



The First 90 Days

Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels

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Introduction

The actions you take during your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you succeed or fail. Transitions are periods of opportunity, a chance to start afresh and make needed changes in an organization. But they're also periods of acute vulnerability, because you lack established working relationships and a detailed understanding of your new role. If you fail to build momentum during your transition, you'll face an uphill battle from that point forward.

The stakes are high. Failure in a new assignment can spell the end of a promising career. But for every leader who fails outright, there are many others who survive but don't realize their full potential. As a result, they lose opportunities to advance in their careers and they endanger the health of their organizations.

New leaders must take advantage of transition acceleration — dramatically condensing the time it takes to get on top of the job, regardless of their level in the organization. Every minute you save by being systematic about accelerating your transition is a minute you gain to build the business.

Five Propositions

Five fundamental propositions form the foundation of transition acceleration:

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.

Failure is never just about the flaws of the new leader, who may have succeeded many times before encountering failure. Nor is it ever just a case of a no-win situation. The business situations facing leaders who derail are no tougher than those in which others succeed brilliantly. Transition failures occur 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 use both to lessen the likelihood of failure and to reach their breakeven point more quickly — the point at which they start contributing as much value to the new organization as they've consumed from it in their early days.

While each transition is unique, they all share common features, including common traps. The specific business situations may vary but types of transition situations share common features and imperatives. There are also fundamental principles — such as securing early wins — that underpin success in transitions at all levels.

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. Leadership is about

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leverage, since the leader is only one person. To be successful, he or she will have to mobilize others.

4. Transitions are a crucible for leadership development and should be managed accordingly. Since they strengthen diagnostic skills, demand growth and adaptation, and test personal stamina, transitions are an indispensable development experience for every company's high-potential leaders.

5. The adoption of a standard framework for accelerating transitions can yield big returns for organizations. Given the frequency with which people take on new jobs in organizations, and the impact of that changeover on others, it helps a lot if everyone — bosses, direct reports and peers — speaks the same “transition language.”

Success Strategies for New Leaders

The challenges of transition acceleration vary according to situational factors. It matters a great deal whether you're making a key career “passage” in terms of your level in the organization, whether you're an insider or outsider, whether you have formal authority, and whether you're taking over a successful or troubled group. Thus it's essential that you match your strategy to the situation you face.

One determining factor is whether the new job is a start-up, turnaround, realignment or sustaining-success situation:

- In a start-up, you're charged with assembling the capabilities (people, funding and technology) to get a new business, product or project off the ground.
- In a turnaround, you take on a unit or group that's recognized to be in trouble and work to get it back on track.
- In a realignment, your challenge is to revitalize a unit, product, process or project that's drifting into trouble.
- In a sustaining-success situation, you're shouldering responsibility for preserving the vitality of a successful organization and taking it to the next level.

Ten Transition Challenges

Overall, there are 10 transition challenges that a leader must deal with:

- Promote yourself.
- Accelerate your learning.

- Match strategy to situation.
- Secure early wins.
- Negotiate success.
- Achieve alignment.
- Build your team.
- Create coalitions.
- Keep your balance.
- Expedite everyone.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

1. Promote Yourself. Promoting yourself doesn't mean hiring your own publicist or naming yourself to a higher position. It means making the mental break from your old job and preparing to take charge in the new one.

Perhaps the biggest pitfall you'll face is assuming that what has made you successful to this point in your career will continue to do so. The dangers of sticking with what you know, working extremely hard at doing it and failing miserably are very real.

Establish a clear breakpoint between the two jobs. Pick a specific time, such as a weekend, and use it to imagine yourself being promoted. Consciously think of letting go of the old job and beginning the new one. Think hard about the differences between the two and in what ways you'll have to think and act differently. Use the time to celebrate your move, even informally, with family and friends, and to seek guidance from informal advisors and counselors. Do whatever it takes to get into a transition state of mind.

2. Accelerate Your Learning. You need to climb the learning curve as fast as you can in your new organization. That means understanding its markets, products, technologies, systems and structures, as well as its culture and politics.

When a new leader derails, failure to learn is almost always a factor. There's so much to absorb that it's difficult to know where to focus and important signals get missed. Or you might focus too much on the technical side of the business — products, customers, technologies and strategies — and shortchange the critical learning about culture and politics.

It's vital that you plan to learn. Figure out in advance what the important questions are and how you can best answer them. Create a learning plan for your new role.

