

# Smoothing the path for your new CEO

CEOs hired from the outside have a lot to learn about their new companies in order to not only make good decisions, but also to be perceived as visionary leaders and successful implementers.

A new CEO asked us to develop an internal communication strategy that would not require him to be too visible, saying: "I don't want to become a communication icon." I dashed his hopes by telling him that he didn't have a choice about whether to be an icon, only what kind of icon. Even choosing to remain invisible would send a powerful communication message to his employees.

Some CEOs believe immediate, bold decisiveness makes them look more leader-like. Too often this leads to a lack of support from internal and external stakeholders who put enormous effort into actively blocking them. For example, imagine the reaction if a new CEO belittles operational and cultural aspects of a company that were built up by the beloved, but recently deceased, founder.

Successful CEO transitions often begin with a period of active listening to all stakeholders, especially when the new leader comes from another industry. Embedding more formal research processes into the CEO's decision-making approach further enhances the chances that he or she will make effective decisions – and be able to convince others to follow the path they lay out.

### Informal listening

A great way to introduce employees to a new leader is to start with a road trip. The leader should tour the operations, have lunch with local leaders and chat with employees on the job. This first round of visits should be focused on

the CEO asking questions of others about what's going well and what they think needs changing.

This could also be the time to test-drive possible new directions by asking employees how successful they think various new directions might be, or what the obstacles to success might be. This type of informal research gives a new leader a much clearer picture of the organization's true needs than just briefings from other executives.

### Pre-testing strategies and messages

Any new strategies spearheaded by the CEO should be pre-tested with a few focus groups to see what might be unclear or what unexpected concerns they might raise. For example, with one client, the originally planned statement about a diversity strategy included: "We need to become more highly diverse... 10 years from now, we will look a lot different." Very strong negative reactions in each focus group included:

- "Why is it going to take 10 years?"
- "'Look' implies only ethnicity, gender and age. What about education?"

Even though our policy says promotions to manager require either a college degree or 10 years' experience, no one without a degree is ever promoted."

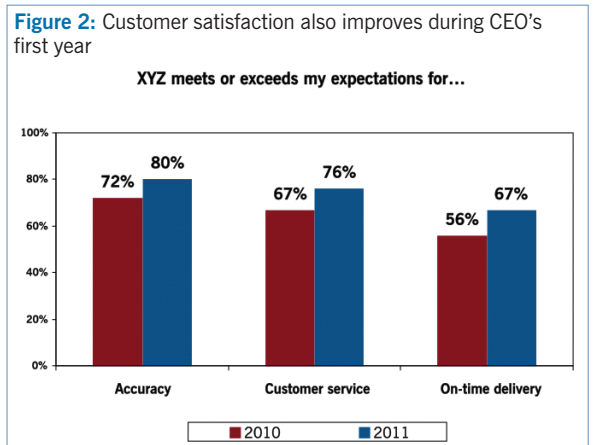
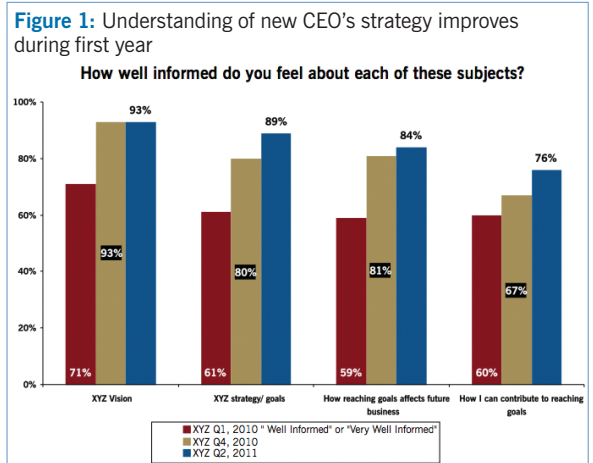
Changes made to this and other aspects of the strategy statement played a large role in how well the rollout eventually went.

### Calibrating the CEO's progress

A new CEO's arrival is often the perfect time to suggest conducting baseline surveys. There's no chance of embarrassment since any low scores won't reflect on the new executive. Figure 1 shows survey results from a client with a new CEO. During the first year after announcing his new strategy, understanding of various elements of the strategy improved strongly.

A customer satisfaction survey we conducted concurrently (see Figure 2) also showed strong improvements in the customer experience that were the goal of his strategy. In addition, write-in comments provided a great deal of guidance on what it would take to achieve higher scores in the future, providing highly actionable tactics for implementing the strategy.

Read our feature on CEO succession, page 40.



Source: graphs both © Sinickas Communications, Inc., 2011

**Angela Sinickas**, ABC, IABC Fellow, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions. For more information visit: [www.sinicom.com](http://www.sinicom.com)

