THE FIRST 90-DAYS SUCCESS PLAN

The first 90-days of any transition sets a powerful tone. The goal is to hit "break-even" as fast as possible. Break-even happens when you move from taking from the organization (i.e. where it the bathroom? Who does what?) to contributing. When the first 90 days are handled poorly it costs money, morale, and sometimes your job.

The Expert Syndrome: The Biggest Mistake New Leaders Make

Whenever a new leader joins a new organization or takes on a new role in an organization, the risks are considerable. The biggest mistake a leader can make is saying, "*I was successful and rewarded in my previous company (or role) because of what I could do there and then, I'll do that here and now.*"

The leader has a point, it probably the reason they were hired or promoted; however, an underlying assumption here is that this new role is just a continuation of what was. In reality, no one can step in the same river twice, the water is always different even standing in the same spot. So while the leader may have considerable experience and a track record of success, they have never been in this new situation or company before. The Expert Syndrome is marked by confidence to the point of losing curiosity. Confidence is good, but under these conditions, it can cause a person to draw conclusions too quickly and apply premature assumptions.

The Beginner's Mind: The Most Effective Posture for a New Leader

People who are just starting out in any new discipline have a posture of curiosity, simplicity, openness, and adaptability. Some call this The Beginner's Mind. Experts on the other hand are deeply knowledgeable and experienced, but often lose curiosity, have strong convictions, and may be less open or able to detect subtle differences. Sometimes, they rest on what they know as bedrock and don't detect subtle changes happening underneath them. The Beginner's Mind is one of the defining hallmarks of executives who are successful at rapidly integrating into a new company or role. They start with the assumption that they don't know what they don't know and remain curious, open, and adaptable. They wonder, "*What new skills will I need to acquire to be successful here?*"

The Critical Currency: How to Build Credibility Fast

Credibility is the hidden currency that determines the effectiveness of leaders. Like a stock, it is either rising or falling based on each interaction, decision, and outcome. Without credibility, all leadership or change initiatives will be met with resistance or neutralized. Unfortunately, very little of the credibility that leader built at a previous job transfers to the new company. A new leader is given a window of about 90-days to establish this in the new organization (or role). That means their first objective is to build credibility fast. To do this, they need early wins and good decisions that matter to critical stakeholders.

ON-BOARDING BLUEPRINT: Navigating the Path & Pitfalls of On-Boarding

You were hired or promoted to bring about change of some kind or another, but to do this you need credibility. Push too hard, too fast, or in the wrong place and credibility vanishes. Wait too long or allow a problem to go unaddressed, and you get the same result. Finding the right pace and path and avoiding the pitfalls means you need to create a good map quickly. This blueprint is designed to help you design the map. It is comprised of four components:

1. **Understand the Business:**
   Even if you are well versed in the industry, don't assume you know how this company does business. How do they think about their priorities? Do you understand their business objectives? Does the team? Is the strategy clear to you? Do you understand the brand, operating model, performance evaluation process, and talent management systems? How does the culture (both spoken and unspoken) inform business decisions? Understanding answers to these questions can powerfully influence how you can have impact.

2. **Establish Key Relationships:**
   Credibility is determined in part by how other people experience or perceive you. Building good relationships early is essential to ensuring you get a fair assessment. This isn't just a perception game; it's also about getting the work done and bringing the needed change. You will need to form collaborative alliances with key stakeholders to get most things done in any organization. This involves not just your supervisor and direct reports, but also lateral players and possibly external partners or vendors.

3. **Clarify Expectations:**
   No matter how well you think you understand what you're expected to do and have the authority to do, check and re-check. How you understand your

mandate, support, and resources may not be fully accurate. Not because you've been deliberately misled, but because the vast majority of this is hidden in unspoken mores of the organization. Other times, people use the same words but mean different things. And in some cases, the organization or the market conditions have changed requiring a different deliverable. Misunderstanding around expectations is the rule, not the exception. Expect confusion, resistance, and back channeling. None of this is personal, but rather universal to human systems.

4. **Become a Student of Culture:**
    This is the most daunting challenge for leaders joining organizations. Culture is ultimately expressed in patterns of thinking, behavior, and language. Culture exists both above the line (stated organizational expectations, values, and vision) and below the line (hidden and unspoken mores and norms). Be sure to become familiar with the culture above the line. But it's the hidden culture that is the most important to detect and decode. Remember it is possible for different units within an organization to have their own micro-cultures. Your invitation is to become an anthropologist, a student of the ways people interact. Pay particular attention to the following areas:

    - **Influence**: How do you get support for initiatives, how you get recognized for accomplishments? Who will you need to accomplish this?
    - **Meetings**. What is their real function? Is this a place where dialogue on hard issues takes place, or is it rubberstamps for private decisions?
    - **Execution**: When it comes time to get things done, which matters more? A deep understanding of processes or knowing the right people?
    - **Conflict**: Can people talk openly about difficult issues without fear of retribution? Or do they avoid conflict?
    - **Recognition**: Does the company promote stars, those who are visible and vocally drive business or team players and collaborators who quietly do the work?
    - **Ends Versus Means**: Are there restrictions that guide how to achieve results? What are those boundaries?
    - **Language**: Every organization has a shared language unique to the organization. Notice repeating words and be curious about what those words mean to them.
    - **Values**: Can you tell by observing behaviors, rewards, and punishments what matters most to the organization, and what doesn't matter much?

