

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

### Executive Integration: Why This Process and Why Now?

With Mr. Mike Burroughs, Managing Director and Integration Practice Leader at Sheer Velocity

**JOE:** Hello. This is Joe Scherrer with The Leadership Crucible; I'd like to welcome you to this interview with Mr. Mike Burroughs. He is the author of *Before On-boarding: How to Integrate New Leaders for Quick and Sustained Results*. We'll hear more about that as we go through this interview. He is a managing director and the executive integration practice leader at Sheer Velocity, which is an executive recruiting firm that specializes in integrating executives into new positions. Mike has vast experience in this area as a veteran global executive recruiter, three time organizational development executive for Fortune 500 companies, a board certified executive coach, and he served our nation as an army colonel, retiring in that position. So Mike, you've done quite a lot. That's quite an impressive resume and I'm happy to have you here.

**MIKE:** Thank you, I'm very happy to be here, Joe.

**JOE:** Our topic today is integrating new executives, why this process and why now? So Mike, let's start off with the obvious question. What exactly is executive integration?

**MIKE:** Executive integration is a term we give to a process for integrating new leaders in to their job before they get there. We call this process, Pre-Boarding. We begin this process when a new leader accepts an offer, and we complete it 90 days after the start date.

**JOE:** Why this process, and why is it important now?

**MIKE:** Well the statistics are pretty grim, Joe, about executive attrition. There have been several studies, going all the way back to 2001. You just take into consideration that there are 500,000 managers in the Fortune 500 that change jobs every year. That's not counting every other organization there is. That's just in the U.S. alone. Then, 40-50% of them depending on one study (another study said 30%+) don't make it. The majority of those who fail, do so within two years. These studies also show that what happens to new leaders in the first 90 days, has a significant bearing on their long-term success. Our process is designed to maximize every minute of those three months, and actually get them up to speed quicker. Another study about ramp up time came out showing that it takes 6 months, and yet another study said 6-9 months, for a new leader to get up to speed and returning more value than he/she has consumed.

Our process is designed to get them up to speed in weeks rather than months and have them focus on doing the right things, get early wins and avoid land mines that could

derail them. It's facilitator led, and involves interviewing the boss of the new leader, and the peers and direct reports--a 360 interview--documenting the information gathered into what we call a "blueprint for success," and keep in mind the new leader hasn't started yet. We meet with the new leader to debrief that blueprint, then we kick off the new leader's new job, the morning of the first day, with a meeting that we host with the new leader and direct reports, and we stay in touch with the boss and the new leader at thirty-day increments for 90 days to make sure that the blueprint is followed. We do that in conjunction with executive searches we perform, and we also do it for executives that have been recruited by the organization or through some other search firm. Our process and our outcomes are the same; moreover, we do it for people that are being promoted from within.

**JOE:** We'll go back to what you said about that grim statistics of executives changing jobs, that 40-50% of them are not working out. That's an incredible investment that a firm puts forth bringing on those executives into very responsible positions and that's not a very good average.

**MIKE:** No it's not, and I think the listeners to this podcast are probably very accustomed to seeing a lot of scrutiny in the selection process for new leaders, while virtually nothing is being done in most organizations once they get there. It's amazing how much investment goes in to hiring people but they just rely on hope when these new leaders get started. I think it's safe to say that hope is not a strategy. We've got a strategy.

**JOE:** both of us have a military background and that was drilled in to us along the way. Hope is not a strategy; you have to have a strategy for the desired outcomes that you're looking for. That seems to me what your process is. How did you arrive at this concept?

**MIKE:** Well you mentioned our military backgrounds, Joe, and back in the early 80s, I was assigned as a young captain on the General Staff. and we had a new leader come in. They had an organization development officer on the post that came and did a new leader integration process for us. But it only went for three hours, involved direct reports and a series of briefings of what we'd done and planned to do, and where we were having issues, making sure this leader is up and running the first day. All of that was useful, and in that environment, extremely useful. But as I was going through this process, I said, this thing has a lot of promise and I was already thinking of doing it in other environments, like the private sector for example. And I said to myself, if I'm ever in a position to transition a new leader effectively, there is a lot of room for improvement in this process and I'll design one to do that. Many years later I was vice president of organizational development for a company and we were having issues with new leaders not working out or taking too long to get up to speed. It brought me back to those days when I was in the army. I said, I'm going to develop that process

now. So I did, and I tweaked it along the way. It turned out to be very successful. That's how it came to pass.

**JOE:** So, personal experience observing a process that had a lot of promise, and you took it and brought it to the commercial world essentially. How does executive integration compare to on-boarding? On-boarding is a term most people have heard of, or intuitively understand, but your process is a little different.

