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THE FIRST 90 DAYS

CRITICAL SUCCESS STRATEGIES FOR
NEW LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

OVERVIEW

You've just been promoted to a new leadership position. You're not sure of the challenges ahead or how you will meet them. All you know is that you have three months to get on top of the job and move forward-or fail.

This book is your road map for taking charge quickly and effectively during critical career transition periods, whether you're a first time manager or a new CEO. Written by noted leadership transition expert Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days* outlines proven strategies that will dramatically shorten the time it takes to reach what Watkins calls the "breakeven point": the point at which your organization needs you as much as you need the job.

Whether you are charged with launching

a start-up or sustaining a high-performing unit, *The First 90 Days* will help you develop a transition acceleration plan that is tailored to your situation.

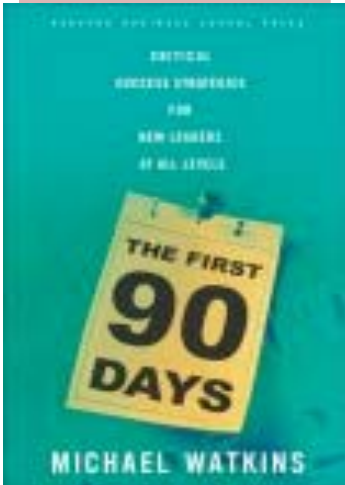
Based on three years of research into leadership transitions at all levels and hands-on work designing transition programs, Watkins provides examples and tools that will show you how to successfully manage your transition.

Refuting the pervasive belief that new leaders should be left to "sink or swim," *The First 90 Days* details a proactive planning approach that can make an individual's career-and ensure an organization's future.

TRANSITION ACCELERATION

There are five fundamental propositions that form the foundation of transition acceleration-and this book.

1. The root causes of transition failure always lie in a pernicious interaction between the situation, with its opportunities and pitfalls, and the individual, with his or her strengths and vulnerabilities.
2. There are systematic methods that leaders can employ to both lessen the likelihood of failure and reach the breakeven point faster.
3. The overriding goal in a transition is to build momentum by creating virtuous cycles that build credibility and by avoiding getting caught in vicious cycles that damage credibility.
4. Transitions are a crucible for leadership development and should be managed accordingly.
5. Adoption of a standard framework for accelerating transitions can yield big returns for organizations.



YOUR ROAD MAP FOR TRANSITION

At the conceptual backbone of the road map are ten key transition challenges.

1. Promote Yourself
2. Accelerate Your Learning
3. Match Strategy to Situation
4. Secure Early Wins
5. Negotiate Success
6. Achieve Alignment
7. Build Your Team
8. Create Coalitions
9. Keep Your Balance
10. Expedite Everyone

If you succeed in meeting these core challenges, you will have a successful transition. Failure to surmount any one of them, however, is enough to cause potentially crippling problems.

This book is for new leaders at all levels, from first time managers to CEOs. The fundamental principles of effective transition acceleration hold up well across all levels. But the specifics of who, what, when, and how and the relative weights of the ten key challenges vary a lot.

This book offers actionable guidelines and tools for succeeding in meeting each of these ten challenges. You will learn how to diagnose your situation and create action plans tailored to your needs, regardless of your level in the organization or the business situation you face. In the process you will build a 90-day plan that will accelerate you into your new role.

"The President of the United States gets 100 days to prove himself; you get 90."

PROMOTE YOURSELF

"Promoting yourself" does not mean self-serving grandstanding or hiring a PR firm. It means preparing yourself mentally to move into your new role by letting go of the past and embracing the imperatives of the new situation to give yourself a running start. This can be hard work, but it is essential that you do it. All too often, promising managers get promoted but fail to promote themselves by undertaking the necessary changes in perspective.

There are several key principles for mentally getting ready for your new position.

- Establish a clear breakpoint- it is essential to discipline yourself to make the transition mentally.
- Hit the ground running- your transition begins the moment you learn you are being considered for the job.
- Assess your vulnerabilities- you can do a lot to compensate for your vulnerabilities if you know what they are.
- Watch out for your strengths- the qualities that have made you successful can prove to be a weakness in your new role.
- Relearn how to learn- new positions often come with a steep learning curve. Learn to embrace the need to relearn.
- Rework your network- promoting yourself calls for working proactively to restructure your advice-and-counsel network.
- Watch out for those who want to hold you back- consciously or not, some individuals may not want you to advance. Getting others to accept your promotion is an essential part of promoting yourself.
- Overcoming barriers- "promoting yourself" can be hard work but it is essential to remember that it is a journey and not a destination.

ACCELERATE YOUR LEARNING

Too many new leaders fail to learn enough about their new organization and in doing so, make costly assumptions. It is essential to figure out what you need to know about your new organization and then to learn it as rapidly as you can. Why? Because 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. If you approach your efforts to get up to speed as an investment process-you will realize your returns in the form of knowledge that allows you to make better decisions earlier.

To maximize your return on investment in learning you need to create an effective learning plan and know the two key components to managing learning as an investment process.

- **Effective Learning-** this calls for figuring out what you need to learn so you can focus your efforts.
- **Efficient Learning-** this means identifying the best available sources of insight and then figuring out how to extract maximum insight in the shortest amount of time.

MATCH STRATEGY TO SITUATION

Matching your strategy to your situation requires careful diagnosis of the business situation. Only then can you be clearheaded, not just about the challenges, but also about the opportunities and resources available to you. The four broad types of business situations that new leaders must contend with are found in the STARS model:

- **Start-up:** you are charged with getting a new business, project or product off the ground
- **Turnaround:** you take a unit or group recognized to be in trouble and work to get it back on track.
- **Realignment:** your charge is to revitalize a unit, product, process or project that is drifting into trouble.
- **Sustaining-success:** you are shouldering the responsibility of a successful organization and looking to take it to the next level.