TOOL #1: Conduct Immersion Research (First 30 days):

Whenever you enter a new role, be sure to have a plan for how you're going to get to know the people you work with and who work for you. Consider following a consistent script to help you get better data in order to compare and analyze what you think is really going on. By asking the same set of questions you can avoid being swayed by the most forceful or articulate person you talk to. Here's a sample agenda:

1. Share your background and your sense of purpose (your WHY).
2. Find out their background and their sense of purpose.
3. What do they think are the biggest challenges facing the organization?
4. Why do they think the organization is facing these challenges?
5. What would need to happen for the organization to exploit the potential of these opportunities?
6. If you were me, what would you focus attention on?

How they answer these questions, doesn't just tell you more about the organization or context, it can tell you a lot about your team too. Who answers directly, who is evasive or prone to tangents? Who takes responsibility? Who points fingers? Who has a broad view of the business? Who seems stuck in a silo?

Once you have distilled your impressions and observations, schedule a meeting about 30 days into your tenure with your supervisor or advisory board and present your ideas as an initial hypothesis to test them. Once you have your supervisor's input, reconvene your people and give them your impressions and questions and invite discussion.

Some Additional Questions to Focus Your Learning:
1. What is the organizations stated strategy? Are they actually pursuing it?
2. What potentially damaging cultural or political missteps must you avoid?
3. In what areas (people, relationships, processes, or products) can you achieve some early wins?
4. In what areas is the organization most likely to face stiff challenges in the coming year?
5. What new capabilities need to be developed in the organization to address these challenges?

After 30 days, create a situational hypothesis. Meet with your boss to share and confirm findings. Be sure to confirm what qualifies as early wins. Next meet with your team to share findings. Based on the input, develop your custom on-boarding plan for the next 60 days. Get your boss's approval, and execute

TOOL #2: Use the STARS Model to Match Strategy to Situation:

Start by mapping where the company (or department) or different parts of your area of responsibility currently live. Tailoring the kind and speed of intervention to the state of the business is essential for success: Ask yourself is the business in…

> **S**tart Up
> **T**urnaround
> **A**ccelerated Growth
> **R**ealignment
> **S**ustaining Success

Each of these requires tailored interventions, pacing, and approaches that are unique. Misdiagnose and you can get blowback or lose credibility. Different aspects of your responsibility will likely be in different categories.

Start-Up	Turnaround	Accelerated Growth	Realignment	Sustaining Success
DESCRIPTION: You are building the capacities, shaping the agenda from the beginning. This may include selecting your team.	DESCRIPTION: A project is in trouble, fast action is required, disagreement about what should be done, and incomplete information are common.	DESCRIPTION: Managing a rapidly expanding business. Often requires extensive hiring and rapid on-boarding.	DESCRIPTION: Reenergizing a previously successful organization that now faces problems. This requires gaining more buy-in over time.	DESCRIPTION: Preserving the vitality of a successful organization and taking it to the next level
EMOTIONS: Marked by excitement and anticipation	EMOTIONS: Marked by loss of morale and frustration	EMOTIONS: Marked by enthusiasm as well as fatigue and stress	EMOTIONS: Usually people are in some measure of denial	EMOTIONS: High levels of engagement and commitment.
CHALLENGES: lack of clarity and focus, sometimes the lack of support resources or structure makes the lifting heavier.	CHALLENGES: If the project fails often the stakes are very high, could mean job loss.	CHALLENGES: Rapid growth can outpace your ability to deliver. Culture change with new people integrating.	CHALLENGES: Getting people to understand what is at stake and how things need to change. Stakeholders may be resistant.	CHALLENGES: Knowing how to keep things going, and playing smart defense. Sometimes complacency can be a problem.

TOOL #3: Establish Best Practices For Working with Your New Boss:

Proactively engage with your new supervisor to shape the game so that you have a greater chance of achieving your desired goals.

Do's

- *Clarify expectations early and often* – Revisiting expectations is especially important if you're coming from the outside and still learning the culture and politics.
- *Take 100 percent responsibility for making the relationship work* – Don't expect your boss to reach out and offer time. If your boss meets you part way, it's a welcome surprise
- *Negotiate time lines for diagnosis and action planning* – Don't feel pressured to make calls before you are ready. Buy yourself time in order to diagnose, then discuss your 90-day plan.
- *Aim for early wins in areas important to the boss* ¬ - Whatever your priorities, figure out what matters to your boss and try to move the needle there first.
- *Expect back channeling as normal* – Expect your boss will have preexisting relationships with people who are now your peers and possibly your subordinates. Be alert to the multiple channels through which information and opinion about you will reach your boss. Don't take it personally.

Don'ts

- *Don't stay away* – If your boss doesn't reach out, that doesn't mean you should accept that. It may feel good to have a lot of rope, don't take it. Get on your boss's calendar regularly.
- *Don't surprise your boss* – Report emerging problems early enough, you don't want them to hear it from someone else.
- *Don't approach your boss with only problems* – You also need to have plans for how to begin to address them. This is not a full-blown solution, which can be just as bad. Just show that you've thought through it.
- *Don't just run down your checklist* – This is not an opportunity to tell your boss everything you've been doing. Focus on the most important three things you need to share or need action on from your boss
- *Don't expect your boss to change* – You may have different working styles and ways of communicating or motivating. It's your responsibility to adapt to your boss's style.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

The First 90 Days, Updated and Expanded: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter. By Michael Watkins, Harvard Business Review Press.