**MIKE:** Yeah, it is. In fact, in the title of my book I was trying to get this point across right from the start. The title of the book is *Before Onboarding*; it's not done in lieu of on-boarding, it's done in addition to. That's why we call it "pre-boarding," because our process is focused on the results of this new leader and getting them up to speed quickly. On-boarding processes are also designed to minimize the integration time of any new employee coming into an organization, but there are very few that on-board leaders differently. I did a study several months ago and talked to a few companies that have an executive integration process of sorts. All of them are different, but most where new leaders are concerned are not unique, and ours is extremely unique. It's designed around the concept of hitting the ground running and knowing exactly what you should do.

**JOE:** I can recall back to leadership positions that I was put into. Hit the ground running also came with sink or swim. So, I think it occurs more often than we care to think in the business world in general. So what you're talking about is actually starting the process before they enter the organization, is that right?

**MIKE:** That's right. I mentioned earlier that it's facilitator-led; a person with a good coaching background uses our methodology and starts as soon as an offer is accepted. Or if it's an internal promotion, as soon as the organization decides to move someone to a new position; the risks are the same. All we ask if you do it with an internal promotion is to delay the start date of that new leader until the process has begun. It takes a few weeks before an outside hire starts, but with an internal promotion, people will make that decision in one week and they often start the next week. We can't do a good integration process without a little bit of a start date delay on the internal promotion.

**JOE:** I understand the basics and, say I'm a CEO, or the Head of HR, Why should I even care about this? Times are tough, budgets are getting cut, and we're grabbing at fish. What's the rationale of investing in something like this?

**MIKE:** You mentioned driving efficiencies. That's what I run into all the time. What you don't see with new leaders coming on-board, though, is the cost associated with failure being taken in to consideration. and that's why a CEO or head of HR needs to take a different look at this. The costs are substantial when a new leader fails, one study said as much as 20x their annual compensation, and that's just in the money. When you look

at the fact that sometimes a new leader comes to work either poorly integrated or not integrated at all, if left to chance, a lot of things could happen. It's all about money, surely, but more so than just the expense of doing a new leader integration process. The costs associated with slow ramp-up times or failure must be taken into consideration.

**JOE:** Right, that makes a lot of sense. You're making it an upfront investment to ensure the success of someone that's important to your organization.

**MIKE:** Right. And if you think about the investment, if in our case we're doing an executive search, there is a fee associated with that search and there is also an incremental cost on top of that to do this integration process, which lasts anywhere from 6-8 days over a 120 day period. It's pretty labor intensive. But, the costs are minimal.

**JOE:** In getting that person up to speed quickly, hitting the ground running as you mentioned, productivity increases as you're shrinking that ramp up time. They're quickly making a difference in the organization. I'll say this Mike. I've talked about this to a number of business leaders around town and everyone of them within two or three minutes of me just sketching out what you have here, every one of them gets it, and inevitably the comment I get back is, "Wow, we could really use something like that." Because they understand how valuable it is having a person in a leadership position ready to go right out of the blocks; how important it is for their success and for the success of the organization.

**MIKE:** I've experienced the same thing, Joe. In fact, I've had a lot of CEOs, presidents and C-Level executives say, "I sure wish I had had a process like that at my last job." Because people tend to personalize it once they know the value of this process. That helps them make their decision about having other people go through it.

**JOE:** I can relate to that, as can you being transferred from assignment to assignment where continuity is often times non-existent. So you're relying on your wits and your personal experience, but you're lacking the vital insight that this process provides that will help you with getting off on that right foot. I get it Mike. I understand; there is a definite financial benefit here. What are the steps of your process?

**MIKE:** Well the first thing we have to do is have the right integrator doing the work. Some organizations have these people internally, or they can go outside and recruit a pool of coaches, who would be briefed on how to do this. In our case, we do it in conjunction with the executive search assignment. There are various ways to get the integrator coach. Then the second step in the process is that the pool of candidates need to know that, if hired, they would be going through this process. In our case, they talk to me; they get a copy of my book. This lays out for them what they are going to experience, then, the interviews begin. I interview the new leader's boss; the next step is

to interview the peers of the individual, and any other stakeholders that may exist, a key client for example, or a board member.

Then the next step is to interview all the direct reports. The idea is you are interviewing about this position the boss, peers, direct reports about this position, focusing on the first 90 days. All of those questions attributable to the person you ask. There is one question that we ask that is an anonymous question. We ask the direct reports, "What do you want to know about your new leader?" That generates a lot of really tough questions; we do that for a reason. So when the kickoff meeting happens, the new leader will be answering, right away, those anonymous questions. The whole idea is for the new leader to communicate transparency and authenticity, because one of the things you run into is their direct reports haven't yet decided how trustworthy communication can be with the new leader.

