Audio-Tech Business Book Summaries

The First 90 Days

Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels

***by* Michael Watkins**

A summary of the original text.

In this issue:

- ***Learn...*** how you can succeed in any new leadership role by following 10 steps to make a positive impact on your organization in your first three months on the job.
- ***Discover...*** how you can slash the time it takes you to reach the break-even point: the point at which your company needs you as much as you need it.
- ***Understand...*** how to achieve your goals whether you are launching a start-up, leading a turnaround, orchestrating a realignment, or sustaining a high-performing unit.
- ***Develop...*** the skills you need to promote yourself, accelerate your learning, match the strategy to the situation, secure early wins, and exceed everyone's expectations.
- ***Transform...*** your business by achieving alignment, building an effective team, creating coalitions, keeping your balance, and helping others reach the break-even point.

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Each year, more than half a million managers enter new positions in Fortune 500 companies alone. That's about one in every four managers in the average company — or, looked at another way, it means the average manager changes jobs every four years.

If you're in a new leadership position in business, you're allowed 90 days to prove yourself. The actions you take during your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you will succeed or fail in the long term.

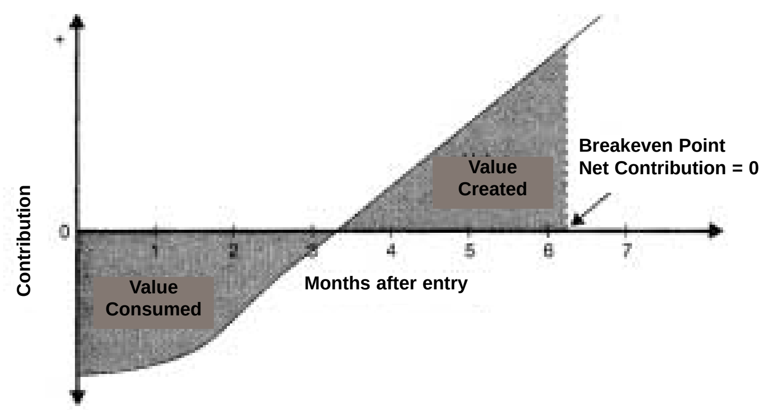
Transitions are periods of opportunity, a chance for a fresh start for yourself and your organization. But they are also periods of acute vulnerability, because you lack established working relationships and a detailed understanding of your new role. If you fail to build momentum during your transition, you will face an uphill battle from that point forward.

Your goal should be to arrive as quickly as possible to *the break-even point,* at which you have contributed as much value to the business as you have consumed from it. When 210 CEOs were asked how long it takes a mid-level manager to reach the break-even point, their answer was six months. Using the 10-point plan we will discuss, that time can be cut substantially.

The faster you reach the break-even point (as illustrated on page 2), the sooner you can concentrate on fixing problems, exploiting opportunities, and building the business.

Here are the 10 key steps you can take to move through your job transition smoothly:

The Break-even Point



1. Promote yourself.

2. Accelerate your learning.

3. Match the strategy to the 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.

For the rest of this summary, we'll focus on each of these 10 steps.

1. Promote Yourself

If you think you can't fail in transition, consider the case of Douglas Ivester, once the CEO of Coca-Cola. An accountant by training, he had spent nearly 20 years rising through the ranks of Coca-Cola. In 1985, he was named CFO at the age of 37. He was the right-hand man to legendary CEO Robert Goizueta.

Ivester orchestrated the highly-successful spin-off of the bottling operations in 1986. He also oversaw the expansion into Eastern Europe in 1989. Ivester was a rising star, and was rewarded accordingly, becoming president and COO of the company in 1994. When Goizueta died suddenly, Ivester was the obvious choice to succeed him as CEO. And he failed.

How could such an obviously talented man with such a great track record fail?

He had been a "numbers guy," detail-oriented, and was known as a "super-COO." But when he became CEO, he could not let go of that job and in fact, refused to name a new COO. He could not let go of his attention to detail in favor of the big strategic picture required by the new job. He began alienating everyone he came in contact with. He lost an important acquisition in France, failed to take charge when Coke was contaminated at a bottling plant in Belgium, and fumbled in dealing with a racial discrimination suit at headquarters in Atlanta.