In all four of the STARS situations, the eventual goal is the same: a successful and growing business. But each type of transition presents a distinct set of challenges and opportunities. *The First 90 Days* helps you diagnose and identifying the challenges and opportunities as well as the various management skills necessary for each unique situation that will be critical to your success.

"When a new leader derails, failure to learn is almost always a factor."

“In the first 90 days, a key goal is to build personal credibility and create organizational momentum.”

SECURE EARLY WINS

In planning for your transition and beyond, it can be clarifying to plan to make successive waves of change. The goal of the first wave of change is to secure early wins. The new leader tailors early initiatives to build personal credibility, establish key relationships, and identify and harvest low-hanging fruit—the highest –potential opportunities for short term improvements in organizational performance. Done well, this helps the new leader to build momentum and deepen his or her individual learning.

While it is crucial to secure early wins, it is also important to secure them in the right way.

You can accomplish this in part by avoiding common traps.

- Failing to Focus
- Not taking the business situation into account
- Not adjusting for the culture
- Failing to get wins that matter to your boss
- Letting your means undermine your ends

NEGOTIATE SUCCESS

To succeed with a new boss, it is wise to *negotiate success* so you don't have to play a losing hand. It is well worth investing time in this critical relationship up front, because your new boss sets your benchmarks, interprets your actions for other key players, and controls access to resources you need. He or she will have more impact than any other individual on how quickly you reach the breakeven point, and on your eventual success or failure.

Negotiating success means proactively engaging with your new boss to shape the game so you have a fighting chance of achieving desired goals. Too many new leaders just play the game, reactively taking their situation as given and failing as a result. The alternative is to shape the game by negotiating with your boss to establish realistic expectations, reach consensus on the situation, and secure enough resources.

ACHIEVE ALIGNMENT

The higher you climb in organizations, the more you take on the role of organizational architect, creating the context within which others can achieve superior performance. No matter how charismatic you are, you cannot hope to do much if the key elements in your unit are fundamentally out of alignment. You will feel like you are pushing a boulder uphill everyday.

If strategy, structure, systems, and skills are within your purview in your new position, you need to begin to analyze the architecture of your organization and assess alignment among these key elements. You can't hope to do much more than conduct a solid diagnosis and perhaps get started on alignment issues in the first few months. But plans to assess the architecture of your group and to begin identifying areas for improvement should be included in your 90-day plan.

“A thorough understanding of organizational alignment can help you build credibility with people higher in the organization.”

BUILD YOUR TEAM

If you inherit a group of direct reports, it is essential to *build your team* to marshal the talent you need to achieve superior results. The most important decisions you make in your first 90 days will probably be about the people on your team. If you succeed in creating a high performance team, you can exert tremendous leverage in value creation. If not, you will face severe difficulties, for no leader can hope to achieve much alone. As one experience leader put it, "Hire in haste, repent at leisure."

Finding the right people is essential, but it is not enough. Begin by assessing existing team members to decide who will stay and who will have to go. Then devise a plan for getting new people and moving people you retain into the right positions-without doing too much damage to short-term performance in the process. Even this is not enough: You still need to put in place goals, incentives and performance measures that will propel your team in the desired directions.

CREATE COALITIONS

Coalition building entails consolidating existing sources of support while developing relationships with those whose resources or connections you need to succeed. The sequence in which you consolidate and build support is key. You will also need to persuade convincibles-people who can be persuaded with the right influence strategy-to become your supporters rather than opponents.

To consolidate existing support, call on established social and political relationships and strengthen them through regular conversations. Make sure you keep your allies up to date. Pay attention to how they react to changing conditions. You can even provide them with advice for how to counter opponents' arguments. You want to affirm the support of existing relationships and leverage them into support for your new effort.

How can you figure out who will be important to your success? To a degree, it will become obvious as you get to know the organization better. But you can accelerate that process by considering several key questions.

- Whose support do you need the most to succeed?
- What influence networks are most important to you?
- Who are your potential supporters? Potential opponents?
- What tools of influence will you employ to convince the convincibles?
- How will you shape supporters' perceptions of their interests?
- How can you sequence interactions to build momentum for your initiatives?

"Are there people you haven't met yet who are likely to be critical to your success?"

“Are you and your family getting the support you need?”

KEEP YOUR BALANCE

The life of a leader is always a balancing act, but never more so than during transition. The uncertainty and ambiguity can be crippling. You don't even know what you don't know. You haven't had a chance to build a support network. If you have moved, you're also in transition personally. If you have a family, they too are in transition. Amid all this turmoil, you are expected to get acclimated quickly and begin to affect positive change in your new organization. For all these reasons, *keeping your balance* is a key transition change.

You can create a strong sense of balance and self-efficacy by building a foundation on three key pillars:

1. Adopting Success Strategies
2. Enforcing Personal Disciplines
3. Building Your Support Systems

EXPEDITE EVERYONE

The strategies laid out in this book should propel you on your way to reaping the rewards of a stunning successful transition. But that doesn't mean you are done. What about your direct reports and their direct reports? Don't you have a stake in the success of their transitions as well?

Your final challenge, therefore, is to

expedite everyone by institutionalizing the transition acceleration model presented in the book. If all leaders who take on new positions in your organization use these success strategies, you will not just prevent failures, you will also capture potentially massive gains from accelerating everyone.



Michael Watkins

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Watkins is an Associate Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, where he does research on leadership and negotiation. He is the coauthor of *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (HBS Press, 1999) and the author of *Leadership Transitions*, an HBSP eLearning Program.

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- Transformative learning experiences

We value learning above all. When dealing with new initiatives, we always consider the degree to which we think we can make a lasting business and social difference while learning alongside our clients.

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