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Just as we become habituated to a country's culture — we know the "right answer" when someone asks us how we're doing, or which topics are off-limits with casual acquaintances — the same thing happens in corporate life. We develop an unwritten understanding of how interactions should go, and it can be jarring when we trip across unexpected fault lines.

As an executive coach focused on leadership communication, I've spent the past decade working with senior leaders on how to position themselves effectively with new colleagues and stakeholders. Here are four strategies that can help ease your transition into a new environment.

Solicit opinions before offering your own.

Coming into a new environment, you may have been briefed by the board, CEO, or hiring committee, but you can't necessarily rely on that information. Like all humans, they have their biases and blind spots, and they may be unaware of behind-the-scenes dynamics, like employees who are feuding, or those who exert disproportionate political influence within the department or team.

Before going "on the record" with your agenda ("We're going to close the Tokyo office"), it's important to meet both individually and as a group with your new colleagues and employees to suss out potential pitfalls (the head of the Tokyo office is close with a powerful customer), uncover new options, or identify potential allies who share your philosophy. You can ask open-ended questions such as:

- What do you think we're doing really well?
- What do you think we could improve?
- If you could change anything about your job, or about how we do business, what would it be?

You may end up making the exact changes you envisioned at the outset. But at a minimum, you'll be more aware of risks and in a better position to mitigate them — and to the extent that your new team shares your vision, you can position yourself as a change agent acting on their behalf, rather than a wrecking ball coming in from outside.

Recognize that a mandate for change has limits.

This is a particular trap for new, high-level leaders. You may have been brought in with the understanding that the previous regime was broken, and it's your job to fix it. To please the board or the CEO, you "hit the ground running" by firing or reshuffling personnel, launching new initiatives, and jettisoning old ones — exactly what you've been told to do.

But it's quite possible that your peers and employees don't share the decision-makers' bleak assessment, and they may be offended by the idea that their work needs "cleaning up." They may rebel against you, either directly or via passive-aggressive compliance, or back-channel complaints to leadership. The board or CEO will support you for a while, but if the din gets too loud, they may decide backing you isn't worth the political capital. Indeed, I once coached a high-level executive who successfully implemented the change agenda he'd been given, but whose job was in peril because he'd alienated his team badly in the process.

Identify a "cultural mentor."

Just as you might when taking an overseas posting, look for a cultural mentor who can help you interpret and navigate the implicit codes of your new environment. Look for someone who has a deep understanding of the corporate terrain, wants you to succeed, and doesn't have an overt political agenda that could cloud their perspective or cause them to give you biased information. Possibilities might include former company employees that you know through social or professional circles, or respected colleagues in other offices or departments.

Control your narrative.

If your new corporate culture is vastly different, it's inevitable that you'll trip up at some point: Your feedback at the pitch meeting will come across as way too harsh, or your team will complain you didn't consult them sufficiently, or the working group will move too slowly because they didn't realize you were *serious* about the project being a priority.

Of course, some of this is a matter of personality quirks and leadership style — but they get magnified when you enter a culture that, as a whole, operates much differently than you've come to expect. If you've come from a hard-charging environment and act accordingly, you run the risk of being pigeonholed as "overly aggressive," and if your last job emphasized consensus and collective agreement, you may be tarred as too "kumbaya" to get results.

If you feel you're being misunderstood or that your intentions aren't coming through clearly, point out the cultural difference, which is likely invisible to your new colleagues (like the fish who asks "what's water?"). "I'm sorry if my feedback came across as too harsh," you could say. "That was a common way of expressing things at my last company, but I've come to understand it may not be the most effective strategy here. I'm going to take note of that for the future."

As long as you don't act like you're complaining, or negatively comparing your new workplace to the old one, people will often cut you some slack as you adjust. The key is observing those nuances carefully and ensuring you don't repeat your mistakes.

We often assume that if we're successful at one company, that will automatically translate to another. But even small cultural differences can add up and create a cascade of misunderstanding, damaging your ability to succeed at your new job. By following these strategies, you can pick up on subtle cultural codes faster and ensure a smoother transition.

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