

Navigating Leadership Transition with Difficult Executive

ICF International

VALUE / SCOPE

Team retention and performance under pressure

SITUATION

When my long-standing VP, who had trusted my judgment and empowered my autonomy for years, left the organization, he was replaced by a new executive with a very different leadership style. The new leader was directive, highly skeptical of inherited staff, and questioned nearly every decision made under the previous leadership. Within weeks he overturned strategies, challenged my long-standing programs, and signaled that nothing built before his arrival was to be taken at face value. This created friction not only for me but for the more than six hundred personnel and multiple programs I oversaw. Morale declined, Directors voiced concerns about instability, and the risk to customer satisfaction, CPARS, and revenue execution grew.

TASK

My task was to rebuild trust upward with a leader who did not initially trust the team he inherited, maintain stability downward for Directors and teams who were beginning to feel uncertainty, and ensure continuity of mission delivery while integrating the new executive's priorities without losing the operational excellence and strategic alignment we had already established.

ACTION

I immediately scheduled recurring one-on-one sessions with the new VP to walk him through program financials, pipeline health, CPARS performance, risks, and staffing. I adapted my communication style from high-level executive summaries to the deeper, tactical detail he preferred. I created weekly operational posture reports tailored to him, documented decisions and actions more formally, and increased transparency around risk drivers and mitigations. Internally, I met with each Director to reinforce stability, communicated what would and would not change, and shielded them from unnecessary churn by centralizing upward communications through myself. When the new VP proposed changes that introduced risk, I respectfully challenged decisions using data, customer impact assessments, and operational risk models. Once decisions were final, I committed fully and executed to demonstrate alignment.

RESULT

Within ninety days, the new VP stated that I had become his "most reliable operator," delegated to me more strategic responsibility than any other leader on his staff, and increasingly relied on my judgment. My teams regained confidence, morale rebounded, and all programs maintained strong CPARS performance above 4.6. Revenue, pipeline development, and customer engagement continued uninterrupted, and the broader organization stabilized despite the turbulence other divisions experienced. Ultimately, the VP expanded my scope of responsibility after observing my operational rigor, leadership stability, and ability to navigate a difficult executive transition effectively.

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