Seeing the big picture, and dealing with key external constituencies, were not his core competencies, and he shied away from these critical tasks. The key to his failure was that he had not mentally prepared himself for the transition from COO to CEO.

To avoid that fate, it is essential to establish a clear breakpoint. Consciously think of letting the old job go and embracing the new one. Think hard about the differences and requirements of the two. Seek advice from people who might help you in understanding the new job.

When you move into the new position, you have to hit the ground running. One useful exercise is to start planning milestones you wish to hit at specific times — remember that you have only 90 days to prove yourself. For example, set specific goals for the very first day on the job. What would you like to have done that first day?

Then move to the first week, the first month, and so on. Even if the plan is sketchy in its details, it will help, and you can revise it as you go along and gain more experience.

Even as you're planning your milestones, assess your vulnerabilities. One of the ways to do that is to ask yourself what kinds of problems you like solving most. That was Ivester's problem at Coke: He chose to focus on problems that he was comfortable solving, and he paid too little attention to the rest. You have no doubt perfected skills at solving certain kinds of problems, and those are probably the ones you like most. But that could leave you vulnerable if those aren't the requirements of the new job.

Most problems will fall into one of three categories:

1. ***Technical problems*** involve strategy, markets, technologies, and processes.

2. ***Political problems*** concern power and politics in the organization.

3. ***Cultural problems*** involve values, norms, and guiding assumptions.

For example, ask yourself if you deal best with customer relationships, budgeting, cost-cutting, product positioning, or cross-functional cooperation. Look carefully at what the new job entails, and see how your problem preferences fit or fail to fit. Where there are gaps, prepare to do the tough work to bring yourself up to speed on those areas. It's going to take discipline.

The main tools for dealing with your vulnerabilities are self-discipline, team building, and advice and counsel. You will need to do the jobs you don't enjoy as much. You will have to consciously restructure your team, bringing in those people who can compensate for your weaknesses and letting go of some others, perhaps people you're fond of working with. And you will have to create a network of advisors who can tell you the truth.

You'll need to negotiate clear expectations with your old boss as you make the sometimes-messy transition from one job to another. Both of you have to know not only what will be done but — equally important — what will *not* be done.

Don't get caught like Ivester, trying to do two jobs at once. One of the keys to success in transition is learning how to learn again. It may have been some time since you had to re-learn your job, and it may be uncomfortable. Let's take a look at the process.

2. Accelerate Your Learning

When a new leader derails, failure to learn is almost always a factor. There is such a torrent of information at first that it can be difficult to know where to focus. You may focus on technology, for example, and forget to learn about the culture and politics of the new position.

Another problem is the 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.

Some leaders even have "learning disabilities," or crippling internal blocks to learning.

One learning disability is the *failure to even try to understand the history of the organization*. Every leader should start by asking, "How did we get to this point?" Otherwise, you risk tearing down fences without knowing why they were put up. Once you know the history, you may find you can get rid of the fence — or that there is a good reason to leave it where it is.

Other new leaders suffer from *a near-compulsive need to take immediate action*. Listening and observing should always be the first actions you take. Worse than that are leaders who *arrive with the solution already in mind*, before they've even studied the problem. What works in one organizational culture may fail miserably in another.

If you approach your efforts to get up to speed as an investment process, you will realize returns in the form of *actionable insights*. An actionable insight is knowledge that enables you to make better decisions sooner, and to reach the break-even point faster.

To gain actionable insights, you need to talk to external sources of information, including customers, distributors, suppliers, and outside analysts. You should also get information from internal sources, such as people in sales, purchasing, R&D, finance, human resources, and so on.

Other people who can provide useful insights are *historians* — that is, people who have been with the company a long time and know the roots of its culture — as well as *integrators,* such as project managers and product managers, who coordinate cross-functional interaction; these people can help you to identify the true hierarchies and tell you where the internal conflicts lie.

