



# The First 90 Days

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This is a summary of the book *'The First 90 Days'* by author Michael Watkins.

It has been created to help people to gain fast access to the key points within Michael's book, and is in line with the other learning solutions available on the Agora web site, providing pragmatic, clear, workable, simple solutions.

The summary has been created by Jon Lavelle, Director and owner of Blue Ice Consulting, our chosen partners in developing the Agora learning site.

We hope that this summary is helpful to you, or to others in your personal and professional network who are either going for an important new job or promotion, who are transitioning between roles, or who are now reeling from their recent immersion into a big new job in a new organisation.

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## Introduction

The President of the US gets 100 days to prove himself.

On this day of writing, Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> August 2010, the new coalition government in the UK celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> day in office.

You're not the President, you're not David or Nick. Things are tougher for you, you only get 90 days!

The actions you take during your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you succeed or fail. If you fail to build momentum during your transition, you will face an uphill battle from that point forward.

This book is as much about 'transition acceleration' as it is about failure prevention. Your goal should be to arrive as rapidly as possible at the 'breakeven point', where you are a net contributor of value to your new organisation.

The breakeven point for a typical mid-level manager, where the net contribution more than balances the net cost of on-boarding is 6.2 months.

The process of leading change often occurs in tandem with a leader's transition into a new role.



## Fundamental Propositions

1. Transition failures happen when new leaders either misunderstand the essential demands of the situation or lack the skill and flexibility to adapt to them.
2. There are systematic methods that leaders can employ to both lessen the likelihood of failure, and ensure that they reach the breakeven point faster.
3. The over-riding goal in a transition is to build momentum by creating virtuous cycles that build credibility, and avoid getting caught in the vicious cycles that damage credibility. As a vicious cycle takes hold, the organisation's immune system gets activated and the new leader is attacked by clumps of 'killer cells', encapsulated, and finally expelled; it's not nice, and it can get messy.
4. Transitions are a crucible for leadership development and should be managed accordingly. They are an indispensable development experience for every company's high-potential leaders.
5. Adoption of a standard framework for accelerating transitions can yield big returns for organisations.

## Accelerating Organisations

Each year, a quarter of managers in a typical Fortune 500 company change jobs. This means that managers spend an average of four years in a given position. High-potential leaders in the mid-senior ranks have a shorter average time in position. Their 'eras' typically last 2½ to 3 years.

Each new manager takes time to reach their breakeven point, and as the pace of business is rapid, there is little time available to get acclimatised and little latitude for poor early decisions.



The failure rate for new leaders who enter organisations from outside is high. More than 40 - 50% of senior outside hires fail to achieve desired results. HR practitioners assess the challenge of coming in from the outside as 'much harder' than being promoted from within, because:

- Executives from outside are not as familiar with the organisational structure and informal networks of information and communication
- They are not familiar with the corporate culture and therefore have greater difficulty assimilating
- New people are unknown and therefore do not have the same credibility as someone who is promoted from within
- It can be difficult for existing people to adjust to 'outsiders'

## Success Strategies for New Leaders

The challenges of transition acceleration vary depending upon situational factors, and so it is essential that you match your strategy to the situation you face. The key is to engage in careful diagnosis and then adapt some general principles to the demands of the situation. This summary provides guidelines for translating principles into plans tailored to your own situation. As you read you should make notes about the applicability of specific points to your context, as well as thinking about how the advice should be customized to the situation you face.

## 1 Promote Yourself

One manager failed because she was unable to make the leap from being a strong functional performer to taking on a cross-functional, project management role. She failed to grasp that the strengths that had made her successful in Marketing could be liabilities in a role that required her to lead without direct authority or superior expertise.

A related mistake is to believe that you will be successful in your new job by continuing to do what you did in your previous job, only more so.

Whatever the issue, you can exist in a state of denial until the moment the walls come crashing down around you, and by then it's too late.

