

# The First Ninety Days of Leadership

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 **T**he president of the United States gets 100 days to prove himself; you get 90. 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. They are 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 will face an uphill battle from that point forward.

The stakes are obviously high. Failure in a new assignment can spell the end of a promising career. But making a successful transition is about more than just avoiding failure. Some leaders do derail (and when they do, their problems can almost always be traced to vicious cycles that developed in the first few months on the job). But for every leader who fails outright, there are many others who survive but do not realize their full potential. As a result, they lose opportunities to advance in their careers, and they endanger the health of their organizations.

This chapter is as much about *transition acceleration* as it is about failure prevention. It provides a blueprint for condensing the time it will take you to get on top of the job, regardless of your level in your organization. If you succeed in this, you will free up time to concentrate on fixing problems and exploiting opportunities in your new organization. After all, 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 organization, not a net consumer. Every minute you save by being systematic about accelerating your transition is a minute you gain to build the business.

Given the stakes, it is surprising how little guidance is available to new leaders about how to transition more effectively and efficiently into new roles. There are plenty of books and articles on leadership, but few directly address transitions at all.<sup>1</sup> Also, excellent resources on managing organizational change exist, but most implicitly assume the change agent is already settled in the organization, with the necessary knowledge and relationships in place to plan, build support for, and carry out transformation initiatives.

The reality is that the process of leading change often occurs in tandem with a leader's transition into a new role. This chapter is intended to fill a gap in the leadership literature. It offers a blueprint for addressing the linked challenges of personal transition and organizational transformation that confront leaders in their first few months in a new job.

## FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITIONS

From observing new leaders and experimenting with methods of accelerating transitions, I have strong beliefs about the challenges of transitions and what it takes to succeed in meeting them. Five propositions form the foundation of my approach to transition acceleration.

The first proposition is that *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. Indeed, the failed leaders whom I studied had all achieved significant successes in the past. Nor is it ever just about a no-win situation in which not even a superhuman leader could have carried the day. The business situations facing leaders who derail are no tougher than those in which

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others succeed brilliantly. Transition failures happen when new leaders either misunderstand the essential demands of the situation or lack the skill and flexibility to adapt to them.

The second proposition is that *there are systematic methods that leaders can employ to both lessen the likelihood of failure and reach the breakeven point faster*. Early in my efforts to develop a framework for accelerating transitions at all levels, an experienced manager told me, "You can't do that." When I asked why, he said, "Because every transition is unique." This is true, of course. It is also misleading. Sure, every transition is unique if you look at its details. But viewed from a higher vantage point, we can discern types of transitions that share common features, including common traps. Consider, for example, making a transition from functional vice president to general manager. Every leader who makes this leap encounters similar challenges, such as the need to let go of reliance on functional expertise. (The transition from frontline supervisor to manager of managers represents a similar challenge at a lower level.<sup>2</sup>) The specific business situations that confront transitioning leaders also vary. But specific types of transition situations, such as start-ups and turnarounds, share certain features and imperatives. Further, there are fundamental principles—for example, securing early wins—that underpin success in transitions at all levels, whether one is a new supervisor or a new CEO. The key, then, is to *match your strategy to the situation*. This is a core theme to which we will return.

The third proposition is that *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 leverage. The new leader is, after all, just one person. To be successful, she will have to mobilize the energy of many others in her organization. Her vision, her expertise, her drive can serve as a seed crystal in the new organization, one that will grow exponentially into new and more productive patterns of behavior. Too often, however, the new leader behaves more like a virus: Her early actions alienate potential supporters, undermine her credibility, and stimulate defensive reactions. As a vicious cycle takes hold, the organization's immune system gets activated and the new leader is attacked by clumps of killer cells, encapsulated, and finally expelled.

The fourth proposition is that *transitions are a crucible for leadership development and should be managed accordingly*. Precisely

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because 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.

My fifth and final proposition is that *adoption of a standard framework for accelerating transitions can yield big returns for organizations*. Each year over half a million managers enter new positions in *Fortune* 500 companies alone.<sup>3</sup> Given the frequency with which people take on new jobs, and the impact of each transition on others in the organization, it helps a lot if everyone—bosses, direct reports, and peers—speaks the same “transition language.” Why shouldn't every person who is getting to know a new boss employ a shared set of guidelines to build that critical relationship? Also, adopting standard approaches to learning about a new organization, securing early wins, and building coalitions translates into speedier organizational adjustments to the unavoidable stream of personnel shifts and environmental changes. Adopting a rational framework for transition acceleration translates into real bottom-line impact.

### SUCCESS STRATEGIES FOR NEW LEADERS

Why is so little good advice available about accelerating transitions? In part, the answer is because there are many different kinds of transitions; thus, it is not enough to come up with general rules or one-size-fits-all advice. Consider the following pairs of transition situations. How do the definitions of success and the imperatives for making effective transitions differ in these cases?