The questions you need to ask these sources are based on your learning agenda. Your learning agenda is a focused set of questions you will use to help you get the answers you need the most. To create a learning agenda, list the most important questions you need to answer about the past, the present, and the future.

Under the subject of the past, ask about performance, root causes, and history:

- What has the past performance been?
- How were goals set? Were they too big or too small?
- Were benchmarks used?
- What measures were employed, and what behaviors did they encourage and discourage?
- What happened if goals were not met?
- What efforts have been made to change the organization? What happened?
- Who has been instrumental in shaping this organization?

Next, assess the present:

- What is the stated vision and strategy?
- Is the organization really pursuing that strategy? If not, why not?
- Among the company's people, who is capable and who is not?
- What are the key processes, and are they performing acceptably? If not, why not?
- What cultural or political missteps must you avoid making?
- In what areas — people, relationships, processes, or products — can you achieve some early wins?

Finally, examine the future:

- In what areas is the business most likely to face stiff challenges in the coming year?
- What are the most promising opportunities?
- What are the biggest barriers to change?
- Are there islands of excellence that you can leverage?
- What new capabilities will you need to develop or acquire?
- Which elements of the culture should be preserved, and which need to be changed?

Using a structured learning process can make much better use of your time and accelerate your transition. Meet with your direct reports one by one, and ask them these five questions:

1. What are the biggest challenges the company is facing now and will face in the near future?
2. Why is the organization facing or going to face these challenges?
3. What are the most promising opportunities for growth?
4. What would need to happen for the company to exploit them?
5. If you were me, what would you focus attention on?

This will allow you to find out if there is consensus about these matters and also give you a reading on your direct reports. Are there finger-pointers in the group? Do people answer honestly or evasively? Who has the big picture?

As you go through the learning process, you will repeatedly collect information, analyze and distill it, develop hypotheses, and test them, progressively deepening your understanding of the organization. Only then can you begin the process of diagnosing the business situation, a vital step in moving toward meaningful action.

3. Match the Strategy to the Situation

There are four types of business situations that new leaders must contend with:

1. Start-up

2. Turnaround

3. Realignment

4. Sustaining success

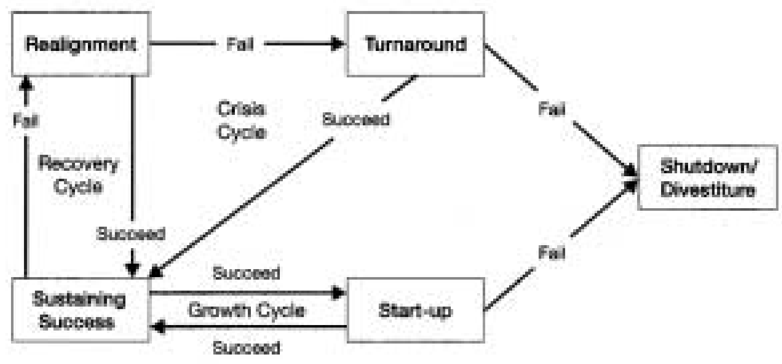
We will refer to this framework of transition types as the STARS Model. Knowing which situation you face will help crystallize your strategy for action.

In a *start-up*, you will have to put together the people, funding, and technology to get a new business, product, or project off the ground. In a *turnaround*, you have to take a troubled unit by the horns and get it back on track. Both involve resource-intensive construction work rather than using existing infrastructure or capacity. On the plus side, you are getting a fresh start. On the negative side, you'll have to make some tough calls early on.

In a *realignment*, you are taking charge of a unit that is drifting into trouble and needs revitalization. In a *sustaining success* situation, you will need to preserve the vitality of a successful organization and shepherd it to the next level. In these two situations, you will have some time before having to make the big decisions, which allows you more time to learn. On the downside, it will be harder to gauge your progress.

Obviously, a start-up, turnaround, or realignment that succeeds becomes a sustaining success situation. A turnaround or start-up that fails gets shut down. But a realignment that fails can become a turnaround with a chance for sustaining success. One of the keys to moving toward sustaining success in any of these cases it to address the psychology of the organization.