Another manager could not free himself from day-to-day operations enough to take on the strategic, visionary, and statesman-like roles of an effective CEO. The root causes of his failure, however, lay less in what he could not do (or learn to do) than in what he could not let go of.

How do you avoid these traps?

This section provides some basic principles for mentally getting ready for your new position.

### Establish a Clear Breakpoint

You get caught up in a scramble to finish up in your old job even as you try to wrap your arms around the new one. Even worse, you may be pressured to perform both jobs until your previous position is filled, making the line of demarcation even fuzzier.

Because you may not get a clean transition in terms of job responsibilities, it is essential to discipline yourself to make the transition mentally. Pick a specific time, such as the weekend, and use it to imagine yourself being promoted. Think hard about the differences between the two and in what ways you have to think and act differently. Use the time to touch base with your informal advisers and counsellors and to ask for some quick wins.

### Hit the Ground Running

90 days after you begin your job, key people in the organisation, your boss, peers and direct reports, expect you to be getting some traction.

Start planning what you hope to accomplish by specific milestones. Begin by thinking about your first day in the job. What do you want to have done by the end of that day? Then move to the first week. Then focus on the end of the first month, the second month, and finally the three-month mark. These plans will be sketchy, but the simple act of beginning to plan will help clear your head.



## Assess Your Vulnerabilities

Many people have an urge to work at one level below where they are. You need to work where you are now or need to be, not where you were.

Everyone likes to do some things more than others. Your preferences have probably influenced you to choose jobs where you can do more of what you like to do. As a result, you perfect those skills and feel most competent when you solve problems in those areas; the pattern reinforces this unhelpful cycle; it's like exercising your right arm and ignoring your left.

Think about how good you are at solving technical, political or cultural problems. Think about how much you know about HR, Finance, Marketing, Operations and R&D. In what spheres do you most enjoy working with and solving problems? In what spheres are you least eager to solve problems? What are the implications of this in terms of potential vulnerabilities in your new position?

You will need to discipline yourself to devote time to critical activities that you do not enjoy and that may not come naturally.

Watch out for your strengths also. Your weaknesses can make you vulnerable, but so can your strengths; every strength has its attendant pitfalls. The qualities that have made you successful so far can prove to be weaknesses in your new role.

## Re-learn How to Learn

It may have been a long time since you faced such a steep learning curve. "Suddenly I realised how much I didn't know" is a common lament from leaders in transition. New challenges, and associated fears of incompetence, can set up a vicious cycle of denial and defensiveness.

So, if you find yourself waking up in a cold sweat, take comfort. Most new leaders experience the same feelings. And if you embrace the need to learn, you can surmount these anxieties.



## Rework Your Network

As you advance in your career, the advice and counsel that you need changes.

As you are progressively promoted, however, it becomes increasingly important to get good political counsel and personal advice. Political counsellors help you to understand the politics of the organisation, which is especially important when you plan to implement change. Personal advisors help you keep perspective and equilibrium in times of stress.

## Watch Out for People Who Want to Hold You Back

Expect early tests of your authority, and plan to meet them by being firm and fair. If you don't establish limits early on you will live to regret it. Getting others to accept your promotion is an essential part of promoting yourself. So, if you conclude that the people in question are never going to accept the situation, then you have to find a way to move them out of your organisation as quickly as possible. If they are peers or even more senior than you then of course this option is not readily open to you!

Promoting yourself is a journey and not a destination. You will have to work constantly to ensure that you are engaging with the real challenges of your new position and not practicing what Ron Heifetz terms 'work avoidance'. It is easy to backslide into habits that are both comfortable and dangerous.

## 2 Accelerate Your Learning

It's essential to figure out what it is you need to know about your new organisation, and then to learn as rapidly as you can.

Efficient and effective learning reduces your window of vulnerability. You can identify potential problems that might erupt and take you off track. It also equips you to begin to make good business decisions earlier. Remember, your internal and external customers won't wait for you to take a leisurely stroll up the learning curve.



