Mistakes New Chiefs of Staff Should Avoid Making

Forbes | Edward Segal | October 29, 2026



In their rush to make a good impression and demonstrate their value, newly hired chiefs of staff could make mistakes that undermine their relationships with CEOs and colleagues. Avoiding those missteps begins with knowing and adhering to the role's responsibilities and authority to make decisions.

Any mistakes could make CEOs and other senior corporate leaders question the value of a chief of staff (CoS) and create more problems than the position is meant to solve for organizations.

Don't Rush To Make Changes

Unless otherwise instructed, new chiefs of staff should not try to change their new organization. Take the time to study the lay of the land, the history of the organization, and how things were done before and are done today. Freshmen chiefs of staff should carefully study the organization and identify potential speed bumps and potholes that could make their job more difficult. Moshe

Cohen, a lecturer at Boston University's Questrom School of Business, has seen them make two kinds of mistakes. "They don't take enough time and ask enough questions to understand how their CEOs work and what success looks like. As a result, they make decisions based on assumptions or prior experience and miss the mark. Especially early on in the relationship, they should focus on getting to know the CEO, organization, and external environment by asking curious questions," he told me in an email message.

Ensure that you and the CEO are on the same page and that you are in sync with the expectations he or she has of you. Know what you are expected to accomplish and when and how your progress and success will be measured. When in doubt, ask before misunderstandings become issues or problems.

A Chief of Staff Should Not Try To Do Everything

New chiefs of staff should avoid the temptation of trying to do everything for their CEOs. They need to know the best ways to use their limited time, energy, and skills, and accept the fact that they do not have to go to every meeting or inject themselves into every project or initiative. "A chief of staff is a finite resource too, so focus is critical. Their goals should determine where they spend their time, which meetings they attend, and which problems truly require their involvement. The goal is not to be everywhere; it is to apply their time and attention where they can create the greatest leverage for the CEO and the organization," Tanya Livingstone, chief of staff to the CEO and chief people officer at Kustomer, a customer service software company, told me in an email interview.

To avoid blowback, new chiefs of staff should ask their CEOs which decisions they can make on their own, which ones need review and approval and how to

handle emerging issues that could morph into larger problems. Otherwise, a CoS, instead of making a CEO's job easier, can make it even harder.

Chiefs of Staff Should Avoid Emotional Reactions

New chiefs of staff should keep their emotions in check, in case they say or do the wrong thing in the heat of the moment or in a misguided effort to please their superiors. If a CEO expresses frustration, the CoS should ask if they want action to be taken or are simply voicing a concern. Treating every complaint as an instruction can create unnecessary work and confusion.

Another major mistake to avoid, according to Cohen at Boston University, is when out of a desire to make the CEO happy, a chief of staff reacts emotionally "to the CEO's perceived whims and outbursts. As a result, they lose strategic focus and instead engage in a sequence of haphazard actions, trying to guess what will please the CEO," he observed. In these situations, Cohen advises them "to slow down, listen, ask additional questions, and make more measured, deliberate choices instead of engaging in increasingly desperate moves."



A Chief of Staff Should Not Be A Yes-Person

One of the biggest mistakes is becoming a yes-person. A chief of staff who only executes what the CEO says without asking difficult questions is adding capacity, but not necessarily leverage, according to Kustomer's Livingstone. "The CEO needs someone who can respectfully challenge assumptions, identify downstream consequences and say when the organization does not have the capacity or clarity to execute another priority," she recommended.

To avoid getting off on the wrong foot with the CEO and new colleagues, chiefs of staff should be clear in conversations with others and whether they are conveying a CEO's decision, seeking advice, are offering their own recommendation. "Another mistake is confusing proximity to the CEO with authority. Walking into a conversation and telling people what to do because 'the CEO wants it' may create short-term compliance, but it destroys trust. A chief of staff should partner with leaders, recognize the work already on their plates and help solve the tradeoffs created by a new request," Livingstone advised.

A CoS Should Not Filter Out Bad News

The first real test of a new CoS could be how they respond to a crisis, whether they postpone delivering bad news to a CEO and how familiar they are with the company's crisis response. A CoS should not "filter out bad news to protect a CEO. Bring the issue to the CEO early, explain its impact and offer options. A chief of staff needs enough trust to challenge an assumption privately and enough clarity to communicate the agreed direction accurately," Kristan de Graaf, founder and co-CEO of Elite Rentals Dubai, a luxury yacht-charter and car-rental business, told me in an email message.

To help avoid what could be costly mistakes, new chiefs of staff need to exercise restraint, discipline, and common sense, and listen and learn as much as they can before trying to exercise their influence or authority. They also need the determination and willpower to diplomatically push back when asked by others to do or say something that is beyond the scope of their duties and responsibilities.