THE STARS MODEL



- *In a start-up*, people are going to be excited but may lack direction. Your job will be to channel their energy in productive directions.

- *In turnarounds*, people will be demoralized. Your job is to provide the light at the end of the tunnel.

- *In realignments*, you will have to overcome people's denial before helping them reinvent the business.

- *In a sustaining success situation*, you'll have to combat complacency and find new challenges to maintain growth.

You'll have to allocate your resources differently depending on the type of STARS situation you're in. For example, how much time should you devote to learning as opposed to making decisions, initiating changes, or recruiting new people?

In turnarounds and start-ups, the emphasis is on taking action. You'll have to make decisions early and often without complete information. Learning is still required, but it's going to be mostly technical at first. Fortunately, that's the easiest kind of learning.

In sustaining success situations and realignments, the emphasis is on learning, because you're dealing with people who are successful in the first case, and in the second case, you're dealing with people who think they are. Early mistakes will be costly. Fortunately, you have more time to learn. Delve deeply into organizational culture and politics.

In a realignment or a sustaining success, it is more important than ever to secure those all-important early wins. Let's discuss how to do that in more detail.

4. SECURE EARLY WINS

What can you hope to

accomplish in 90 days? By the end of your transition, you want your boss, your peers, and your subordinates to feel that something new, something good, is happening. Doing this requires avoiding the five most common traps in transition.

- The first trap is the ***failure to focus.*** During the transition, things can get confusing fast. You can't hope to achieve results in more than a couple of areas at the start. Identify the best opportunities and focus relentlessly on translating them into early wins.

- The second trap is ***not taking the business situation into account.*** What can be a win in one STARS situation will be a loss in another. Simply getting people to talk about change can be a big win in a realignment but a loss in a turnaround, where action is required. Think tactically about what will be required.

- The third trap is ***not adjusting to the culture.*** If you're coming in from outside, this is a great risk. Beware your preconceptions of what constitutes a win. In some cultures, the individual pursuit of glory is frowned upon. In others, it's admired. Should you lead a team to success, or do it on your own? Only a correct reading of the culture can tell you.

- The fourth trap is ***failing to get wins that matter to your boss.*** Even if you do not fully agree with your boss's priorities, you have to take them into account in planning your wins. If you fix an important problem for your boss, it is a huge win.

- The fifth and final trap is ***letting your means undermine your ends.*** You can't use means that are manipulative, underhanded, or inconsistent with the culture, no matter how big the win might be in the end. Align your wins with behavior you hope to instill in your new organization.

Early wins are the building blocks of your credibility, and should lay the foundation for your long-term goals in the company. Remember, the transition is 90 days, but you will be in that job two or more years. Your early wins will set the tone for those years and dictate to some extent what you're able to accomplish.

There are two broad areas you want to influence: You want to move toward ***implementing your A-item business priorities,*** and you want to ***introduce the new pattern of behavior*** for your organization. Keep three principles in mind as you establish your A-item priorities.

1. A-item priorities should follow naturally from core problems.

2. They should be neither too general nor too specific.

3. They should offer clear direction, yet allow for flexibility while you learn more about your situation.

The second half of the equation, changing people's behavior, is just as important as achieving those A-item priorities. Develop a clear vision of how you would like people to behave by the end of your tenure, and plan how your early wins will advance that process of change.

This will have two phases: building your credibility in the first 30 days, and beginning to achieve early performance improvements in the remaining 60 days.

Your earliest actions will have the greatest impact. Think hard about what message you want them to send. Identify your key audiences for those messages, such as your boss, your direct reports, your peers, and outside constituencies, such as customers and suppliers. Focus on who you are and what your values are. Here are some questions people will be asking about you when you first arrive:

- Do you have the insight and steadiness to make tough decisions?

- Do you have values that they relate to, admire, and want to emulate?

- Do you have the right kind of energy?

- Do you demand high levels of performance from yourself and others?

In shaping how people are going to answer those questions, consider the following: New leaders are perceived as more credible when they are:

- ***Demanding,*** but able to be satisfied.
- ***Accessible,*** but not too familiar.
- ***Decisive,*** but judicious.
- ***Focused,*** but flexible.
- ***Active,*** without causing commotion.
- ***Willing to make tough calls,*** but humane.