This process is designed to break down those barriers before midday the first day on the job. I've seen this happen many times. Body language shifts after about 20 minutes. People start to think, that's a really tough question and I like the way it was answered. I think we can communicate. Prior to that kick off meeting, the next step is to document all the answers to the interview questions, package it into the blueprint for success, and give that document to the new leader who is still packing boxes somewhere. After 2-3 days of reviewing it, making notes, etc., we meet with the new leader face-to-face and go over that document line-by-line, page-by-page. At that point we're doing executive coaching. I tell my participants in this process that for a day or two, I know more about your job than anybody because I've talked to everybody.

So take this information to heart. I give some tips that came out of the process, things they need to know, emphasizing what not to do for example.

An interesting question that comes out of this process is, What must this leader avoid at all costs? Some of the questions relate to how things were done under the previous leader, so the idea is that every conceivable problem is identified and matched with a piece of guidance regarding what to do and when to do it.

After the kick off meeting occurs, we tell the new leader, you need to meet face-to-face with everybody that contributed to this process, and do it quickly. The beauty of that is when they are meeting with their peers, for example, for the first time, they know exactly how their peers answered questions that were asked. So, they can go there with some information--key information.

One of the questions I like to ask for example is, "What do you want this new leader to do differently than the previous leader that will help you do your job better?" I remember doing one of these processes once, where the person I was interviewing looked at me and said, "If he would just return my phone calls, we'll get off to a good start." It turned out the previous leader was notoriously bad for returning calls. I've

heard every answer imaginable to that question, but at least the new leader knows going in what they can do with a peer to step off on the right foot. Everything we can do to make this new hire successful is our goal, and we follow up. The blueprint is there to for the new leader to follow, and at 30, 60, and 90 days we meet with the boss and new leader, and we refer to the blueprint and do a check-in. How is the new leader doing in relation to all the guidance that had been given by the new leader's manager? Sometimes priorities have changed, and the new leader can re-adjust. At the end of 90 days, we feel we've covered that critical 90-day period. Although we've had a lot of people come back and say it'd be great if we had an executive coach stay for 6-12 months to do this. Being a veteran executive coach, I hardly support that. But at the end of 90 days our process pretty much ends.

**JOE:** The distinction is that you're starting before the leader actually takes their position in the organization, and what you're doing is you're following through systematically through those first 90 days, with the potential to follow on with a coaching relationship.

**MIKE:** I've done that; it's valuable to do that.

**JOE:** I can see if I was handed a blueprint for success, in my mind that would do a number of things for me. Wow, this organization really has its act together; they are really interested in my success. There is a lot of good will established right there, and right off the bat, you're breaking down barriers and establishing patterns of communication in a way that's very effective. Anyone with that available to them has an advantage.

**MIKE:** That's what they tell us.

**JOE:** So what results have you seen when you do this pre-boarding process?

**MIKE:** I can sum it up in one word: confidence. A lot of new leaders come into a new job confident because it's a good image to put forward, but there is always a risk that comes with a new job. The new leader comes on board, feeling like, I really have a handle on this, I know what to do and there isn't a lot of guess work. I'm not going to go off spending a lot of time doing things that aren't that important. Most of the times we've done this, we've had great success, but I don't want to give the impression that this process is going to work 100% of the time. The selection process still is very important. Organizations today are spending more effort in qualifying their candidates. The better selection process you have, the higher the likelihood you have of this process working. And it does.

**JOE:** What you're trying to do is increase the amount of success right off the bat, with that leader coming in and quickly making a difference for the organization. You now have a tool where they can continue it after the person is hired and gets into the job,

whether that's in the 30, 60, 90 days, or within the coaching process. So really, as I see this, your process fills in the gaps in the entire assimilation process.

**MIKE:** That's true, and let's go back to the comment you made earlier about business leaders you've talked to who say, quickly, that the process has a lot of value. It's really a paradigm shift. I know I don't have a hard time convincing CEOs of the value of this process; it's a short conversation.

**JOE:** So you call it executive integration, but what levels of managers should be integrated prior to their start date?

**MIKE:** Well, realistically, what I'm discovering is that organizations that have developed some sort of leader integration process of their own have naturally started at the executive level, VP or above. But I've said in my book: any person who manages others should be integrated, depending on the environment. If it's a healthcare organization with nursing managers, for example, it's very important, I think in that environment, that you take it all the way down to the frontline management level. There are costs, though, and that's the trade-off. One thing for sure, however, is that providing this integration process to all new leaders sure sends the right signal to them that the organization is committed to their success. I believe that organizations need to have go through a new leader integration process, but initially, start at VP and above level and iron out some of the wrinkles in the process before expanding it to all levels of management.