### Overcoming Learning Disabilities

Amid the torrent of information coming your way, it is easy to miss important signals. You might focus too much on the technical side of the business, products, customers, technologies and strategies, and short-change the critical learning about culture, leadership and politics.

A related problem is a failure to plan to learn. Planning to learn means figuring out in advance what the important questions are and how you can best answer them. Few new leaders take the time to think systematically about their learning priorities. Fewer still explicitly create a learning plan when entering a new role. A baseline question that every new leader should ask is "How did we get to this point?" Otherwise you risk tearing down fences without knowing why they were put up.

Other new leaders suffer from the 'action imperative', a near compulsive need to take action. Being too busy to learn often results in a death spiral. If you do not learn, you can easily make poor early decisions that undermine your credibility, making people less likely to share important information with you, leading to more bad decisions. The result is a vicious cycle that can irreparably damage your credibility.

Perhaps most destructive of all, some leaders arrive with 'the answer'. This stance leaves you vulnerable to serious mistakes and is likely to alienate people. Displaying a genuine ability and willingness to listen often translates into increased credibility and influence.

### Defining Your Learning Agenda

Learning during a transition is iterative. At first your learning agenda will consist mostly of questions, but as you learn more you will hypothesize about what is going on and why. Increasingly, your learning will shift toward fleshing out and testing those hypotheses.

You should focus upon developing what are called 'actionable insights'; knowledge that enables you to make better decisions earlier, and so helps you reach the breakeven point in terms of personal value creation sooner.

## Identifying the Best Sources of Insight

You will learn from various types of hard data such as financial statements, operating reports, strategic and functional plans, employee surveys, press accounts and industry reports. But to make effective decisions, you also need 'soft' information about the organisation's strategy, technical capabilities, culture and politics. The only way to gain this intelligence is to talk to people who have critical knowledge about your situation.

When diagnosing a new organisation, start by meeting with your direct reports 1:1, asking them essentially the same five questions:

1. What are the biggest challenges facing this organisation, now or in the future?
2. Why is the organisation facing, or going to face these challenges?
3. What are the most promising unexploited opportunities for growth?
4. What would need to happen for the organisation to exploit the potential of these opportunities?
5. If you were me, what would you focus your attention on?



These five questions, coupled with careful listening and thoughtful follow-up, are certain to elicit many insights. By asking everyone the same set of questions, you can identify prevalent and divergent views, and thus avoid being swayed by the first or most forceful or articulate person you talk to.

*How* people respond can also tell you a lot about your new team and its politics. Who answers directly and who is evasive or prone to going off on tangents? Who takes responsibility and who points fingers? Who has a broad view of the business and who seems stuck in a silo?

Once you have distilled these early discussions into a set of observations, questions, and insights, convene your direct reports as a group, feed back your impressions and questions, and invite discussion. You will learn more about both substance and team dynamics by doing so, and will simultaneously demonstrate how quickly you have begun to identify key issues.

If you are meeting with salespeople, ask them what our customers want that they are getting from our competitors and are not getting from us?

## Creating a Learning Plan

Your learning plan is a critical part of your overall 90 day plan. The heart of your learning plan is a cyclical learning process in which you collect information, analyse and distil it, develop hypotheses, and test them, thus progressively deepening your understanding of your new organisation.

## Learning About Culture

Because cultural habits and norms operate powerfully to reinforce the status quo, it is vital to diagnose problems in the existing culture and to figure out how to begin to address them. These assessments are particularly important if you are coming in from the outside.

One useful framework for analysing an organisation's work culture approaches it at three levels, symbols, norms and assumptions.

**Symbols** are signs including logos and styles of dress; they distinguish one culture from another and promote solidarity. Are there distinctive symbols that signify your unit and help members recognise one another?

**Norms** are shared social rules that guide 'correct behaviour'. What behaviours are encouraged or rewarded in your unit? What elicits scorn or disapproval?