- Promotion to a more senior role in marketing versus moving from marketing to a position as general manager of a business unit
  - Moving to a new position within your existing organization versus moving to a new company
  - Moving from a staff position to line management versus moving from line to staff
  - Taking over a group facing very serious problems versus taking over a group widely and accurately viewed as very successful
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The point? The challenges of transition acceleration vary depending on situational factors. It matters a great deal whether you are making a key career “passage” in terms of level in the organization, whether you are an insider or an outsider, whether you have formal authority, and whether you are taking over a successful or troubled group.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is essential that you match your strategy to the situation you face. Practical advice has to be tailored to the situation, the level of the new leader, his or her experience with the organization, and the condition of the business.

To illustrate the power of a systematic approach to transition acceleration, consider the challenge a new leader faces in diagnosing his new organization’s business situation. How does he characterize the challenges and opportunities? How does he reach consensus with his new boss and direct reports about what actions need to be taken? Without a conceptual framework to guide diagnosis and planning, this turns out to be a lot of work. It is also easy to blunder into dangerous misunderstandings with bosses or direct reports about what needs doing. Even if the new leader achieves the necessary shared understanding, he is likely to have consumed significant time and energy in the process and might have missed some important opportunities and failed to identify some ticking time bombs.

Now suppose instead that the new leader is counseled to figure out early on whether his new job is a *start-up*, *turnaround*, *realignment*, or *sustaining-success* situation. Suppose too that he has clear descriptions of the challenges and opportunities typical of each of these situations and actionable guidelines for establishing priorities in each one. What changes?

This diagnostic tool, called the STARS model (for Start-up, Turn-around, Realignment, and Sustaining success), powerfully accelerates the new leader’s diagnosis of his new organization and his development of effective action plans. It also helps the new leader to more rapidly reach a shared understanding of the situation with other key players, including his boss and direct reports. Whether he is taking over an entire organization or managing a group or a short-term project, he can use this tool to accelerate his transition.

So take heart. There are structural similarities in challenges and opportunities, and corresponding guidelines—must do’s and don’t do’s—for different types of transitional situations. The key is to engage in careful diagnosis, adapt some general principles to the demands of the situation, and create a 90-day acceleration plan

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for yourself. The conceptual backbone of that road map is ten key transition challenges:

1. *Promote yourself.* This doesn't mean hiring your own publicist. It means making the mental break from your old job and preparing to take charge in the new one. Perhaps the biggest pitfall you 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.
  2. *Accelerate your learning.* You need to climb the learning curve as fast as you can in your new organization. This means understanding its markets, products, technologies, systems, and structures, as well as its culture and politics. Getting acquainted with a new organization can feel like drinking from a fire hose. You have to be systematic and focused about deciding what you need to learn and how you will learn it most efficiently.
  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. Start-ups, for instance—of a new product, process, plant, or a completely new business—share challenges quite different from those you would face while turning around a product, process, or plant in serious trouble. A clear diagnosis of the situation is an essential prerequisite for developing your action plan.
  4. *Secure early wins.* Early wins build your credibility and create momentum. They create virtuous cycles that leverage the energy you are putting into the organization to create a pervasive sense that good things are happening. 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.
  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. This means carefully planning for a series of critical conversations about the situation, shared expectations,
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leadership styles and strengths, resources, and your personal development. Crucially, it means developing and gaining consensus on your 90-day plan.

6. *Achieve alignment.* The higher you rise in an organization, the more you have to play the role of organizational architect. This means figuring out whether the organization's strategy is sound, bringing its structure into alignment with its strategy, and developing the systems and skill bases necessary to realize strategic intent.
7. *Build your team.* If you are inheriting a team, you will need to evaluate its members and perhaps restructure it to better 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 will need to be both systematic and strategic in approaching the team-building challenge.
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 to figure out how to line them up on your side.
9. *Keep your balance.* In the personal and professional tumult of a transition, you will 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 is much you can do to accelerate your personal transition and to 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 will help your own performance. Beyond that, the benefits to the organization of systematically accelerating everyone's transitions are potentially vast.

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.



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## Chapter Twenty-One

1. Excellent exceptions to this general rule are John J. Gabarro, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1987) and Linda A. Hill, *Becoming a Manager: How New Managers Master the Challenges of Leadership*, 2nd edition (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003).
2. For an excellent exploration of the challenges of moving from technical contributor to first-time manager, see Hill, *Becoming a Manager*.
3. This is an extrapolation of the results of a management transition survey of senior HR executives at Fortune 500 companies that I conducted in 1999. The survey was sent to the heads of human resources at a random sample of 100 Fortune 500 companies. We received 40 responses. One question concerned the percentage of managers at all levels who took new jobs in 1998. The mean of the responses to this question was 22.3 percent. Extrapolated to the Fortune 500 as a whole, this suggests that almost 700,000 managers take new jobs each year. The half-million figure is therefore a conservative estimate intended purely to illustrate the magnitude of the impact of leadership transitions.
4. For discussion of key passages in the lives of managers, see Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel, *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).