

Falling Star or Rising Star?

by Don Huse

Today's economy can be hazardous for company "rising stars." And you may be one of them — a valued and high-potential employee who has fallen off course or is heading there.

Mergers, acquisitions, downsizings and other upheavals that once took years to evolve now happen in months. These rapid changes are creating new rules in the workplace. Key employees are expected to quickly adapt to new cultures, altered priorities, different reporting systems, and new job descriptions and levels of accountability. High performers are expected to achieve the same level of performance as before.

Those who've been given additional responsibilities may find they lack some of the skills to handle the job effectively. And employees with outstanding skills wonder how their performance will be judged by the new regime. Confused by the changes and unsure of their status, they question their roles in the new order and their own capabilities. Some wait it out, hoping things will stabilize. Others start looking for new jobs. Some reveal it in behavioral changes. The organization suffers from inadequately performing employees and the individual suffers through a period of confusion.

What about the new stars? Welcomed with high expectations, they are expected to produce results immediately. But many run into trouble because they lack the internal support systems to facilitate these changes. It's hard to demonstrate results if you've not had the time to understand the company's culture and values, and learn who the chief stakeholders are, as well as their goals and deadlines.

A falling star situation can cause problems throughout the entire organization. It can affect worker morale, customer relations, productivity levels and efficiencies, and even profits. Losing and then finding and training talented people—a company's most valuable asset—is time-consuming and costly. Without talent, growth is likely to suffer.

What can you do to make sure your career path is on course and that you won't become a falling star? Consider the following:

Know your objectives. Request clearly defined job expectations that spell out the critical results for the organization and your responsibilities in meeting them. No matter how impressive your qualifications may be, you should know exactly what you are expected to accomplish. This will help you focus on the skills you have or must develop and issues that must be addressed.

Know the players. Identify the new bosses' priorities and standards for measuring performance and success. Many stars assume that if they were doing a great job in the old order, there's no reason to change. But the company's objectives have changed. What was a No. 1 priority yesterday may no longer apply today. Expect shifting priorities and be prepared to accept and adapt to new challenges.

Help your staff work through all the changes in the organization. It may take time to help them adapt to the new reality, but it will be a reflection of your leadership.

Know the rules. Get to know the acceptable behaviors and management style of the new order. A knowledge of unwritten rules, from dress code to reporting preferences, can avoid later surprises or disappointments.

Know your competition. Identify colleagues who are “friendlies” and those who are competing for the promotion you want. This will help you focus on people who can further your career while avoiding those who might hinder you.

Subtly let new management know what you’ve done in the past. While past victories won’t necessarily signal success in the new job or with a new regime, it can’t hurt to let the top brass learn as much as possible about the capabilities of their key people. You may have a critical skill that the company needs.

Know what’s important. If you don’t get that expected promotion or are transferred to a new location, find out the reasons for the decision so it is not misinterpreted. As an example, a company nearly lost one of its top executives because no one asked how she felt when she didn’t get an expected promotion. Within six months, her performance plummeted and she was within days of being fired. It wasn’t until someone asked how she was doing that she conveyed her disappointment and erosion of self-esteem. She felt the missed promotion was a sign that the company had little confidence in her. In actuality, her abilities were never questioned and she was always considered a valued employee. The new person was a better fit for the job.

Be sensitive to possible negative reactions to your promotion or if you’re a new recruit. Others may not share your happiness. Who was passed over? How will colleagues feel about a friend not getting promoted? Is there resentment that someone was brought in from the outside? If so, your chances for success may have been compromised because support systems have been sabotaged.

Take risks. After a company upheaval most people keep a low profile. This might be your chance to take a creative risk and stand out. Take a close look at what can be done to improve a particular company process and share your ideas with the stakeholders. Avoid decision paralysis. The greater the risk, the greater the reward.

These are exciting times for American businesses with tremendous opportunities for growth. Now is the time for the stars to rise.

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