The Transitioning Executive Leader's First 100 Days

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> New-to-role executive leaders set the foundation for their success during their first 90 to 100 days. To secure early wins and future performance during this period, follow this five-phase roadmap: prepare, assess, plan, act and measure.

Overview

Key Findings

- An executive leader's tenure is often defined by their initial time in role. Traditionally, executives were given 100 days to make an impact, but given the pace of change today, the new norm is 90 days or less.

- The success or failure of an executive's tenure is determined, in part, by the degree of alignment on the role's definition, the business priorities and their scope of responsibility.

- Many executives fall into the trap of overcommitting to change before they understand the people, processes, politics and collective priorities of the organization.

- Focusing on a collective quick win — particularly one where the new-to-role executive leads the team — can increase trust and improve credibility by prioritizing key stakeholders' needs.

Recommendations

To quickly establish your leadership in your function and within the broader enterprise as a new-to-role executive, you must:

- Mitigate transition risks by clarifying the mandate for the role and business priorities with the CEO and/or board immediately after taking the role. The initial (and very brief) "honeymoon" period presents a high-leverage window for executives to advance their agendas if aligned on the right priorities.

- Create political currency and trust that you can leverage over the course of your tenure by building relationships quickly with your cross-functional peers and direct reports.

- Assess your function's current state and maturity by prioritizing strategic improvements and determining short-term operational priorities, while making the best use of limited time and resources.

- Deliver quick wins by creating plans to prove assertions, demonstrating an understanding of team dynamics and gaining legitimacy for subsequent investments.

Introduction

The first three months in a new role are your opportunity to create your agenda and establish a strong foundation for your tenure. While 100 days used to be the standard time frame to get these activities done and have an impact, the new standard is 90 days and timing can vary. Proper preparation, assessment, planning, acting, measuring and, above all, communicating can greatly enhance your chances of success.
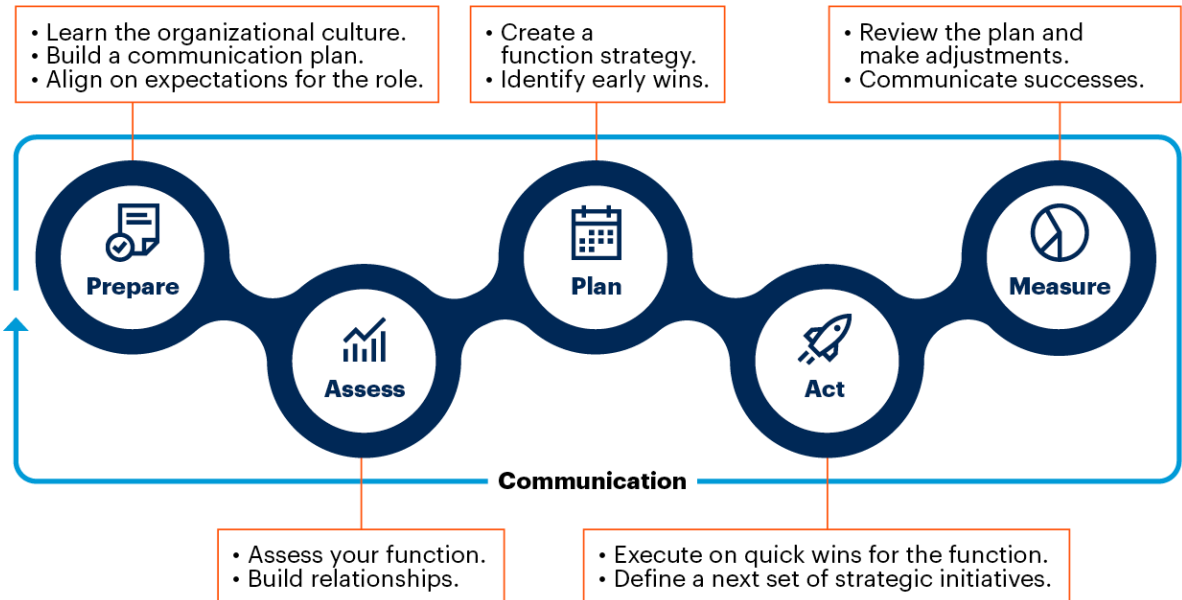
This initial period in role is a springboard from which you develop and execute your long-term vision. There is a lot to do: aligning with your cross-functional peers, establishing organizational priorities, building key relationships, talking with customers, assessing and transforming your team, developing and launching a strategy and showing quick wins. It is within this critical period that you can establish yourself and create the basic perceptions that others will, for better or worse, associate with your subsequent plans and actions. To do this effectively, executive leaders need a comprehensive plan.

Because this initial phase in your new role is short, and you will often face demanding CEO and organizational expectations, your plan should establish delivery cycles, merged as an ongoing strategy for continuous delivery. Use every 30-day increment as an opportunity to cycle through the phases of your roadmap (see Figure 1). Each 30-day increment will reinforce your brand and the brand of your team and is designed to improve the performance of the enterprise as a whole. Not only does this ongoing approach accelerate time to impact, but it has the additional benefit of extending your period of goodwill in the organization.

As a new-to-role executive leader, you should use this research to assess your unique situation and critical issues, and to organize and execute your first 90 to 100 days plan.

