

# Bringing In A COO

FRANCIE DALTON EXPLAINS HOW TO DETERMINE IF YOU NEED TO HIRE A COO

**ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT** bringing a COO into your organization? This article will help you assess the wisdom of such a decision and succeed in the selection process.

## THE CHECKLIST

Consider using this checklist to determine whether bringing on a COO is really the right decision:

### 1. Validate the need.

Why are you as the CEO considering bringing in a COO? What work can you no longer afford to do yourself? Is your board insisting that you expand your external role such that internal managerial duties will have to be delegated? Is your expertise in selected functional areas inadequate to effectively manage some of your executives? If so, bringing in a COO may indeed be the right move.

Imagine the new COO is on board and ask yourself: What meetings will you stop attending? Who will make which decisions? Who will lose what responsibilities? How will the budgeting process change? What's going to stop? What will change for whom?

Look long and hard at what challenges your organization will face during the next five years. What changes are you expecting?



What do you hope a COO could offer when facing those changes?

### 2. Assess your willingness to allow autonomy.

A COO has to be a strong individual. His or her style can't be contradictory to yours as the CEO because that would impede alignment. But the style can and probably should be different—if for no other reason than to underscore that you've not hired a clone. Are you really willing to allow a different style of management? Are you willing to allow the COO to make decisions without consulting you? Have

you honestly considered whether you're prepared to surrender this degree of control?

### 3. Determine your receptivity to scrutiny.

How willing are you to openly discuss your decisions, reveal how you think and answer questions about the way you handled specific interactions? This degree of transparency is crucial to making the COO effective as your leadership partner. Absolute candor is a requirement for the success of this relationship. Are you prepared to grant this degree of scrutiny? >>

#### 4. Assess your risk.

Accept that there will be both practical and emotional difficulties attendant to your decision to bring on a COO. Accept that there will be hurt feelings among your direct reports, and there may be a price to pay. Decide in advance whether it's worth it.

#### 5. Double-check your expectations. Are they reasonable?

Don't trick yourself into thinking that bringing in a COO will solve all your problems or free you up right away. Instead, establish clear expectations for the COO position, making sure you can articulate the measurable outcomes you expect to be achieved within specified time frames. Realize also that it's going to take a few weeks for your organization to settle down and begin to adapt to this change once it occurs.

#### THE SELECTION PROCESS

Once you've affirmed the need for a COO, the next challenge is to implement as flawlessly as possible the process of hiring the best person for the job. The following recommendations can help you avoid predictable mistakes:

- **Evaluate the candidate as well as the credentials.**

Don't be so enamored by the candidate's credentials and background that you impute managerial competence and fail to assess behavioral fit. The ability to generate desired outcomes just isn't enough. If the candidate's management style is antithetical to the needs of the VPs, it won't work. Rather, consider what management behaviors will be effective with your executives.

- **Steel yourself against the seduction of "star" quality.**

The concept of what constitutes good management can get clouded with a candidate's political prowess. It can be challenging to stay focused on the fact that dazzling political connections have little to do with one's ability to manage others. (Attorneys, for example, are a frequent but wrong choice for the COO role in non-legal firms.) Those who have been trained and rewarded as individual performers can, most certainly, be high achievers but are unlikely to possess management savvy as a component of their skill set. One's reputation outside the organization, no matter how illustrious, cannot compensate for a lack of managerial capability.

- **Realize there will be a learning curve.**

Don't assume that because this is such a high-level hire for which only the brightest will be considered, the successful candidate will be able to figure everything out on his or her own without any help from you and without any period of orientation or training. Instead, realize your own success is in part contingent upon making this hire successful. Permit the new COO to shadow you, include him or her in key meetings and encourage questions about your decisions and your methods.

- **Draw significant comparisons.**

Rigorously compare your organizational culture and that of your candidate's past employers. Make sure you hire a COO whose exposure to other organizational cultures is like yours or is like the culture you want to create.

- **Take your time.**

Don't bow to the pressure to

hurry up and get someone on board. You must subordinate your desire for quick success to the need for sustained success.

- **Your "set-up" will determine the success of this initiative.**

Getting the respect of the VPs quickly is a key component of the success of this hire. Clarify for those impacted by this hire why this position is in the best interests of the organization. Ask them what competencies and behaviors they consider to be most important in a COO.

- **Guard against hiring in your own image.**

You're not looking for a clone or a best friend. In fact, the skillset you're recruiting in a COO may reflect your weaknesses. Know what they are and be willing to hire accordingly.

- **Rely on more than personal attraction.**

Don't hire based just on chemistry and coffee. Instead, identify the behavioral characteristics with which your organization can and cannot work and be relentless in the interviewing process to reveal these. Identify the leadership qualities you seek and inquire specifically about these characteristics when checking references.

By using this checklist to determine whether your organization should bring in a COO and these recommendations to help avoid selection mistakes, you have the necessary tools to assess the wisdom of your decision and succeed in the selection process. **PPB**



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