



TotalPicture Radio Interview Transcript
Jean Brown
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When George Bradt and Mary Vonnegut set out to write *Onboarding: How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, they invited a select group of experts to share their knowledge in the onboarding process.

In this special series here on Total Picture Radio, we'll be interviewing in depth the individuals chosen by the authors to contribute their experience, expertise, and perspectives.

Welcome to a special inside recruiting channel edition of Total Picture Radio. This is Peter Clayton reporting.

The Onboarding Expert Series is sponsored by PrimeGenesis. Founded in 2002, PrimeGenesis' mission is singular: use executive onboarding and facilitated transition acceleration to help new leaders and their teams deliver sustainable, better results faster. Based in Stamford, Connecticut, PrimeGenesis is led by senior operating executives and organizational development specialists with deep and varied business experience.

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Communications expert Jean Brown, partner with the New York based MacKenzie Brown, LLC works with senior executives, managers, and partners of many Fortune 500 companies and law firms. Jean contributed to chapter 8 of *Onboarding*, titled *Manage the Announcement to Set Your New Employee up for Success*.

Jean, welcome to Total Picture Radio.

Jean: Well, thank you very much for having me.

Peter: How important is it to carefully plan and manage the announcement when a new executive arrives at a company?

Jean: Well, it's one of the most important aspects of the onboarding process. It's really all about first impressions and creating a strong first impression and a positive first impression because what you're trying to do is to set the tone for the employee's relationship, not only with the organization, but with coworkers and key stakeholders. So you want the new employee to feel welcome. You want them to feel valued, and then you also want them to know that you're



setting them up for success, but also setting the whole team up for success, so it's very, very important.

Peter: Although this announcement process may be done when somebody initially joins an organization, it seems it's not done or done as effectively with internal promotions. In your opinion, is this a mistake?

Jean: Well, it's interesting that you should bring that up. I was actually reading an article about that just last week, as a matter of fact. So I want to give credit where credit is due there; the article is by Dr. Rebecca Schalm of the *Toronto Sun* and she has been doing research on that very topic and her research shows that the typical onboarding process focuses almost exclusively on employees who join from the outside.

As you know, a lot more internal movement has been happening over the last year than external hiring, so it's quite interesting that people are not putting the same focus on the internal transitions and I think the issue there is really that people make too many assumptions. They assume for example that the role and the expectations of the new role will be clear. They assume that the relationships will take care of themselves. They assume the culture of the new group is the same as the culture of the old group, and then in terms of this announcement process, I think the most critical mistake is that they assume the credibility is taken for granted. That's where the announcement becomes especially important, because not only should it clarify the role of the new person, but also establish the credibility of this new person to fill that role.

Peter: I think that is so important and it seems that when you get into the senior management roles, there's oftentimes a lot of competition for that particular position. So, if you can, in that announcement, clarify exactly why that individual was chosen, it seems that it would really benefit.

Jean: Well, in that situation, that's where you want to be having pre-conversations in a one-on-one manner to make sure that individuals are aware of why the new person is being brought in and to be able to gauge the response to that to help you understand how to manage that particular political issue.

Peter: Back to the book *Onboarding*, you outlined four keys to an effective message. I'd like you to expand on each of these, if you would. The first one is concrete.

Jean: Don't talk in concepts, be specific. I want to expand on that with giving you an example.

In the onboarding announcement, a key component of that announcement is the vision. So what is the future that this person is being brought in to build. If you think about the language of that... A lot of times, people will think of their announcement as, "We're so delighted that Sue - whoever is joining our new team - we want to all give her a big welcome." - Well that's not an onboarding



announcement or we could go one step further. "We're bringing Sue in to affect change in the organization." Well, that's a little bit better, but it's still a vague concept. That concept of affecting change doesn't really mean anything.

So what is the change that Sue is being brought in for? Is she being brought in to expand our manufacturing operations overseas or she's being brought in to focus our organization on new client development, what are the specifics of that change – that's what I mean by concrete.

Peter: I think again that is so important because, let's face it, change is usually resisted in most organizations so people really need to understand that this is what this individual is expected to do and everybody needs to be on board with that concept.

Jean: Absolutely.

Peter: #2 on your list is targeted to your audience.