**Assumptions** are the often unarticulated beliefs that pervade and underpin social systems. These beliefs are the air that everyone breathes. What 'truths' does everyone take for granted?



The most relevant assumptions for new leaders involve **power** and **value**. Who can legitimately exercise authority and make decisions? What does it take to earn your stripes? Regarding value, what actions are believed by employees to create (and destroy) value?

These different aspects of culture overlap and reinforce one another. To avoid missteps, you must devote significant energy to understanding and adapting to the culture to which you are moving.

Once you're in, you then need to decide whether to continue to adapt to or to try to alter that culture. In particular, you will want to assess which cultural characteristics are helping performance, and which may be harming performance. Your future success depends on knowing the difference, and upon taking the right actions.

### 3 Match Strategy to Situation

Far too many new leaders do a poor job of diagnosing their situation and tailoring their strategies accordingly; hence the significant failure rate.

#### Diagnosing the Business Situation

The four broad types of business situations that new leaders must contend with are start-up, turnaround, realignment and sustaining success. This is known as the STaRS model.

In realignment, your challenge is to revitalise a unit, product process or project that is drifting into trouble. In a sustaining success situation you are shouldering responsibility for preserving the vitality of a successful organisation and taking it to the next level. Put another way, in realignments you have to reinvent the business; in sustaining success situations you have to invent the challenge. In both situations you typically have some time before you need to make major calls, which is good news because you have to learn a lot about the culture and politics and begin building supportive coalitions.

#### Understanding History

Successful companies tend, because of internal complacency or external challenges or both, to drift toward trouble. Even if the organisation is not yet in crisis, acute observers see gathering storm clouds that signal a need for realignment. Realigning the business can return it to a sustaining success state, designated in the model as the recovery model.

If efforts to realign the business fail it can end as a full-scale turnaround. Turning around a failing business required the new leader to cut it down to a defensible core fast and then to begin to build it back up. It's a painful process.

It's important to understand these cycles. You cannot figure out where to take a new organisation if you do not understand where it has been and how it got to where it is. In realignment, for example, it is essential to understand what made the organisation successful in the past and why it drifted into trouble. To understand your situation you have to put on your historian's hat.

## Understanding Organisational Psychology

Successful transitions depend in part, on your ability to transform the prevailing organisational psychology.

In start-ups, the prevailing mood is often one of excited confusion, and your job is to channel that energy into productive directions, in part by deciding what not to do.

In turnarounds you may be dealing with a group of people who are close to despair; it's your job to provide the light at the end of the tunnel.

In realignments, you will probably have to pierce through the veil of denial that is preventing people from confronting the need to reinvent the business.

Finally, in sustaining success situations you have to 'invent the challenge' by finding ways to keep people motivated, to combat complacency, and to find new direction for growth, both organisational and personal.

## Leading With the Right Skills

The management skills necessary for success vary amongst the four STaRS situations.

Start-ups and turnarounds call for 'hunters', people who can move fast and take chances.

The skills most appropriate to realignment and sustaining success, by contrast, are more akin to 'farming' than hunting. More subtle influence skills come into play. Skilled farmers focus on understanding the culture and politics of the organisation. They also painstakingly cultivate awareness of the need for change, by promoting shared diagnosis, influencing opinion leaders and encouraging benchmarking.



It is essential for you to think clearly and honestly about which of your skills and inclinations will serve you well in your particular situation and which are likely to get you into trouble.

Don't arrive with your spear if you need to be ploughing.



## Focusing Your Energy

Clarity about the type of situation you are facing helps you to decide what you need to do in your first 90 days. In particular, clarity helps you to make three fundamental early choices:

1. How much emphasis will you place on learning as opposed to doing?
2. How much emphasis will you place on offence as opposed to defence?
3. What should you do to get some early wins?

