graders would understand. We call this "the language of the living room," and it's vital to getting a clear message across.

The truth is that even intelligent people in your industry won't understand all of your company's jargon. In fact, your own company probably uses different terms in different departments. Ultimately, unnecessary complexity is a barrier to communication.

Your new CEO will be best served by removing that barrier and communicating in simple terms.

### **Focus on What Matters**

We've written before that CEOs are vulnerable to being directed off track by irrelevant questions from reporters. Because they have a breadth of knowledge about the many aspects of the companies they represent, they often feel obligated to reply to off-topic questions. They know at least parts of the answers, after all.

That's why focusing on a concise message is so important.

First, the CEO needs to prepare to fulfill her communication goals (based on the communication questions covered previously). Will she be selling? Educating the audience? Creating brand advocates?

Then, she needs to stick to that cause.

[Timothy Geithner](#), former Secretary of the Treasury, gave an interview on a news network some time ago. He'd recently written a book, and was making media appearances to promote its sales. That was his goal in engaging with the media. The promotion of his book was his cause.

Yet, during the interview, he wasn't asked about his book. He was asked about financial policy, a subject

that he obviously was able to speak knowledgeably about. He did so, and the discussion was interesting – but then the segment ended. He never mentioned his book.

He'd lost his focus. The same thing happens too often to CEOs.

It's essential that new CEOs have a clear focus on the goal of their communication, and then are able to bridge back to the core message when necessary.

### **3. How to Show Passion**

Finally, your new CEO needs to [know how to show passion](#).

It may sound trite, but there are too many CEOs and companies that don't present any passion for what they do. They're businesslike to a fault. That approach is meant to come across as professionalism, but sometimes, it can come across as disinterest.

During one of our client trainings, we worked with a CEO who exuded an almost childlike enthusiasm when he talked about what he and his company were doing. He was clearly excited about what they were working on, and that enthusiasm bled into every aspect of his communication.

That kind of excitement is appealing. It's inspiring. And it gets results.

If your CEO is excited, that excitement spills over and out, and it goes a long way in creating positive communication.

So, how can your new CEO show passion? Well, it helps to be proactive about creating a conversational environment where passion comes out. For instance, it's easier to show passion when you stay on topic. If you get away from the area you're confident in, your energy goes down.

Additionally, communicative techniques like stories, anecdotes, and examples can help. Your new CEO probably has a firm grasp of data, but make sure that he or she is also prepared to speak in more narrative terms. Stories add excitement for the audience, and for the speaker, too.

Finally, new CEOs need to bring their own personalities into communication.

All of us know how we feel when our main goal is not to screw up. And, all of us know how we feel when we're genuinely excited to talk about something. The latter is much preferable to the former.

Passion for the message is essential.

### **[Is Your New CEO Ready?](#)**

Communicating well as a CEO is integral to doing the job – and it isn't easy. Is your new CEO ready?

If you want to make sure that the answer is yes, [get in touch with us](#). At the Ammerman Experience, we have decades of experience helping individuals learn to communicate well.

Don't leave your new CEO unprepared. After all, in the midst of change, good communication is something that never goes out of style.