Figure 1: The Transitioning Leader's Roadmap

The Transitioning Leader's Roadmap

• Learn the organizational culture.
• Build a communication plan.
• Align on expectations for the role.

• Create a function strategy.
• Identify early wins.

• Review the plan and make adjustments.
• Communicate successes.

Prepare

Assess

Plan

Act

Measure

Communication

• Assess your function.
• Build relationships.

• Execute on quick wins for the function.
• Define a next set of strategic initiatives.

Source: Gartner
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The First 100 Days Roadmap

Use the table below to navigate this research. The focus areas are not always linear, so jump to the area that reflects where you need to target your efforts, based on the outcomes on the right.

Focus Area	Key Activities
Prepare	■ Learn the organization culture ■ Build a communication plan ■ Align on expectations for the role
Assess	■ Assess your function ■ Build relationships
Plan	■ Create a function strategy ■ Identify early wins
Act	■ Execute on quick wins for the function ■ Define a next set of strategic initiatives
Measure	■ Review the plan and make adjustments ■ Communicate successes

Prepare

Actions in this initial phase are all about ensuring cultural fit, understanding organizational expectations and aligning on the expectations for the role. To successfully kick-start your transition plan, you'll have to take actions before you start with the new role and then quickly after your first day.

Learn the Organization Culture

■ **Take time to assess personal fit.** A key determinant of your success is understanding how well you're suited for the organization — and how well it's suited for you. If possible, executives will spend time before day one assessing fit with their new organization (see questions below).

Questions to Ask Yourself to Assess Fit Before Day One

■ *Will I be happy working with these people for long hours, on short deadlines and over the long haul?*

■ *Will they be happy with me?*

- *Do my cross-functional peers have a consistent definition and expectation for the role?*

- *Will I have a meaningful budget?*

- *Will I have the ability to engage stakeholders as desired?*

- *What level of control and autonomy is there for my functional operational issues?*

- *Do I believe in the company and the opportunity?*

- *Do I see the possibilities for growth and change, the possibilities for storytelling, and the arc of the narrative?*

Once in seat, executives should spend time assessing how their leadership styles align with organizational culture and how to handle any misalignments (see Table 1). This reflection should also include thinking about how the executive tends to communicate, collaborate, resolve conflict and navigate decision making.

Table 1: Ten Cultural Dimensions to Assess as a New-to-Role Executive

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Dimensions informed by the business operating model: What kind of environment do you work best in, and how does your new organization operate?

Dimension	Extreme 1	Extreme 2
1	Layered: Multiple layers of management, with emphasis on hierarchical decision making and problem solving	Flat: Fewer layers of management, with emphasis on centralized decision making and problem solving
2	Structured: Tightly defined structure and workflows, with adherence to articulated processes and policies	Unstructured: Loosely defined (or continually redefined) approaches to work, with limited use of articulated processes or policies
3	Fast-Paced: Pace of business operations, decision making, and organizational change is notably fast	Slower-Paced: Pace of business operations, decision making, and organizational change is more deliberate
4	Stable: Business strategy and operations remain largely unchanged, with incremental adjustments over time	Fluid: Business strategy and operations shift frequently, with both step-function and incremental adjustments over time
5	Breakthrough Innovation: Orientation toward achieving fewer, larger, step-function changes/improvements to strategy and questions	Incremental Improvement: Orientation toward continually driving a series of smaller, more gradual changes/improvements to strategy and operations over time

Dimensions informed by dominant interpersonal styles: What is your style, and what is the dominant style in your organization?

Dimension	Extreme 1	Extreme 2
6	Direct: Communication style emphasizes matter-of-fact expression and forthright exchanges	Indirect: Communication style leans toward nuanced, subtle expression and implicit exchanges.
7	Individual: Emphasis on individual achievement, with goals, recognition and rewards aligned to personal success	Team: Emphasis on team achievement, with goals, recognition and rewards aligned to team success
8	Risk-Oriented: Emphasis on experimentation and trial and error; focus is on quantity of ideas, with less emphasis on risk mitigation aspects of each data	Risk-Averse: Emphasis on alignment to central and/or tried and true processes and methodologies; focus is on fewer, more thoroughly vetted ideas
9	Detail Orientation: A comprehensive understanding of resources, timelines, options and ROI is required to make the case for an idea, proposal, business plan or strategy	Macro Perspectives: Emphasis is on presenting the overall vision, long-term objectives, and high-level risks/benefits associated with the idea, proposal, business plan or strategy
10	External Focus: Prioritize externally sourced ideas and market feedback in strategy setting and decision making	Internal Focus: Prioritize internal best practice and key operational learning in strategy setting and decision making

Source: Gartner

- **Get to know the company and market**. Study the market, the business model and the competitive landscape. Who are the founders? What were their circumstances? Is the brand associated with a movement, a philosophy or a strong point of view? Identify and internalize all of this. Suggested resources to review include:

    - Company and industry websites: Analyze your company's website to learn how your new company presents itself to customers and what your marketing team thinks is important to highlight.

    - Public perceptions: Leverage your professional network and publicly available information to learn how people outside the organization perceive your company's culture. Browse employee reviews on Glassdoor or Indeed, social media posts, and local and national "best place to work" lists.