In realignment or sustaining success situations you are dealing with people who are, or think they are, successful. They may not be hungry for change or for direction from you. Early mistakes, especially if they are interpreted as risking the traditional strengths of the business, will cost you dearly. The good news is that you will have time to learn. There is no need for urgent early action in realignments or sustaining success situations. You can afford to aim carefully before you fire your first critical shots. Also, learning about organisational politics and culture is hard work and it takes time.

## Diagnosing your Portfolio

At a high level you may fit neatly into one of the four STaRS situations. However, as you start to drill down you will almost certainly discover that you are managing a portfolio of products, projects, processes, plants or people, that represents a mix of STaRS situations. You need to think systematically about the challenges and the opportunities in each area.

## Rewarding Success

The performance of people put in charge of start-ups and turnarounds is easiest to evaluate, because you can focus on measuring outcomes relative to some clear prior baseline. Evaluating success and failure in realignment and sustaining success situations is much more problematic. The unknown is what would have happened if other actions had been taken or other people had been in charge, the 'as compared to what?' problem.

## 4 Secure Early Wins

By the end of your transition you want your boss, your peers and your staff to feel that something new, something good, is happening. Early wins excite and energise people and build your personal credibility. Done well, early wins help you to create value for your new organisation earlier and therefore to reach the breakeven point much more quickly.

### Avoiding Common Traps

These are the most common traps that afflict unwary new leaders:

#### **Failing to Focus**

You cannot hope to achieve results in more than a couple of areas during your transition period. Therefore, it is essential to identify promising opportunities and then to focus relentlessly on translating them into wins.



### **Not taking the business situation into account**

Simply getting people to talk about the organisation and its challenges can be a big accomplishment in a realignment but a waste of time in a turnaround. Think tactically about what will build momentum best.

### **Not adjusting to the culture**

Leaders who come in from the outside are most at risk of stumbling into this trap.

### **Failing to achieve wins that matter to your boss**

Even if you do not fully endorse his or her priorities, you have to make them central in thinking through what early wins you will aim for. Addressing problems that your boss cares about will go a long way towards building credibility and cementing your access to resources.

### **Letting your means undermine your ends**

Process matters. If you achieve impressive results in a manner that is seen as manipulative, underhand or inconsistent with the culture, you are setting yourself up for trouble. An early win that is accomplished in a way that exemplifies the behaviour you hope to instil in your new organisation is a double win.

## **Making Waves of Change**

The transition period lasts only a few months, but you will typically remain in the same job for two to four years before moving on to a new position. This two to four year period is your era in the organisation, during which you will transition, make changes and pursue your goals. To the extent possible, your early wins should advance these longer-term goals, so you must begin by thinking of the 'end' in mind, you should consider a longer-term time horizon.

In planning for your transition and beyond it can be helpful to clarify your plan in terms of waves of change. If you keep changing things then it is impossible to figure out what is working and what is not. Unending change is also a sure fire recipe for burning out your people.

The goal of the first wave of change is to secure early wins. Done well, this helps the new leader to build momentum and deepen his or her own learning.



The second wave of change addresses more fundamental issues of strategy, structure, systems and skills to reshape the organisation. This is when the real gains in organisational performance are achieved. But you will not get there if you do not secure early wins in the first wave.

## **Establishing Long-Term Goals**

Keep in mind that the actions you take to get early wins should do double duty. Plan your early wins so that they help you build credibility in the short run and lay a foundation for your longer-term goals. Specifically, your effort to secure early wins should (1) be consistent with your A-list business priorities, and (2) introduce the new patterns of behaviour that you want to instil in the organisation.

Think about your legacy. What do you want it to be? What do you want the letter announcing your promotion to the next job to say about what you did in this one? A useful exercise is to actually write this letter. What would you want people to say about your achievements in this job at the end of two to four years?

## Defining Your A-List Priorities

A-list priorities should follow naturally from core problems. Pinpointing the critical areas in your organisation that demand attention, as well as those that offer the greatest opportunities to contribute to dramatic improvement in performance.