With this in mind, you can then set your strategy for specific initiatives. Remember to keep your long-term goals in mind while identifying a few promising areas where improvement can be made quickly. Master those areas and then launch a pilot project to test your hypothesis. Identify people at all levels who have the insight, drive, and incentives to advance your agenda and promote them. Then reward them for success.

5. Negotiate Success

One of the most important elements of your success in transition is your boss. The time you invest in this critical relationship is well worth it. Your boss sets your benchmarks, interprets your actions for others, and controls access to resources. He or she is the gatekeeper of the break-even point.

The best strategy is to negotiate some realistic expectations up front, reach a consensus, and secure enough resources to succeed. To do that requires having a 90-day plan.

This can be done through five conversations, which you will plan and execute. They will cover:

1. The business situation.
2. Expectations on both sides.
3. Style of interaction.
4. Resources you'll need compared with what is available.
5. Your personal development on the job.

Let's take them one at a time.

The first conversation is about *reaching a shared understanding of the business situation.* This will help define which of the STARS models you'll use to design your overall plan. Once you have defined which situation you're in, you'll need to define your boss's role in helping you achieve results.

For example, you may need help in getting resources in a start-up or turnaround, or help in making the case for change in a realignment. This conversation will lay the groundwork for everything you do in those crucial 90 days.

The second conversation is about *expectations* — yours and your boss's. This is where you set short- and medium-term goals and define what success is going to look like. You'll decide on a timeframe for milestones and look to the future beyond those targets.

Out of this conversation, you'll be able to figure out some early wins that will align with your boss's priorities. That will secure you the help you need to go to the next level.

Once you move into action, always promise slightly less than you deliver. No one will complain if you delight them with surprise bonuses. But promising what you can't deliver hurts credibility.

Go back frequently to confirm that you're on the same page with your boss. Ask the same question in different ways to gain insight. Read between the lines. Put yourself in your boss's shoes. Don't let key issues remain ambiguous.

Once you have negotiated expectations, you are ready for the *style* conversation. This will determine how you and your boss can best work together. The first step is to diagnose his style.

For example, does your boss prefer voice mail or e-mail? If you have to leave an important message, that's a key piece of information. Does he prefer talking face-to-face, or exchanging written messages?

What kinds of decisions does he want to be involved with, and what kind will just annoy him to know about? Does he arrive early and work late? Compare and contrast your two styles and see where they mesh or clash. Talk to others.

In the end, remember that it's your responsibility to build a good relationship with your boss and not the other way around. You are going to have to adapt to his style. If he doesn't like voice mail, don't use it. If he wants all the details of every decision, deliver them. When in doubt, ask. And if serious issues of style come up, address them directly and honestly.

Once you've laid this groundwork, confront the issue of *resources*. This will differ markedly depending on which situation you are in. In a start-up, you need money and technical support, along with people to do the job right. In a turnaround, you need authority backed by political support. In a realignment, you need public backing to confront the need for change. And in a sustaining success situation, you need financial and technical resources to exploit new opportunities.

When you set your resource goals, plan ahead. It's not good to keep going back for more. Get what you need upfront for agreed-upon goals. If the boss wants 10 percent growth, figure out what it will take to get it and ask for all of the resources you'll need to do the job. Always link resources to clearly defined results.

The last conversation will be about your *personal development*. Are there new skills you need to develop in order to advance? Are there special projects that could help build those skills? Ask your boss for feedback on developing your skills. The higher you rise, the more you must shift away from technical skills and toward the "soft" skills, such as cultural and political diagnosis.

Going through those conversations will help you to develop a 90-day plan. Once your boss has bought into that plan, it is your ticket to success in transition. If you plan to use the first 30 days for learning and building personal credibility, make sure it's negotiated with your boss up front, and don't allow yourself to be derailed with unexpected projects.

6. Achieve Alignment

The higher you climb in a company, the more you take on the role of organizational architect. If the company’s strategy, structure, systems, and skills aren't aligned, your job will be far more difficult.