    - Published financial reports: Use public financial and performance data, such as stock exchange filings, to gauge recent trends in the company's financial results.

    - Press releases and other news reports: Look beyond the financial data for other information on the company to understand how it is performing.

- **Understand the organization's structure and key stakeholders**. Study the backgrounds of key stakeholders, including the CEO, your peers in the C-suite, board members and your functional leadership team. Learn about them by studying their backgrounds (what they've done and where they've been), starting with their professional profiles on networking sites like LinkedIn. Confirm your understanding in conversation with the head of HR/CHRO, who is the guardian of the executive leadership team and organizational culture.

Target Outcomes

- Conversation fluency about the company and its strategy

- Validation of cultural fit with the company and understanding of where there may be any misalignment

- Identification of key stakeholders with whom you will need to work to make progress on priorities

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Waiting to start until day one. Ninety to one hundred days is not a lot of time, and your CEO will expect you to show up with an initial outline of what you plan to accomplish. They will also expect a list of intelligent questions, informed by your own research and reflection, to drive alignment with your cross-functional teams and direct reports. Start by using the search and interview process to uncover critical information about expectations, business strategy and key stakeholders.

Underestimating the importance of culture. A key determinant of your success is your fit with the organization's culture, or an understanding of whether you have been hired to change that organizational culture. Trust your instincts — early-warning indicators often prove accurate. Once you've eliminated this doubt, focus on building relationships and identifying coaches and mentors who can guide you on organizational culture and politics.

Build a Communication Plan

- **Assess your communication skills.** In all communications, resolve to follow these best practices for effective communication —

  - Be brief, clear and consistent in your message across forums and audiences.

  - Connect plans explicitly to the strategic investment objectives of the enterprise, thus demonstrating that you and your function are synchronized with the business.

  - Socialize your plans to peers and business leaders throughout the organization and actively solicit feedback.

- **Write an introduction.** Prepare introductory communication material about yourself, your background and your initial thoughts on joining the organization. Make this content as fact-based and as authentic as possible, and keep it short and succinct. For example, try a 100-word short bio, along with some personal information about your key priorities in life and work, your value systems and integrity.

- **Draft discussion guides**. Prepare guides to help you organize the following critical discussions —

  - Stakeholder discussions: Prepare a list of no more than five questions, some specific and others open-ended, that will ensure the early stakeholder conversations yield insights beyond the polite meet-and-greets. For example, ask key business stakeholders about their perception of and satisfaction with the current state of the organization. Ask if there are any issues that must be resolved as quickly as possible and any chronic pain areas, priorities and general expectations.

  - Staff discussions: Prepare a list of similar questions for your first meeting with your staff members. Ask them about their key work challenges and constraints and their perception of and satisfaction with their own team and organization.

- **Meet with your team and introduce yourself to the broader organization**. Call a meeting for everyone in your direct team, in person or through a hybrid format. This meeting has two objectives — (1) to introduce yourself and (2) to show that you are approachable and available to everyone. During the meet-and-greet:

  - Deliver the introductory message you drafted in advance. State when you will report back to the team with updates on your progress.

  - Remember some detail about each person that will help you start conversations later.

  - On your official start date, distribute the introductory remarks to the wider organization on the company intranet and via email.

Target Outcomes

- Awareness of your communication channels and styles with a honed ability to set the right tone and cadence in your communications

- Knowledge of how to conduct effective stakeholder discussions and an ability to adjust for the differences in stakeholder audiences

- Discussion guides that engage staff and build trust in both group and 1:1 settings

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Leading with generic, professional statements. For example, "Our function is a critical driver of the business" is both an obvious and unhelpful way to connect to strategy. Focus messages around attributes specific to your organization's performance and to you as a leader. To support employees at work today, as well as in other aspects of their lives, leaders must practice empathy and show genuine care, respect and concern for employees' well-being. Use your initial time with your team to display authenticity and empathy.

Creating overly detailed, technical communications. Create communication objectives not only for your internal segments, but also for external stakeholders (such as vendors and suppliers) who will be engaged in supporting success. Use these overall objectives as the foundation for initial messages. Clearly define any corporate lingo or jargon, such as abbreviations and acronyms. Use simplified business language wherever possible and avoid corporate-speak.

Resources

Toolkit: Communicating With Your Team During Change: Use this toolkit to reflect on your communication approach and lead department brainstorms and other dialogues with your team.

Checklist: Executive Messages That Drive Employee Responses: Use this tool to create executive messages that drive employee interaction and advocacy.