A-list priorities should neither be too general nor too specific. They should establish measures and milestones along the way.

They should offer clear direction yet allow for flexibility while you learn more about your situation. The process of defining your priorities is iterative. You need to have a clear set of goals early on, but you must often test, refine, and restate those goals. You have to remain open to adjusting your objectives as you move along.

Also, think about behaviours. If A-list priorities are the destination, then the behaviour of people in your organisation, including yourself, is a key part of how you do (or don't) get there.

## Building Credibility

In your first few weeks in your new job you cannot hope to have a measurable impact on performance, but you can score small victories and signal that things are changing. Your objective at this early stage is to build personal credibility.

Because your earliest actions will have a disproportionate influence on how you are perceived, think through how you will get connected to your new organisation. What messages do you want to get across about who you are and what you represent? What are the best ways to convey those messages?



Identify your key audiences and craft a few messages tailored to each. These need not be about what you plan to do, that's premature. They should focus instead on who you are, the values and goals that you represent, your style, and how you plan to conduct business.

Think about modes of engagement too. How will you introduce yourself? What other channels such as email and video will you use to introduce yourself more widely? Will you have early meetings at other locations where your organisation has facilities?

As you make progress in getting connected, identify and act as quickly as you can to remove minor persistent irritants in your new organisation. Focus on strained external relationships and begin to repair them. Cut out redundant meetings, shorten excessively long ones, or improve physical space problems. All this helps you to build personal credibility early on.

When you arrive, people will rapidly begin to assess you and your capabilities. Your credibility, or lack of it, will depend on how people in the organisation would answer the following questions about you:

1. Do you have the insight and steadiness to make tough decisions?
2. Do you have values that they relate to, admire and want to emulate?
3. Do you have the right kind of energy?
4. Do you demand high levels of performance from yourself and others?

Once opinion about you has begun to harden, it is difficult to change. And the opinion-forming process happens remarkable quickly. In general, new leaders are perceived as more credible when they are

1. Demanding but able to be satisfied
2. Accessible but not too familiar
3. Decisive but do not jump too quickly into decisions
4. Focused but flexible, by zeroing in on issues but consulting others and encouraging input
5. Active without causing commotion; avoiding pushing people to the point of burnout
6. Willing to make tough calls but remain humane

## Teachable Moments

Early actions often get transformed into stories, which can define you as hero or a villain. Do you take the time to informally introduce yourself to the support staff or do you focus only on your boss, peers and direct reports?

Something as simple as this can help to brand you as accessible or remote. How you treat support staff, how you deal with small irritants, all of these pieces of behaviour can become the kernels of stories that circulate widely.



These are the actions that clearly display what you are about. They also model the kinds of behaviour you want to encourage. They need not be dramatic statements or confrontations. It can be as simple, and as hard, as asking the penetrating question that crystallises your group's understanding of some key problem they are confronting.

## Securing Tangible Results

Soon you should be identifying opportunities to get some quick, tangible performance improvements in the business. The best candidates are problems that you can tackle reasonably quickly with modest expenditure and that will yield visible operational and financial gains.

Identify two or three key areas at most, where you will seek to achieve rapid improvement. If you take on too many initiatives you risk losing focus. But, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Think about risk management. Build a promising portfolio of early win initiatives so that big successes in one will balance disappointments in others. Launching pilot projects can also be a good idea.

Elevate change agents. Identify the people in your new unit, at all levels, who have the insight, drive and incentives to advance your agenda. Promote them to positions of increasing responsibility, then send a message to everyone else by rewarding them lavishly for success.

## Avoiding Predictable Surprises

Some bolts from the blue really do come out of nowhere. But far more often new leaders are taken off track by 'predictable surprises'. These are situations in which people have all the information necessary to identify the problem and take corrective action, but fail to do so. Use the following questions to identify areas where potential problems may be lurking:

1. External environment – could trends in public opinion, government action or economic conditions precipitate major problems for your unit?
2. Customers, markets, competitors and strategy – are there developments in the competitive situation confronting your organisation that could pose major challenges?
3. Internal capabilities – are there potential problems with your unit's processes, skills and capabilities that could precipitate a crisis? An unexpected loss of staff, major quality problems, a key produce recall...etc
4. Organisational politics – are you in danger of unwittingly stepping on a political land mine?

