

HOW TO FILL BIG SHOES

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By **Satish Purohit**

It's challenging to take over the reins from someone who's been a hit at work. Here's how to do it with finesse.

From top: The new spinoff of Kiefer Sutherland starrer 24 has Corey Hawkins in the lead role; the actor feels pressured to match up; Executive, Girija D'Silva learnt that it's important to give yourself time to get on top of things; Brigadier Sushil Bhasin says it's vital for new leaders to win the trust of team mates; Development coach, Nina Lehl: "You can't compete with the memory of a person"; Professional storyteller Preeti Bapat says it takes time to adjust to any new job

Stepping into the shoes of a much-loved success is no cake walk — just ask Vishal Sikka, CEO and MD of IT giant Infosys. When you take over from one who was something of a rock star at work, the transition is bound to be riddled with challenges.

Comparisons can be cumbersome, and you also have to win over the hearts of team mates whose loyalties remain pledged to your predecessor. American actor Corey Hawkins knows how difficult it can be. Hawkins, who plays the lead role in the new spin-off of the hit TV show 24, admitted to an interviewer that he felt the pressure — his predecessor, Kiefer Sutherland's performance as Jack Bauer, after all, earned him two Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe. And it's not easy to exorcise the ghost of illustrious predecessors. So, how do you step out of a giant's shadow? Team leaders and those who have dealt with the situation share tips.

Communicate clearly

"To subordinates, the entry of a new boss signifies change, and it's only human to resist change," says 45-year-old Satish Rikhari, an ex-banker and education entrepreneur. Rikhari used to work for a multinational bank and headed a team that was scattered across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. "Sure, you're being brought in to change the way things work, but it's wise to ease your team into the changes you have in mind. Start by communicating your plans and goals clearly — colleagues should understand what is expected of them. There is bound to be some resistance — there will always be some who remain faithful to your predecessor — but keep at it and you can be certain that once your method starts showing results, everyone will get on board," Rikhari explains.

Give it time

32-year-old Girija D'Silva, who has been heading the research and development department of Global Advertisers, an outdoor advertising concern, for over a year and a half now, underscores the importance of "handover time" with her experience. When D'Silva who's been with the same company for close to five years, was asked, on short notice, to take over from the executive assistant to the MD of the company, she only managed to pull off the role "for a disastrous couple of months," she recalls. "I didn't get enough time to understand the position and its responsibilities and, consequently, I found I just couldn't cope with the pressure."

"My predecessor was an extremely efficient person. She had risen to her position through over seven years of hard work, and when I was asked to take over the reins, I didn't have the time to acclimatise, to prepare for the new role. It was all so sudden. Then, I was being compared to my predecessor

constantly, and of course, I was found wanting. It was not long before I was given a new role,” says D’Silva, who feels, “it’s vital to take some time to settle into your new job — if you try to deliver based on unreasonable expectations, you’re just going to end up stumbling over your own feet.”

Thirty-four-year-old Preeti Bapat, a professional storyteller, had a similar experience. When she took up a new responsibility at an educational company in 2010, she found, “There was little time to adjust to the new environment. I was expected to manage training schedules for 2,000 people a week. I had other deliverables that were to be executed before the end of the year, and it was already September when I joined. It was a struggle but I managed the show well and to this day it amazes me how calm I remained through such a turbulent time,” Bapat adds. In hindsight, she says, “It’s probably a good idea to ask your subordinates and superiors to allow you some time and room. That will not just help you stay calm, it will help you organise yourself better.”

Be your own hero

“When one takes over from someone who has been a success at work, one fear is that the newcomer may be in awe of her or his predecessor. In extreme cases, this can make you lose sight of your own strengths, abilities and even cloud your judgment,” says KS Praveen, CEO of HR firm, Human Touch.

“If you feel your predecessor had a magnetic personality and you do not, remind yourself of the areas in which you excel: you may be great at strategising, giving directions, at managing people and, most importantly, at getting results.”

Thirty-seven-year-old Neha Lehl, an organisational development coach, stresses that one must never strive to live up to the image of a larger-than-life predecessor. “It’s not possible to compete with the memory of a person,” says Lehl. “Stop trying to meet the expectations that people had of the person who held the position before you. It will just distract you, and keep you from completing your tasks efficiently. Instead, you must aspire to lend your own individual flavour to the role. Treat your colleagues respectfully, stand up for your team and support them, and with each success, their memory of your predecessor will fade a little more.”

It all begins with acceptance

Forty-five-year-old Jayesh Sampat, a senior HR leader with Liberty Videocon General Insurance, says that, in his experience, the best way to take over from someone successful is to begin by truthfully accepting and acknowledging the successes of the predecessor. “I did this myself and I found it brought my team around to seeing that I am not here to undo the good work that they have already done along with the previous leader. The team felt that their efforts were duly acknowledged and they were then ready to work with me to build on what they had created.”

Honest introspection

Sampat adds, “I made an honest list of my strengths and deficiencies and gauged where my team could help me make up for my weaknesses. I engaged their help and involved them in decision making. Then, after the first 90 days, I took stock of the success the above strategy had achieved.”

Win their trust

Brigadier Sushil Bhasin, a corporate transformational facilitator, says it’s vital for new leaders to win the trust of their team. Bhasin who has conducted over 500 management development programs with over 300 companies. “Connecting with the team is a new leader’s primary responsibility. Once trust is established, communication becomes easy and once the lines of communication are clear, one is no longer perceived as an outsider.”

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga, a corporate etiquette coach, offers a few tips on how to build trust. “Firstly, always say what you mean and mean what you say,” she says. “Use the fewest words with the fewest syllables to communicate. Be specific. Speak to be understood, and allow your colleagues to see that you are genuinely concerned about their situation. Studies show this helps build trust.” Finally, she adds, “Listen to your team mates — that means paying attention to both, what they’re saying as well as what’s between the lines. And, always answer questions with precision, politeness and to the satisfaction of the querent.”

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