Align on Expectations for the Role

- **Understand your predecessor's performance.** Knowing how a predecessor performed is important, because it can help put your transition into a broader context you can use to your advantage. There are four types of predecessors in an executive role. For each type, specific actions can accelerate transition time and improve success. Uncover the performance of your predecessor, and use these keys to shape your new role and transition plan (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Predecessor Types and Associated Keys to Success

Predecessor Types and Associated Keys to Success

Predecessor Type		Keys to Success
	Breaking Ground (25%) The new executive assumes a newly created or modified position	• Clearly define role responsibilities and objectives • Gain an understanding of the stakeholder universe
	Jump-Starting (35%) The predecessor performed adequately, but the organization needs to quickly move in a different direction	• Quickly understand the industry, organization, and dynamics of the new team • Actively use existing networks and teams to socialize and drive change
	Following a Train Wreck (20%) The predecessor was unsuccessful	• Create a clear vision for the organization • Forge new relationships and repair those damaged by predecessor underperformance
	Replacing an Icon (10%) The predecessor was very successful in the job	• Clarify the role • Forge relationships to legitimize and advance new agenda

Source: 2021 Gartner Secrets of a Successful Executive Transition Survey
Note: Percentage of survey respondents in each predecessor type category.
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- **Evaluate your own strengths and development areas.** You were hired for the position because your CEO thinks you have the skills, experience and capabilities to perform. That does not mean you won't have opportunities to develop and keep growing. Spending time thinking about these early as you are getting information about the role will ensure you do not become your own roadblock to success. Discuss with the head of HR/CHRO how your strengths and development areas complement those of other executive leaders to learn where you fit best into the team and can grow.

- **Get to know corporate and functional strategy.** What are the stated corporate and functional objectives? Familiarize yourself with the challenges that need to be overcome. Ask for internal strategy documents, position papers and deliverables from consulting engagements, where appropriate. Review recent minutes from executive committee meetings to gain an insight into what key stakeholders' current priorities are, and understand the potential impacts on your function.

- **Meet one-on-one with the CEO and key stakeholders.** Refer to the discussion guides you created as part of your communication plan. During the meetings, discuss the role, the team and the expectations on both sides. Allot a substantial amount of time to review how success will be defined and measured. Additionally, talk through the level of influence afforded to this role and the span of control. Collaboratively start envisioning challenging initiatives you will face.

- **Regroup with the CEO and/or your manager:** Once the 1:1s are complete, wrap up the prepare phase with a meeting with your manager that covers:

  - The key challenges and opportunities from your point of view.

  - Your preliminary strategic vision and immediate priorities.

  - A communications schedule for the future between the two of you.

Target Outcomes

- Alignment with the CEO and/or your manager on your core responsibilities, span of authority/control and how your performance will be evaluated

- Understanding of the CEO's appetite for change, perception of your function's challenges and drivers of these challenges

- An understanding of recent market dynamics or organizational changes, especially those you are expected to contend with

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Your role as an executive is not just to lead your function but also to contribute to overall business strategy and organizational success.

Focusing only on expectations as a functional leader. Your role as an executive is not just to lead your function but also to contribute to overall business strategy and organizational success. Make sure that early conversations, especially with the CEO, provide both an understanding of that overall strategy and expectations for your role on the executive leadership team. Use executive leadership meetings to understand how the team currently works together and how you will contribute.

Making assumptions about the role based on past experience. Past experiences may lead you to see the organization through a lens that contains some confirmation bias This may include assuming competencies that are not necessarily there or assuming priorities that may not be true in your new role. Spend time confirming existing expectations, capabilities and capacity before jumping to commitments that may not be possible. Then, use your experience and training to navigate a path forward.

Resource

Tool: Leadership Competency Self-Assessment — Planning for the Role of Executive Leaders: Use this tool to assess yourself against a set of executive leadership competencies, identify areas needing improvement and create an action plan for development.

Assess

The assess phase is about starting your new job by determining corporate goals and priorities, assessing your team and further establishing relationships you will need to meet your objectives. In this phase, as a new-to-role executive, you will start seeing patterns and form the hypotheses that will ultimately inform your strategic positions. You will start your listening campaign with key stakeholders, getting internal information on what needs to be done. You will also be drawn into some urgent situations and the execution of programs whose origins predate your tenure.

Assess Your Function

- **Evaluate function budget.** Become familiar with how the function budget is allocated and request a three- to five-year dashboard of functional spending. Conduct a benchmarking exercise to determine how your functional spending compares with peers.

- **Evaluate organizational design.** Evaluate how effectively the organization facilitates your strategic imperatives and longer-term goals. It is important to quickly identify staffing issues (and start evaluating organizational structure) in the interest of delivering on your first 100 days and subsequent functional plan.

- **Assess current functional performance and maturity.** Work with your leadership team to learn about the dashboards and metrics the organization uses to measure functional performance. Assess the performance of your function across core objectives and supporting activities before making any significant change to the function. Identify underperforming areas and hypotheses for why they are below their goals. Conduct similar studies for high-performing areas of the function as well. Compare the results of this exercise to your listening tours to understand how different stakeholders' perceptions align to reality. By the end of this assessment, you should understand:

    - What are your functional goals and key performance indicators (KPIs)?

    - How are the KPIs being tracked and measured today, how do they roll up to corporate goals?

    - What are the results so far?

    - What metrics and analytical skills are absent, and what will it take to bridge these gaps?

- **Evaluate functional initiatives and campaigns.** Perform a 24-month audit of programs and initiatives with a planned and retrospective orientation. Focus on investments, outcomes and correlations with KPIs and corporate goals.