Jean: Yes. Here's the golden rule of communication - whenever you're communicating with someone else, it's not about you, it's always about them. So you have to think, what is this person or this group, what do they care about, and the answer is usually me – they care about me. How will these changes affect *me* and my role?

So as you build your sub-messages... So you have your key message, which may be the change that the new leader is being brought in, the expansion of that message should really be about well how is this going to impact you and how will this new person help you or help the team be more successful? Those message points may differ from audience to audience - you want to target them specifically. So for the peers, there maybe one message, but the direct reports there might be another, but it's always about what that group cares about.

Peter: #3 on your list is pithy and memorable. Can you expand on that?

Jean: You want everybody to repeat your message. The whole point is to have a message that people will remember and take away so that one day they're having conversations with each other, there's a consistency in the way that they are communicating to each other about this new employee. So, memorable is important. If they can't remember the message, you didn't do an effective job. Part of that is using language that is interesting and that stands out, which I can expand upon with some examples.

Peter: Yeah, if you would because #4 on your list is short, and again, I think now we get into the copywriter kind of a thing, right?

Jean: Exactly. Short, because again you want somebody to be able to repeat the message and to remember it. Here's a great example of this: Ronald Reagan goes to the Berlin Wall back in 1989 and he gives his speech and he's not using flowery language of "Let us end the divide between communism and



democracy and come together with peace and harmony.” He’s not going on and on. What he said was, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” That’s a short, pithy, memorable message that’s action oriented, very specific, and targeted to the audience. So that is a great example. You want your message to be short so that it sticks. I’ll give you some other examples of that.

If you think about the iconic Martin Luther King message from 1963 “I Have a Dream,” that phrase “I have a dream” was voted by the top 100 scholars of rhetoric as the most powerful political message of the 20th century. Now obviously there’s content to context that’s involved in that, but if you think of what the language of that message - I have a dream - four words, all one syllable words, the most powerful political message of the 20th century is four words. It’s an incredible message, not only from the meaning of it obviously, but the simplicity of it and that’s part of it’s power.

Start looking at language and dissecting. This is one of the things that we do when we teach in our seminars, when we coach executive. We’re always trying to learn from great writers so that we can take some of those elements and use them even though in business we’re not copywriters, we’re not writing ad slogans, but still you want to use some of the learning from great writing to craft powerful messages that people will remember.

Peter: That’s really interesting because I used Martin Luther King’s speech a lot when I talk about what I’m doing with my radio show because you can read his speech and you certainly will get an emotional reaction to it. But if you listen to it, if you listen to how he speaks, it changes and becomes an entirely different emotional connection and I wonder how much that really - the fact that he was such a great orator and such a great speaker - how much that factors into his I Have a Dream speech being and his mind being voted as the most powerful in the 20th century.

Jean: Well, I believe that you can’t really separate the two. I believe that it’s both the message and the delivery of that message that contribute to the power. I do believe that although the message itself and certainly the way that he craft that whole speech with the repetition of the message and the illustration of each example that supports that message, it’s a very powerfully written speech.

Then you add on, and what I like that you said was the emotional component. I think a lot of people shy away from the concept of emotion in business. But emotional messaging is what can really spur people to action. If we take that back to onboarding, you really are trying to engage people in being part of this new change and you want their buy in and therefore, you have to hit them where they live on an emotional level. That’s how you get people to move off of their current position.

I think the emotional component of it is very important.

Peter: Especially now as stressed out as everyone is, right?



Jean: Yeah, people are afraid.

Peter: If you could really connect with somebody on an emotional level, and you're right, I mean, so many people shy away from emotion in business because they figured that it shouldn't be there, but I disagree with that. I think if you can be emotional and if you can share that kind of passion for what you're doing, it's easier to really get people on board, right?

Jean: Well, I think if you can't whip up a little passion and conviction and enthusiasm about what you're talking about, you can't expect other people to feel anything. It starts with you and the way that you bring yourself into your message and that you're able to show people how much you believe in what you're saying.

Peter: You also share in the Onboarding book what you call universal motivators, money time, and feelings. Can you expand on that a little bit for us?