Your 90-day plan should include an assessment of alignment and how to improve it. You can even get started on fixing the worst misalignments in the first three months. Misalignment is such an insidious problem that fixing it could even take you to the break-even point.

To move toward alignment, start with your business strategy. Ask how your team is positioned with respect to the larger organizational goals. Make sure the strategy is well thought out and logically integrated.

Next, examine whether your group's structure, systems, and skills can support the changes in strategy that you envision. If they can't do the job, alter the strategy and build the capabilities that are needed.

Next, chart a path for shifting the strategy, including changes in positioning and supporting capabilities. Work out a realistic timeframe for those changes. Remember, you'll have to reshape structure, systems, and skills at the same time.

A key element in assessing alignment is looking at how your group's strategy is actually being implemented. Look at what people are doing, not what they're saying.

For example, if the strategy calls for new skills, is a training program in place to develop them? If it requires cross-functional teams, are those people actually working together? From this sort of probing, you can see if the problem lies in the strategy itself or in its implementation.

In order to make a complete diagnosis before taking action, you have to do so step-by-step, starting with the strategy, then moving to the supporting structure, systems, and skills and figuring out how you will adapt each to fit the strategy. Then chart a path for shifting the strategy if necessary.

While looking at the strategy, ask which customers you want to serve, which markets you'll exit, and which new ones you'll enter. Develop a time-line.

Ask which of your businesses need more investment and which can provide capital. Will even more additional capital be required? Where will you get it?

Ask what your organizational capabilities are, and what new ones you need to develop. Will you need to create or acquire others?

And last, assess what critical resource commitments you'll have to make. Use the SWOT method, analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

With a thorough understanding of strategy, including its history and how that strategy has been implemented so far, you can intelligently start shaping your group's structure to fit it. Look at how the units are structured, how people work together, who has power to make decisions, how performance is measured and rewarded, and what the reporting relationships are. In each case, ask: *Is this the best way to do things?*

You can't realign a company — or even your group — in the first 90 days. But you can gain a deep understanding of what's needed and make a plan. Having a plan will allow you to move forward into the next step: building your team.

7. Build Your Team

The most important decision you will make in your first 90 days will probably involve selecting the members of your team. A high-performance team can give you tremendous leverage.

Your team analysis will come into play here as you decide who to keep, who to let go, who to hire, and who to move.

In assessing each member of your existing team before making changes, consider the person's competence, judgment, energy, focus, relationships, and trust as the key elements.

Once you have assessed each member of the team, look at the team as a whole. First study the data. Read reports and team meeting minutes. Then systematically ask questions about the challenges and opportunities the team faces. If the responses are *overly* consistent, it may suggest that there's an agreed-upon party line. If there is *too little* consistency, the team may not be coherent.

Look at the group dynamics. Are there obvious alliances or animosities? Who's the leader? Do you see signs of team frustration? Pick up on subtle cues, such as body language.

Once you have finished your assessment, you are ready to begin restructuring your team. Assign each member to one of the following categories:

- ***Keep in place.*** This is someone you'll definitely retain.
- ***Keep and develop.*** This is someone you'll help move to the next level.
- ***Move to another position.*** This person may work out, but not in this job.
- ***Observe for a while.*** This is a wait-and-see situation.
- ***Replace.*** This person will leave the team sooner or later. Prioritize these people for termination.

Once you have planned your team restructuring, you can begin to adjust goals, incentives, and measures of performance to fit the team and the strategy. You'll establish new team processes and decide who participates, who makes decisions, and who leads.

Make sure to explain the processes to the team members so that everyone understands what should happen and why. You will know that you have been successful in building your team when you reach the break-even point, and the energy the team creates is greater than the energy you need to put into it. At that point, you will be ready to take the next step: building coalitions.

8. Creating Coalitions

Your success inevitably will depend on people who are out of your direct line of authority. When this happens, it is important for you to have a network of people to support your ideas and goals. You can't wait until you need it. You have to start creating coalitions early on.