- **Assess technologies, vendors and processes.** Work with your leadership team to identify underutilized resources to free up budget and improve operational efficiency. Look closely at the coverage and performance of external vendors, service providers and consultants on retainer, as well as the tools and systems supporting the functional strategy. Also consider how customer and employee expectations have changed and what new functional competencies will be needed in the coming years.

- **Assess and address capacity for change.** Before you make commitments, assess the organization's appetite and aptitude for change. Talk to your cross-functional peers and stakeholders about how change has been rolled out in the past and at what pace.

Target Outcomes

- Identification of functional metrics and KPIs, along with how they're measured, linked and performing

- A baseline knowledge of functional maturity and performance, with an insight into critical maturity gaps and improvement opportunities

- A prioritized list of the key organizational and operating needs and deliverables that must be addressed within the first year in your role

- Initial thoughts on how changing customer, employee or market conditions may alter functional strategy

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Jumping to solve problems too quickly. Your goal is to complete a high-level current-state assessment of the work being completed today and then understand capabilities and dependencies at a macro level. Do not rely on initial feedback from frustrated stakeholders in the early days of your tenure to immediately start making changes. Instead, focus on assessing what work is prioritized, what work is completed and how performance is measured today by listening to, and reviewing evidence from, a wide sample of stakeholders.

Moving too slowly to make change. While moving too quickly is a challenge, so too is moving too slowly. Especially today when executives are expected to deliver results for their new organizations within 90 days, you will need to make sure your assessment of the function quickly pinpoints potential changes to make. Don't spend too long getting all of the information you possibly could about your function before putting together initial ideas about your future direction.

Failing to build team trust. Build trusting relationships with your direct reports by being transparent about your expectations for the function and involving the entire team in key decisions and goal setting. Assure team members that you value their feedback and insights as part of the strategic decision-making process.

Build Relationships

- **Map and prioritize important connections in your network.** Based on your initial discussions, start to map the connections you will rely on to get work done. Some of these connections will be dictated by your organization chart (e.g., your CEO, your direct team), but you will likely also need more informal connections. These might be mentors, peers or others. Ask yourself: Who will I rely on to help me achieve my objectives? Who will help me fill personal capability gaps?

- **Conduct a listening tour internally and externally.** Connect with stakeholders throughout the enterprise, especially any you do not meet with in your initial set of 1:1s. These might include heads of peer functions (e.g., sales, operations, HR, finance, IT), suppliers, key customers and informal stakeholders like mentors or coaches. Be sure to listen carefully to each person's responses to questions and resist the urge to start formulating plans. Use active listening techniques to get the most out of this stage. This is especially critical in any introductory meeting with customers.

- **Evaluate the current state of functional leadership and talent.** Treat each interaction with a direct report as an assessment during the first few months. Also, for key team members, document any themes or trends you observe from your conversations. Assess your team members' ability to adapt to a dynamic macroenvironment and a faster pace of internal change. Start to understand:

    - Who is responsible for key initiatives?

    - Who has formal and informal influence?

    - Which employees are considered high performers?

    - Which employees are considered retention risks worth saving?

- **Keep stakeholders apprised.** Share a weekly update with your direct reports, which they can cascade to their teams, where appropriate. Share the same update with your cross-functional peers during weekly executive meetings.

- **Develop a stakeholder engagement action plan.** It's important to recognize that stakeholder engagement is not a one-time activity. You must continually engage stakeholders to win their support and trust. Failure to engage early and actively with a wide range of stakeholders can foster estrangement with them and result in attitudes that are difficult to change. List stakeholders, lay actions with each stakeholder, together with its time frame and owner of actions (if not you).

- **Start defining the personal brand you will need.** A personal brand is the context people use when making judgments about your messages, actions and requests. It is how they hear you and how you encourage them to take action. Executive leaders build a personal brand through the accumulated interactions they have with their teams and others. To be intentional about the brand you are building in your initial tenure in role, spend time assessing how you see yourself as a leader and how you want or need others to see you. Make sure the brand you create is as human as possible — employees today expect their leaders to lead in more "human" ways by exhibiting authenticity, empathy and adaptivity.

Target Outcomes

- Further insight into the inner workings of the organization, including the organization's culture and the group's appetite for change