## 5 Negotiate Success

To succeed with a new boss it is wise to negotiate success so you don't play a losing hand.

It is well worth investing time in this critical relationship up front, because your new boss sets your benchmark, interprets your actions for other key player, and controls access to resources you need. He or she will have more impact than any other individual on your eventual success or failure.



Shape the game by negotiating with your boss to establish realistic expectations, reach consensus on the situation, and secure enough resources. Keep in mind that the higher you rise, the more autonomy you are likely to get. Lack of oversight can be a blessing, if you get what you need to succeed, or it can be a curse, if you get enough rope to hang yourself.

### Focusing on the Fundamentals

**Don't trash the past** – there's nothing to be gained and much to be lost by criticising the people who led the organisation before you arrived.

**Don't stay away** – If may feel good to be given a lot of rope, but resist the urge to take it. Get on your boss's calendar regularly. Be sure your boss is aware of the issues you face, and that you are aware of your boss's expectations and whether and how they are shifting.

**Don't surprise your boss** – it's no fun bringing your boss bad news. However, most bosses consider it a far greater sin not to report emerging problems early enough. Worst of all is for your boss to learn about a problem from someone else.

**Don't approach your boss only with problems** – you don't want to be perceived as bringing nothing but problems for your boss to solve. This emphatically does not mean that you have to fashion full-blown solutions. The key is to give just a few minutes' thought to how to address the problem, and to your role and the help you will need.

**Don't run through your checklist of what you have been doing** – it's expected that you are getting on with your job; you don't have to prove it. Instead, use time with your boss to discuss issues and what you are trying to achieve and how they can help you.

**Don't try to change your boss** – Assume that you are not going to change your boss, and adapt to his or her style and idiosyncrasies. You've got enough on your plate without trying to change long-embedded habits in someone else.

**Clarify mutual expectations early and often** – begin managing expectations right away. It is wise to get bad news on the table early and to lower unrealistic expectations. Then check in regularly to make sure the boss's expectation have not shifted.

**Negotiate timelines for diagnosis and action planning** – don't let yourself get caught up immediately in fire-fighting or by being pressured to make calls before you are ready. Buy yourself some time to diagnose the new organisation and come up with an action plan. The 90 day plan discussed at the end of this chapter is an excellent vehicle for accomplishing this.

**Aim for early wins in areas important to the boss** – whatever your own priorities, figure out what the boss cares about most. What are his or her interests and goals, and how does what you are doing fit into this picture? Once you know, aim for early results in those areas. His or her success is your success, and vice versa. A good idea is to focus on just three things that are important to your boss and to discuss what you are doing about them every time you meet.

**Pursue good marks from those whose opinions your boss respects** – be alert to the multiple channels through which information about you and your performance will reach your boss.

## Planning for Five Conversations

Your relationship with your new boss will be built through a continuing dialogue. To help you to structure this you should think in terms of five key conversations. These are not subjects to be dealt with in separate appointments, but intertwined threads of dialogue.

### 1. The situational diagnosis conversation

In this conversation you will seek to understand how your new boss sees the business situation. Is it a turnaround, a start-up, a re-alignment or a sustaining success situation? How did the organisation reach this point? Which factors, soft and hard, external and internal, make this situation a challenge? What resources with the organisation can you draw upon? Your view may differ from your boss's but it is essential to grasp how he or she sees the situation



### 2. The expectations conversation

Your agenda here is to seek to negotiate and agree expectations. What does your new boss need you to do in the short term, and in the medium term? What will constitute success? How will your performance be measured? When? You might conclude that their expectations are unrealistic and that you need to work to reset them. Also, as part of your broader campaign to secure early wins, keep in mind that it is better to under-promise and over-deliver; this helps to build your credibility. Work at reading between the lines. Put yourself in your boss's position and work out how they will be evaluated by their boss? Above all, don't let key issues remain ambiguous; a tie in a conflict over what was said and about expectations doesn't go to you, it goes to your boss!