One common mistake people make in transition is to pay too much attention to those above and below them and not enough attention to those on the sides — peers and external constituencies.

You'll need to figure out who you must influence, who is likely to support you, who will oppose you, and those who remain undecided but perhaps convincible.

First you need to identify the key players. Who will be important to your success? Start by identifying the critical interfaces between your group and others. Customers and suppliers are natural places to start. Take the time to get your boss to connect you with key outside people. Set up meetings with them.

Diagnose informal networks of influence. Every organization has a "shadow organization" inside of it, consisting of working relationships that aren't spelled out in the official organizational chart. This is how a lot of the real work gets done.

You need to get inside that shadow organization. Try to map alliances and discover who really holds power. You can do this by watching carefully in meetings to see who defers to whom on crucial issues. Also notice who people go to for advice, who shares information, who marshals resources, and who owes favors to somebody else.

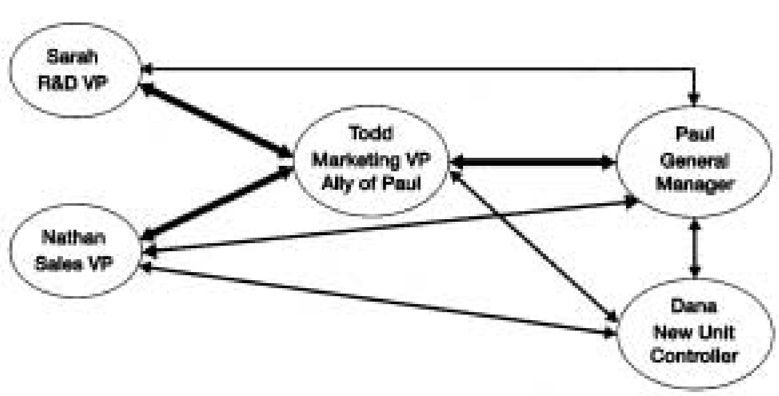
Once you have done this, draw an influence map (as illustrated below) to depict the flow of influence among various forces. Then you will be in a position to say who will support you, who will oppose you, and who remains convincible.

For example, you may be able to convert some opponents by calming their fears of change, but you do not want to waste too much time trying to convert people who will remain against you.

The best way to spend your time is on the undecided. Their motivations may be for status, for financial reasons, for job security, or some other reason. But you'll need to figure out what stands in the way of them supporting you, and then work to overcome it.

One way to convince people is to bring them along in a series of small steps toward your goal. The more irreversible the steps are, the better. For example, if you get people to collect data on how you're doing in comparison with the competition, and you know it's going to look bad, you will have put them in a position where they can no longer deny that change is necessary.

An Influence Map



9. Keep Your Balance

The life of a leader is always a balancing act, but never more so than during transition. If you moved from one city to another, you're in a personal transition. If you have a family, they're in transition, too. With all that turmoil, you're still expected to get adjusted quickly to your new job and start performing. There are seven traps into which new leaders can fall in this area. Let's examine them.

- The first trap is ***riding off in all directions.*** There is an infinite number of tasks to choose from, but only a few are vital. You can easily reach mental lock-up, where you simply go from task to task, getting nothing done.

- Trap number two is ***undefended boundaries.*** Establish clear boundaries early on concerning what you will and won't do. If you don't, no one else will do it for you.

- The third trap is ***brittleness.*** It's easy to get defensive in transition, and that leads to rigidity and a need for control. If you stick with a bad decision out of defensiveness, you can doom your progress.

- Trap number four is ***isolation.*** It is surprisingly easy for a new leader to end up isolated. Overwhelmed, you may not take time to connect with people. Encourage people to share information, including bad news, with you.

- Trap number five is ***biased judgment.*** You can lose perspective because of ego, because of a tendency to focus on only information that confirms your views, or because of overconfidence. In each case, it can keep you from making sound decisions.

- The sixth trap is ***work avoidance.*** To avoid a tough decision, it's easy to focus on other work to avoid it. You can be incredibly busy — and failing every day.