- Clarity on your team's strengths and development opportunities

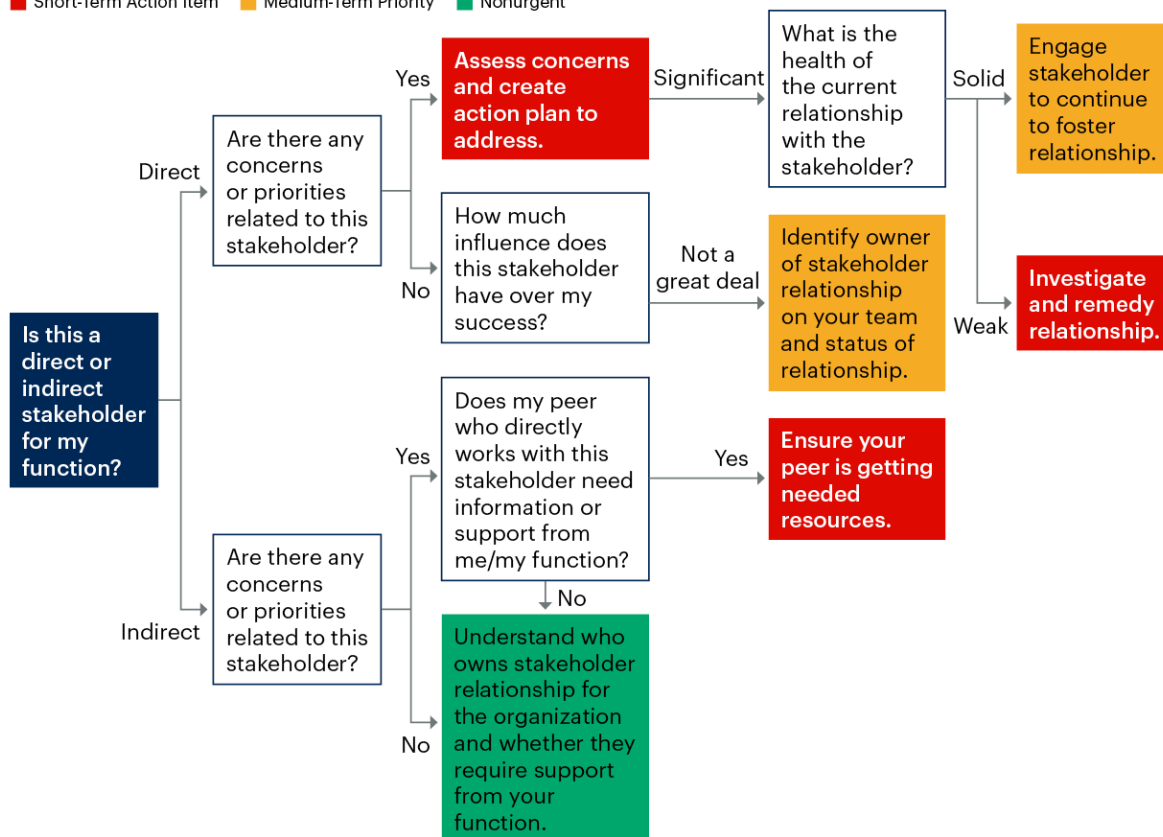- Understanding of the internal politics and network related to your new position

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Targeting too many stakeholders. Executive leaders won't have time to talk to every potential stakeholder, so group stakeholders into types. Prioritize these groups based on current understanding of the group and the group's impact on future success. Use the framework illustrated in Figure 3 to identify the prioritized organizational stakeholders and actions to take with them.

Figure 3: Organizational Stakeholder Action Prioritization

Organizational Stakeholder Action Prioritization

Legend: Short-Term Action Item (red), Medium-Term Priority (orange), Nonurgent (green)

- Is this a direct or indirect stakeholder for my function?
  - **Direct** → Are there any concerns or priorities related to this stakeholder?
    - **Yes** → Assess concerns and create action plan to address. → **Significant** → What is the health of the current relationship with the stakeholder?
      - **Solid** → Engage stakeholder to continue to foster relationship.
      - **Weak** → Investigate and remedy relationship.
    - **No** → How much influence does this stakeholder have over my success? → **Not a great deal** → Identify owner of stakeholder relationship on your team and status of relationship.
  - **Indirect** → Are there any concerns or priorities related to this stakeholder?
    - **Yes** → Does my peer who directly works with this stakeholder need information or support from me/my function?
      - **Yes** → Ensure your peer is getting needed resources.
      - **No** → Understand who owns stakeholder relationship for the organization and whether they require support from your function.
    - **No** → Understand who owns stakeholder relationship for the organization and whether they require support from your function.

Source: Gartner
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Failing to update personal brand for context. All brands live in a context, and when that context changes, the brand's value changes. Match your personal brand to the challenges you face and to the company context by comparing the relationship between your role's responsibility and its accountability for results.

Resources

Identify, Prioritize and Engage With Stakeholders to Boost Your Executive Transition: Use this research to identify key internal and external stakeholders, prioritize stakeholder actions, and engage and nurture stakeholder relations to accelerate your transition.

How to Manage Your Personal Brand: Review this research to understand how to review and build your personal brand, then put your brand into action.

Plan

The plan phase, which usually overlaps with the assess phase, is designed to baseline the functional strategy, identify the critical imperatives, assess and address capacity for change, and develop plans for early wins. You should use this time to prioritize issues, determine solutions and create a plan to execute. It will still take time beyond this phase to understand things at the proper depth before you can feel comfortable making bigger and more sweeping decisions. What matters most at this point is getting a small set of tangible wins and not overcommitting.

Create a Function Strategy

- **Establish mission and purpose.** Communicate a visionary state of "why" the function exists and the "what" and "where" of how value is being created.

- **Identify required actions to align function strategy with business priorities.** Define operational and strategic priorities by addressing the pressing issues that have been identified in the earlier phases. This requires a twofold approach:

    - Identify any short-term (within three to six months) priorities and schedule them into your immediate work plans. Look for leverage points where smaller changes can yield larger results. Your goal should be to gain momentum, which means you need to build credibility quickly.

    - Identify longer-term changes and integrate them into strategic plans with a 12- to 18-month time frame — that is, the remainder of the current year plus the following year.