### **3. The style conversation**

This conversation is about how you and your new boss will work together? Does your boss arrive early into the office and/or work late. Do they expect others to do the same? What if your boss prefers to micromanage and you like a lot of independence? How are you going to manage this tension? What form of communication does he or she prefer? Face to face? In writing? By voicemail or email? How often?

What kinds of decisions does he or she want to be consulted on and when can you make the call on your own? When will they want to make the decision themselves? How do your styles differ and what are the implications of your differences for how you should interact? Initially expect to be confined to a relatively small box in terms of empowerment to make decisions independently. As your new boss gains confidence in you, the dimensions of the box should increase. If they do not, then you may have to address the issue directly.

### **4. The resources conversation**

This is essentially a negotiation for critical resources. What is it that you need to be successful? What do you need your boss to do? The resources need not be limited to funding or staff. In a re-alignment, for example, you may need help from your boss to persuade the organisation to confront the need for change.

When seeking to change things, clarify in your own mind before you enter these discussions, back them up with as much hard data as you can and prepare to explain exactly why you see certain resources as essential. Then stick to your guns. Keep coming back. Enlist others to help make your case. Seek out allies within and outside your organisation. It is better to push too hard than to slowly bleed to death.

### **5. The personal development conversation**

Finally, discuss how your tenure in this job will contribute to your personal development. In what areas do you need improvement? Are there projects or special assignments you could undertake (without losing focus)? Are there courses or programmes that would strengthen your capabilities? What internal training do you need on organisation-specific processes and systems?

## **Putting It All Together – Your 90 Day Plan**

No matter what type of situation you are entering, it is useful to write a 90 day plan and to get buy-in from your boss. Usually, you will be able to devise a plan after a couple of weeks in the new job, when you have begun to connect with the organisation and to get the lay of the land.

Your 90 day plan should be written, even if it just consists of bullet points. It should specify priorities and goals as well as milestones. Critically, you should share it with you boss and seek buy-in for it. It should serve as a 'contract' between the two of you about how you are going to spend your time, spelling out both what you will do and what you will not do.

To begin to develop your plan, divide the 90 days into three blocks of 30 days. At the end of each block you will have a review meeting with your boss. Naturally you are likely to interact more often than that. You should typically devote the first block of 30 days to learning and building personal credibility. Negotiate for this early learning period and then try to hold your boss to that agreement. Then you can proceed to develop a learning agenda and learning plan for yourself. Set weekly goals for yourself and establish a personal discipline of weekly evaluation and planning.

Your key outputs at the end of the first 30 days will be a diagnosis of the situation, identification of key priorities, and a plan for how you will spend the next 30 days. This plan should address where and how you will begin to seek some early wins. Your review meeting with your boss should focus

on the situation and expectations conversations, with an eye to reaching consensus about the situation, clarification of expectations and buy-in to your plan for the next 30 days. Continue the weekly discipline of evaluation and planning.

At the 60 day mark, your review meeting should focus on assessing your progress towards the goals of your plan for the previous 30 days. You should also discuss what you plan to achieve in the next 30 days (that is, by the end of 90 days). Depending on the situation and your level in the organisation your goals at this juncture might include identifying the resources necessary to pursue major initiatives, fleshing out your initial assessment of strategy and structure, and presenting some early assessments of your team.

## Signing off...

So that's it... your 90 day blueprint for success.

Is it guaranteed to work?

No.

However, you only get one shot at opportunities like this so best make it the best shot you've got!

With the very best of luck...

Jon



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It might be the best thing you can do for someone today!

Best regards,

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