**JOE:** So, we've been focusing on new leaders that are hired from the outside, and you mentioned that it can also be applied internal leaders. Many organizations have leadership development programs in place, and it seems to me that your pre-boarding process is the first step in leadership development.

**MIKE:** Well it does. In fact, when I developed this process, I would say 2/3 of the executives I integrated were internal moves. I was trying to fill a gap within the company that I worked for and refined the process over time. Studies I cited earlier, say the internal promotions fair better than for outside senior hires, but it's not by much. Just a few percentage points, so yes, you can work for the same company, but if you move to a new division with new players, managers, direct reports, peers, you have some advantage, but it can also work to your disadvantage. Doing integration with internal promotions is every bit as important as for outside hires.

**JOE:** That's a surprising statistic Mike; I never would have guessed something like that. I thought people internal to the organization would have had a leg up, and what you're saying is that's not true. And in fact, isn't true based on studies and your experience.

**MIKE:** For the organization that I was working for when I developed this process, that was a need. We had internal promotions that were unsuccessful. This process helped them be successful and get up to speed sooner.

**JOE:** How might a company go about integrating their new leaders?

**MIKE:** Well, again, the resources are key. The first thing an organization has to do is implement this process from the top, down. Any change management initiative, if you're doing it from the middle, up and down, is just not going to work. You need to get top management to buy in to this process, with full support. They're going to be participating as peers or managers, so buy in is key. So if you're an executive, and you're ready to introduce a process like this, start at the top and work your way down. Once you've done that, you have to do a resource assessment. Who do we have in our organization that can do this, and do it well? Or will we need to go outside for facilitator coaches.

It's a big question: Should we have someone within the organization do it? There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. I've done it both ways. People on the inside are more likely to be candid with an external consultant. I've just experienced that, so once you have the resources and you're ready to start the process, then it's just a question of time. Is there enough time for your process before the outside leader starts, or the new leader moves in? If you need outside resources like coaches there are many people who are good at this sort of thing. Many professional executive coaches who are in private practice embrace this process, are even using this model as another arrow in their quiver of services they offer to their clients--integrating their new leaders for them. I've had HR leaders and executive coaches on a global scale contact me about this. But, depending on the size of the organization, will determine the size of the pool of inside or outside resources that you may need.

**JOE:** Your firm is comprehensive in the way it approaches this challenge. So what other ways can you assist people and organizations that may want to integrate new leaders?

**MIKE:** Well, the first thing on the list would be if you have an executive search assignment, let us demonstrate to you how this process works by doing the search with an integration process on the tail-end of it. Another way I can assist is that I go into organizations and help them set up their own integration process. Sometimes I've done that where they use the process in my book and we refine it for them. But, I also did a study of many organizations around the country that have developed some semblance of a new leader integration process and I've documented those case studies for a workshop I conduct at the request of clients. They basically go through my model in the book, and the case studies, and pick and choose what elements they like best and would work best in their organization. Then they are off and running. I serve as a resource to them for as long as they may need my advice.

**JOE:** Mike, that's fantastic, and I appreciate your vision and your foresight on identifying a need in the marketplace for a process like that. It sounds like you've had great success already, since this idea catches on, it's the no-brainer factor that becomes self-evident with more organizations out there. So I'd really like to thank you for your



time. I've learned a lot today. As I always do in these interviews. I want to give you the opportunity for the last word. Is there anything you'd like to close with?

**MIKE:** Thank you, I would definitely like to close with this: I'm the owner of the LinkedIn group called the Executive Integration Network and it's growing steadily. It's for people who have responsibility for ensuring that their new leaders are quickly up to speed. So if you want to be associated with people who have embraced this concept, join the network on LinkedIn and recommend it to people you know who have similar responsibilities. I would also encourage people to go onto Amazon and get a copy of the book, *Before On-boarding: How to Integrate New Leaders for Quick and Sustained Results*, or download it to your Kindle. It's a short read and I think you'll have a good idea of what the possibilities are for integrating your new leaders, whether you develop your own system, or use ours.

**JOE:** I appreciate it Mike. There you have it folks, Mr. Mike Burroughs, author of *Before On-boarding: How to Integrate New Leaders for Quick and Sustained Results*. I've read the book. It's a quick read and well worth it. You'll come away with a great understanding of what this process can do. I hope you come away from this podcast with a better understanding of executive integration and what it can do to help your business compress the time it takes new leaders to produce, while reducing the risk and cost of an unsuccessful executive. Mike, thanks a lot.

**MIKE:** Thank you, Joe.