- **Share your initial observations to drive awareness.** Announce your intentions regarding the function to the CEO and other critical stakeholders. Communicate the priorities by painting a vision that clearly outlines the logic behind your decision making to help your stakeholders understand and share their commitment to the cause. Even if you are not planning significant changes, confirm your directional steer of priorities and necessary changes.

- **Set budgets.** Take another look at your operational budget for the next six months and highlight anything that has changed from your first review during the assess phase. Note any trends and look for items that stand out as your top expense categories. These categories often present the most productive opportunities for financial savings. Develop a plan for cost reduction or reallocation.

- **Identify the areas within the function that require more analysis and understanding.** Even though you have an initial plan, you don't know everything yet about your organization or what strategy you need to set. Use this time to also reflect on knowledge gaps and how to fill them.

Target Outcomes

- An initial strategic roadmap with a plan of action for the remaining first 100 days and beyond. This should include clear priorities and milestones that take into account the observations and data collected as part of the assess phase

- CEO and key stakeholder buy-in on the budget plan and strategic roadmap

- A budget plan that includes opportunities for cost reduction and/or reallocation

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Focusing your vision only on the function's direction. A deep inside-out focus of department priorities can alienate stakeholders in other functions. It can also create barriers to acceptance of the department's vision of the future — especially where there is a significant change in strategic direction. People commit to ideas, people and things on an emotional level. Appealing to the emotional or purposeful reasons underlying the vision puts the audience at the center and provides a basis for connection.

Rigidity regarding strategic goals. Having a rigid view about the tasks and goals to accomplish in a certain period without taking the time to understand the needs of the functions might lead to missing key pieces of information or key stakeholders. You must continually revisit your plans as you build knowledge about the organization and function (such as the culture, the function's past performance, and employee capability needs and goals).

Resources

Inspire Commitment to a New Department Strategy Through Storytelling: Learn how to increase engagement, improve understanding and forge deeper connections for your department strategy by appealing to the audience's vision through storytelling.

The Art of Creating a One-Page Strategy: Understand how to gain credibility and engagement quickly through a storytelling technique that gains buy-in to the capabilities that comprise enterprise strategy.

Identify Early Wins

- **Identify quick wins related to an enterprise strategic initiative.** To establish credibility quickly, identify small projects bounded by impact and effort that can help you make meaningful improvements to the organization (see Figure 4). Prioritize the initiatives for your team on the basis of the information gathered during the conversations with stakeholders using the following criteria:

  - Value — A quick win must be linked to an urgent, critical business outcome with a clear connection to revenue growth or cost reduction.

  - Collective impact — The best quick wins are collective, i.e., executed with the help of your direct reports and even the broader team. Once achieved, the entire team will feel they contributed to the win.

  - Relationship building — The work should require you to seek guidance and input from your direct reports, peers outside the function and manager.

Figure 4: Project Prioritization Matrix

Project Prioritization Matrix

	Low Effort	High Effort
High Impact	Quick Wins	Major Projects
Low Impact	Low-Hanging Fruit	Hygiene
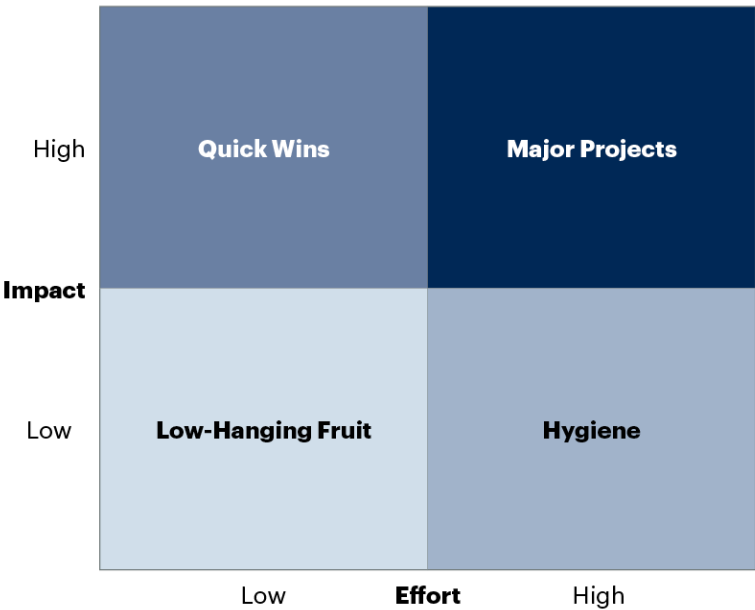
Source: Gartner
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- **Meet with key team members to continue sourcing action items.** Hold weekly meetings with your leadership team and essential individual contributors to determine the status of any issues, related obstacles and resource gaps, and alternative resolutions. Confirm shortfalls, agree on appropriate actions and communicate your execution timeline.

- **Schedule town hall meetings for the whole function.** Update everyone in the function on your progress on the quick wins you've decided to pursue, in-flight projects and your vision for the function. Celebrate successes and address opportunities to turn around performance where necessary.