- Trap number seven is ***driving yourself to the point of diminishing returns.*** All of those traps can generate dangerous levels of stress. When stress gets too high, you work harder and achieve less, leading to exhaustion or burn-out.

The key to avoiding these seven traps is to be aware of yourself. You need discipline and energy, but you also need self-reflection to keep tabs on how you're doing. Building an advice-and-counsel network is an important step in doing this.

That group can give you invaluable support, as well as feedback on how you're holding up and clues that you might miss. Use a mix of internal and external people with strengths in technical, cultural, and political issues.

Success depends heavily on your ability to keep your balance during transition and beyond. Your day-to-day actions during this period set the stage for all that follows. With the strategies already laid out, the balancing act will be well within your grasp.

10. Expedite Everyone

You have now gone through the main steps involved in accelerating transition for stunning success in the first 90 days on a new job. The last, and perhaps most important, step is to bring this process to the organization. Imagine the benefit to the bottom line if *everyone* could transition faster.

Most companies pay no attention at all to transitions and many even put barriers in the way of people who step into new jobs. In some organizations, it's a sink or swim culture, where senior managers view this as a way to winnow talent.

The first step in introducing the transition acceleration framework to your organization is to introduce a new vocabulary to make it possible to talk about it. People need to be able to approach their bosses, peers, and direct reports and discuss the following:

- The type of transition they're entering: start-up, turnaround, realignment, or sustaining success.

- Their agenda for technical, cultural, and political learning, and the key elements of their learning plan.

- Their progress in engaging their new boss in the five key conversations about the business situation, expectations, communication style, resources, and personal development.

- Their A-item priorities, goals for behavior change, and ideas about where they can secure early wins.

- Their priorities for strengthening their advice-and-counsel network.

A common vocabulary ensures that these important conversations not only can but will take place. Bringing this kind of change to an organization is a challenge, but one worth undertaking. Start locally and expand. Your own team members are the first obvious choices.

When you hire people, for example, see how quickly you can get them to the break-even point. Teach them about the 90-day plan and help them develop it. Encourage the five-conversation framework for building a relationship with you. Have them diagnose the business situation and discuss it with you.

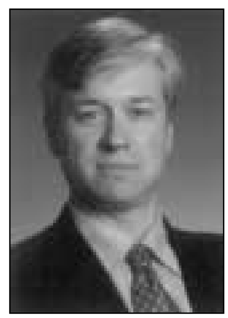
Merge this with the expectations conversation. Work with them to create a learning agenda and plan. Help them identify people who can support them. Tell them to create an A-item list, and push them toward some early wins. Then, when they have reached break-even, get them to use the transition acceleration framework on others.

You can also use this framework for accelerating your team building efforts. This is especially powerful if your team mixes people who have been around for a while with new people. Introduce the team to the STARS Model and push them to clarify key challenges and opportunities they'll face as a team. Focus on how the team will define its A-item priorities and secure early wins. Explore the kind of coalitions you'll build to marshal the support you'll need.

These same approaches can be used effectively in developing high-potential leaders, in succession planning, and in accelerating post-merger integration. When organizations merge, they invariably bring two different languages to the new organization, and that can spell disaster. The STARS Model gets everyone to use the same terms from the start and can smooth the way to successful transition.

Remember, the ultimate goal behind transition acceleration is to reap big returns that ultimately fall to the bottom line. A quick back-of-the-envelope estimate of how many people are in transition at any given time — and how many other people they in turn impact — could show you the whopping annual cost of sluggish or failed transitions. When the author surveyed company presidents and CEOs, he discovered that the average number of people whose performance was significantly compromised by the arrival of a new mid-level manager is 12.4 people. With one-fourth of your company's managers in transition at any one time, it is easy to see why companies are less productive than they could be. The STARS Model can accelerate the transitions of all of those people and keep the machinery of business running smoothly in this fast-paced world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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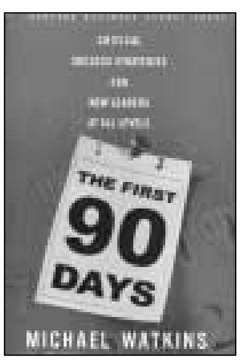

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