3. Match Strategy to Situation. There are no universal rules for success in transitions. You need to diagnose the business situation accurately and clarify its challenges and opportunities.

Both start-ups and turnarounds involve much resource-intensive construction work — there isn't much existing infrastructure and capacity for you to build on. To a significant degree, you get to start fresh. But both require that you make tough calls early.

Realignments and sustaining-success situations, by contrast, occur when you enter organizations that have significant strengths but also serious constraints on what you can and cannot do. In realignments you must reinvent the business, while in sustaining-success situations you must reinvent the challenge. In both cases 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.

4. Secure Early Wins. Early wins build your credibility and create momentum. In the first few weeks, you need to identify opportunities to build personal credibility. In the first 90 days, you need to identify ways to create value, improve business results and get to the breakeven point more rapidly.

In a study of new general managers, Jack Gabarro found that they typically planned and implemented change in distinct waves. Following an early period of acclimatization, they began an early wave of changes. The pace then slowed to allow consolidation and deeper learning about the organization, and to allow people to catch their breath. Armed with more insight, the new general managers then implemented a deeper, more thorough and structural wave of change.

In the first wave, you need to tailor initiatives to build credibility, establish key relationships and identify and harvest low-hanging fruit — the highest-potential opportunities for short-term improvements in organizational performance. The second wave of change — with its more fundamental issues of strategy, structure, systems and skills — depends on securing the early wins of the first wave.

5. Negotiate Success. Because no other single relationship is more important, you need to figure out how to build a productive working relationship with your new boss and manage his or her expectations.

That means carefully planning for a series of critical conversations about the situation, expectations, style, resources and your personal development. It's critical that you develop and gain consensus on your 90-day plan.

6. Achieve Alignment. The higher you rise in an or-

ganization, the more you have to play the role of organizational architect. That means figuring out whether the organization's strategy is sound, bringing its structure into alignment with its strategy, and developing the system and skill bases necessary to realize strategic intent.

Your goal during the first 90 days should be to identify potential misalignments and then design a plan for correcting them. Common misalignments will come between skills and strategy, systems and strategy, and structure and systems.

Beware, however, of some traps — trying to restructure your way out of deeper problems, which is like straightening the deck chairs on the *Titanic*; creating structures that are too complex; automating problem processes, since then the problems will remain; making change for change's sake; and overestimating your group's capacity to absorb strategic shifts.

7. Build Your Team. If you're inheriting a team, you'll need to evaluate its members and perhaps restructure it better to meet the demands of the situation. Your willingness to make tough early personnel calls and your capacity to select the right people for the right positions are among the most important drivers of success during your transition. You need to be systematic and strategic in approaching this team-building challenge.

Some leaders clean house too precipitously, but it's more common to keep people longer than is wise. A good rule of thumb is that you should decide by the end of your first 90 days who will remain and who will go. By the end of six months you should have communicated your planned personnel changes to key stakeholders, particularly your boss and H.R. If you wait much longer, the team becomes "yours" and change becomes increasingly difficult to justify and carry out.

8. Create Coalitions. Your success will depend on your ability to influence people outside your direct line of control. Supportive alliances, both internal and external, will be necessary to achieve your goals.

You should therefore start right away to identify those whose support is essential for your success, and figure out how to line them up on your side.

9. Keep Your Balance. In the personal and professional tumult of a transition — with the intensified stress, many demands on your time, and perhaps distance from your family because the job is in a new city — you have to work hard to maintain your equilibrium and preserve your ability to make good judgments.

The risks of losing perspective, getting isolated and making bad calls are ever-present during transitions. There's much you can do to accelerate your personal transition and gain more control over your work environment. The right advice-and-counsel network is an indispensable resource.

10. Expedite Everyone. Finally, you need to help everyone in your organization — direct reports, bosses and peers — accelerate their own transitions. The quicker you can get your new direct reports up to speed, the more you'll help your own performance.

Beyond that, the benefits to the organization of systematically accelerating everyone's transitions are potentially vast.

Conclusion

If you succeed in meeting the 10 core challenges, you'll have a successful transition. Failure to surmount any one of them, however, is enough to cause potentially crippling problems.

The key is to take a systematic approach, paying

attention to the five crucial propositions for accelerating your transition and being alert to the 10 core challenges. **e**

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Why Not? How to Use Everyday Ingenuity to Solve Problems Big and Small, by Barry J. Nalebuff and Ian Ayres, Harvard Business School Press, 2003, ISBN 1591391539.