

Identifying Your New Leader's Rivals

Detect, defuse and bring them back into the fold

 By Linda Reese



You've made a great hire, recruiting a top candidate away from your biggest competitor. As an HR partner supporting this high-level leader, you are making it a priority to see that their onboarding is smooth and thorough. As you ready a place for the leader, taking care of many arrangements and details, don't forget to do one very important thing: identify the person(s) who could be this new leader's undoing.

When we prepare our clients for new leader transitions, one of the most important questions we ask hiring managers and HR partners is, "who might be considered a rival of the new leader?" More often than not, they tell us that because the best

candidate was chosen there is no real rival for the role. By that strict, logical definition they may be correct, but it is most often the emotional impact of hiring decisions that spawns true rivals. In many cases, there is someone close to the new leader who is unhappy about the hire – whether they were interviewed but not chosen, or not even considered for the role at all. Unhappiness with the new leader can also emanate from those who held the interim role but weren't selected for the permanent position, or those strongly aligned with the former incumbent.

In any of these scenarios, the rival may hold perceptions not based in logic, and it is crucial for the HR partners of new leaders

to be aware of the often subtle emotional dynamics of rivalry. It is the rare rival who overtly takes on, or tries to undermine, the new leader. The hidden toll of rivalry is actually more insidious – for rivals often reveal themselves more by what they don't do. Undetected, the rival's failure to support the new leader can have multiple negative impacts on their target's effectiveness – sometimes to the point of unseating the newcomer from their role.

One of the primary emotions behind some instances of rivalry is envy. In the article *Envy at Work*, Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson cite results from a recent 10-year study of executives that examined the impact of envy in the workplace. These researchers note that those who direct jealousy at another can generate a host of problems by becoming distant to or acting disinterested in the focus of their envy, introducing negativity to the team, and damaging relationships – all which impede success. In addition, those experiencing this strong emotional reaction are likely to lose focus on their objectives and thus become ineffective. The research also indicates that some may even become obsessed with the productivity and activity of their target – a very disruptive misuse of energy.

As destructive as rivals can be, we must also realize that they are important to success of your new leaders in many ways. Potential rivals understand the culture, other leaders, and often know “where the bodies are buried.” They also have key historical, functional, and technical knowledge. Failure to bring rivals into the fold can result in missteps and missed opportunities, as well as incomplete or fragmented team formation. Strained relationships can lead to increased misunderstanding and misattribution of motive, and block essential communication.

The Costs of Rivalry

While some think of rivalries as a normal part of office politics, they can be corrosive. Some of the costs include:

- Failed initiatives
- Undermined trust
- Lack, or distortion, of communication
- Insufficient knowledge transfer
- Decreased team morale/engagement and overall effectiveness
- Reduced risk-taking and innovation
- Lost potential for collaboration
- Derailed leaders – if not attended to properly, rivals can unseat new leaders.

Workplace warfare – whether open or veiled – is destructive in ways that defy calculation. The good news is that there are steps you can take in detecting, and even heading-off, the negative impacts of rivalry with your newly-placed leaders.

8 Steps to Detect and Defuse Rivalry – Bringing Rivals into the Fold

The most important thing to remember here is that emotion, not logic, carries the day. The people around the new leader who feel injured by the appointment may not have openly expressed interest in the role, but feel hurt, nonetheless. The path to moving beyond those emotions may not be obvious, but it does exist:

1) Develop an understanding of the impact of the rivalry. Once you have a sense of the causes and consequences of rivalry, identify your role in defusing or preventing potential conflict. You may want to tackle the issues directly with the rival, or work behind the scenes with the new leader. Whichever way you handle it, focusing on detachment and logic will be a useful approach.

2) Identify individuals who may wish they had gotten the role (or strongly regret the departure of the former leader). If they say they didn't want the role, consider that they may be trying to hide their disappointment.

3) Look for unusual behavior – either behaving too aggressively toward the new leader, or acting in a way that is disrespectful or challenging.

4) Monitor the extent to which those around the new leader are actively supporting the transition – educating the new leader about culture, work processes, performance expectations and ways to get things done. Of special importance is the detection of those who are failing to support the new leader. It's often not what they do, but what they don't do that gives rivals away.

5) Encourage the new leader to seek out and act on feedback in a way that will give them insight into the concerns of their colleagues/rivals. Mentors can be especially helpful here.

6) Support the new leader in taking actions that will include and engage the rivals in the important work of the team. You may choose to not directly identify the rivals for the new leader, but instead ask for their appraisal of their key stakeholders (including what motivates them, how to most effectively engage them).

7) Use feedback from your talent management process to help the new leader support the development and promotability of those aspiring to different or higher-level roles. Knowing that someone is actively focused on their development, and gaining actionable insight into the reason(s) they didn't get selected for the desired role can go a long way to soothing the hurt feelings of the passed-over.

8) Stay connected to the new leader and their team, monitor behavioral changes over time, and adjust your strategy as needed.

As a key partner to the leader transitioning into a new role, you have the opportunity to help them set the course to rapid ramp-up and high performance. Recognizing and attending to the challenges brought by rivalry not only benefits the new leader, but also supports your talent management process – and it proves to be a preventative measure against future employee relations issues. **LE**



Linda Reese is the Managing Partner of Leader OnBoarding, a management consulting and coaching firm specializing in fostering the success of newly-placed executives. She has professional training in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and is a member of the Executive Education faculty at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business. She is certified in a number of assessment tools and consulting methodologies. Email linda.reese@leaderonboarding.com