Jean: Sure. Building on this idea that what we're trying to do in an onboarding message is gained by it. We're trying to craft a persuasive message. You could do that and you need to stress the benefits of this change. When we think about benefits, broadly, if you can think about areas – obviously money is the obvious one – we're bringing on somebody to develop new business, to increase revenue. There's the making money aspect, there's the saving money, cutting cost, improving profitability. Then there are time issues like improving the efficiency of operations and then I also said that one of those universal motivators is feelings - improving morale, building cache for a brand - all of those are in the more emotional realm.

Generally, if you think of those three different areas as you're trying to position your message to a particular audience, you have generally moved people in your direction.

Peter: Back to this whole emotional thing we've been talking about, you're right, as important as developing your message is delivering your message. We've all seen these residents and CEO stand up and in monotone just deliver this pronouncement or we're going to promote so and so to this position without any emotion or any feeling at all, and it's like what?

Jean: Yeah, I think sometimes people focus so much on the message itself they forget to look to see how that message is being received. Now, MacKenzie Brown, one of our most popular classes is this course called Communication Skills: Presence and Impact. In that class, we focus on ten principles of communication that are all about projecting confidence and credibility in the way that you present a message and if I can focus in on just two that I think are really important in onboarding process – one is connection and the other is attitude.

Connecting your message – you can have a brilliant message, but if you can't connect it to another person, there's no point. Obviously, the skill that anyone



would teach you if you take a class in communication or presentation is going to be eye contact. Looking somebody in the eye and delivering your message projects confidence and certainly in the onboarding process, you want to project that you are confident in the choice that has been made.

But it goes one step beyond that because you need to see how that message is landing and unless you're looking in somebody's eyes, you can't see how the message registers with them. So that's what the skill of eye contact is really about - not this mechanical skill. The skill is to look for the response to your information and when you do that, you see it register, that's when a connection has taken place. Of all of the skills of communication, that's the most important one.

Secondly, I would suggest that attitude, and we spoke a little bit about this just a minute ago, that idea of sharing your enthusiasm and being able to show that with all of your tools of expressiveness from your facial expression to your body language to the tone of your voice - all of these things have to reinforce that you believe in the choice that has been made and the vision for the future. All the delivery skills... I think, certainly there are many things that we could talk about in delivering a message, but I think those two to keep it simple can really help somebody deliver a message well.

Peter: Regarding onboarding executives, what's the biggest disconnect do you see?

Jean: I think the biggest disconnect happens in the internal movement that we talked about a little bit earlier.

Peter: Right. Let's just assume, "Well, George has been around here for a long time so everybody knows who he is."

Jean: Yeah, everybody knows who he is. You do not really need to do anything for him. He knows the company, they all know him, and people are making these assumptions that everything will just work itself out and so I think you could also probably translate that to bringing people from the outside if you don't manage this process. You make assumptions that everybody will just buy into the choice that has been made and that's not the case. You need to manage communication closely, so that you're sure that everybody is receiving a consistent message. In a way, you're building a brand for this new person, and therefore consistency and repetition are important.

Peter: Jean, thank you very much for taking time to speak with us today. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to share with the audience around this whole issue of onboarding?

Jean: Well, the one thing I was thinking about, of course, goes back to the delivery of the communication and that is my final hot tip for everyone - is just practice, practice, practice. Practice your message out loud in front of somebody else so that you can get some feedback on whether the message is



communicating clearly and persuading people appropriately. So I would say really focus in on both the writing of that message and the clarity of the message and then practice the delivery of it with a few key people that you trust.

Peter: Well again, Jean, thank you very much for taking time to speak with us here on Total Picture Radio.

Jean: I really enjoyed it. Thanks for having me.

Peter: Thank you. We've been speaking with Communications Expert, Jean Brown, partner with New York City based MacKenzie Brown, LLC. Be sure to visit Jean's feature page in the inside recruiting channel of Total Picture Radio, that's TotalPictureRadio.com for our resource links and to more information.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, *Onboarding: How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, is available through your favorite bookseller. Also published by Wiley in 2009, the second edition of *The New Leaders 100-Day Action Plan: How to Take Charge, Build Your Team and Get Immediate Results*, an onboarding process for leaders at every level.

This is Peter Clayton reporting. Thank you for tuning in to Total Picture Radio, the voice of career success and leadership development.