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Coping without a boss could give you the chance to show what you're made of

HOW TO SURVIVE WITHOUT A COMMS LEADER

The sudden departure of the person who heads up your comms team could be an unexpected crisis – or a chance to step up and prove your worth. Liz Guthridge provides a survival plan for those managing without a boss, guaranteed to make a difference to both your organization and your own professional development.

What happens if the top employee communication job in your organization becomes vacant? In other words, what do you do if you don't have a boss for a while? Besides doing lots of extra work, here are some actions that'll give you a healthier perspective on the situation and help you make a difference.

On a personal level:

- **Actively seek out trusted advisors.** Consider what type of advice would be most helpful to you. For example, political counsel? Technical support? A sounding board? Seek out people inside and outside your organization. External advisors (or at least those not in your department or group) can generally keep you from getting too isolated and insulated in your daily work.
- **Take time for professional development.** Keep commitments for classes, seminars, webinars and other programs you've enrolled for, even if you're feeling overworked and underpaid. If your calendar is bare of these events, enroll now. You'll get some fresh ideas and meet some new people – maybe even your new boss.
- **Reflect on your career aspirations.** Take time to look “up and out” rather than just “down and in” while you're doing all your extra work. You've got a great opportunity during this period of flux to mull over what you want to do next,

including what type of boss and co-workers you want.

To support your comms function:

- **Encourage and support junior staff.** Even if you don't aspire to be the group's leader just yet, serve as a mentor/coach for junior staff members. They'll respect and appreciate you. So will senior staff – especially if you prevent morale from plummeting, productivity from dropping and any more staff members from leaving.
- **Guard against waste.** Without anyone accountable for employee communication, two wasteful actions tend to happen. Communication staff (or people outside the function) can create and distribute information independently. Employees lose precious time plowing through it all, which just adds to the waste. Also, various projects can start, stall and restart, which wastes resources. If you can't take charge, alert those who care about these issues.
- **Promote metrics.** Recognize that gut feelings can't replace good metrics, especially if there's a shortage of experience. Instead, good data can

help define success, determine whether you're on the right course and demonstrate ROI. Also, the metrics will be very helpful to your incoming boss, who'll appreciate inheriting a progressive staff.

For your organization:

- **Guide leaders, don't just follow them.** Make sure you're actively supporting leaders, including helping them meet with employees face to face. Also, be sure to track emerging issues and hot spots that could adversely affect leaders' credibility and employee productivity. If you need help, call on others in your department, or ask a senior person in HR or a trusted consultant to work with you.
- **Take time to engage with key audiences, don't just e-mail them.** Other key individuals – not just executives – also need attention. In your regular role, you may not spend time socializing with individuals across functions. However, you need to get out of your comfort zone and constantly reach out to critical stakeholders. Give them a chance to tell you what's on their mind and what they're concerned about. You need to sense when there's trouble brewing, such as a change effort hitting a wall.
- **Plan, don't just react.** When you're resource-constrained, it's easy to spend the majority of your time responding to requests. But if you're reacting all the time, you won't be planning or setting priorities or anticipating organizational needs. As a stopgap measure, develop a transition plan that addresses the period between now and when the new communication leader joins. This plan will help you operate offensively, not just defensively.

By taking these steps, you can better manage the stress and uncertainty of working without a boss. You'll also improve your own skills and morale, while doing great work for your department and organization.



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