Target Outcomes

- Prioritized list of your three highest-value quick wins to pursue over the balance of your first 100 days

- A prioritized list of short- and longer-term challenges, vetted by your trusted stakeholders and manager

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Changing or canceling inherited projects too quickly. Keep in mind your early performance will be assessed based on the initiatives you inherited from your predecessor, in addition to net new pursuits. Gauge the merits of in-process projects to the extent they support your goals and strategic plan. Keep and strongly resource those that support; terminate those that don't once they've been fully vetted.

Committing too quickly based on urgency. Avoid getting mired in initiatives that don't support your quick wins or vision statement(s) by pushing back on requests outside your plan, even if the requestor deems the priority urgent. If not possible (for example, a new organizationwide priority arises, or the executive team deems the project to truly be urgent), ensure new projects are built into an agreed, adjusted plan with reset objectives and KPIs.

Resources

Achieve Business Goals With Gartner's Risk, Value and Cost Optimization Decision Model: Strengthen your early business cases, funding requests, committee reviews and board reporting by optimizing risk, value and cost in a business context through the lens of key stakeholders' needs.

How Executives in Transition Can Use OKRs to Deliver Better Outcomes: Learn how implementing OKRs as a new-to-role executive can help you establish your leadership, accountabilities and opportunities to contribute to critical strategic outcomes for your team.

Act

The act phase is all about communicating and proving your strategic assertions, gaining trust, testing process and execution workflows, delivering on a defined set of quick wins and gathering operational feedback. At this point, you should have a point of view on what needs to get done. The objective is to prove your assumptions and gain the legitimacy to extend investments. It is also about understanding what it means to get work done in the organization — how processes work, how power flows and how teams work together to accomplish tasks.

Execute on "Quick Wins" for the Function

- **Kick off a quick win.** To demonstrate your ability to act on the areas identified for improvement and garner goodwill, initiate short-term projects that address stakeholder pain points. Define a project team within the function, and identify and appoint relevant stakeholders to spearhead the project. Work with your direct reports to ensure all involved stakeholders are visibly accountable for the outcome of this project.

- **Meet your test project team.** Engage with your team regularly to discuss the accomplishments, priorities and roadblocks to progress. Use short meetings of 15 minutes or less. Review your key metrics in advance and surface anything worthy of attention during this meeting.

- **Conduct project reviews.** At the conclusion of each project iteration, review your goals and outcomes and take a close look at any gaps between target and actual metrics. Turn this analysis into findings that inform the next iteration. The goal is to use each iteration to make progress on tasks, but also to continuously test and validate your assumptions. Do not let barriers stand in executing actual work, which should be the dominant focus during this phase. Resolve any barriers quickly to move forward successfully.

- **Socialize frequently.** Share vision, strategy, organization design and plans with your cross-functional peers.

- **Get involved in existing projects.** By this phase, you will have some understanding of how your function works, so you can start adding value to projects that occupy your team's time. Your role should focus on supporting these leaders and projects, not taking them over. You should have only two objectives in this process:

    - Keep the teams focused on the business value of their projects.

    - Prompt the team members, when necessary, to keep their execution crisp, smooth and effective.

Target Outcomes

- Refined understanding of people and process dynamics in the execution of work

- Delivery of a limited number of quick wins across the first 100 days, meeting or beating target deadlines and performance expectations

- Designation of ownership for new strategic initiatives and successful execution of existing projects

- Continuous refinement of priorities, based on feedback from relevant stakeholders and the impact of quick wins on performance metrics

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Missing opportunity for learning. A quick win must provide you with additional insight into your team members' strengths, weaknesses, motivations, aspirations and working dynamics. Take time across the project to check in with key team members and ask for their perspective on how the project is going and what could or should be done differently. Focus on both the project and their role within the project.

Providing too much tactical contribution. Adopt a hands-on approach to inspire the team to dig into the work, but be careful while balancing your contributions against strategic needs of the team. Too much tactical contribution may reflect you in the wrong light and cause you to lose sight of the bigger picture.

Resources

Executive Leaders Insight: Making High-Quality Decisions in an Environment of Change: Review our research on evaluating and applying decision best practices to help improve the quality of your early decisions in role.

Common Challenges Executive Leaders Can Overcome to Improve Strategic Execution: Learn how to address three common barriers to strategy execution and improve your rate of success in your new role.

Define a Next Set of Strategic Initiatives

- **Refine your team.** This is your opportunity to recognize strengths, capitalize on motivational factors, make changes to the team structure (if necessary) and allow each of your leaders to achieve the highest-possible performance:

    - Give your leaders their first assignment supporting your list of quick wins.

    - Measure cross-functional collaboration to uncover the relative level of siloed versus cross-functional thinkers in your organization.

    - Identify leaders "at risk" of attrition. For leaders you deem crucial to your cause, spend extra time defining their current and future path in the organization and identifying successors.

    - Identify underperforming leaders and root causes for their underperformance. In partnership with your HR colleagues, develop talent development plans that will enable you to make effective use of the resources available to you. This may involve helping some leaders find alternate niches or roles.

- **Carefully select and meet with owners of new strategic initiatives.** Clearly communicate expectations and timelines, including how the success or failure of the initiative will be measured. Give initiative owners the autonomy to build their plans and ensure they have a list of decision factors for project discontinuation.

- **Develop a formal strategy for communicating your initiatives.** As you finalize your strategic initiatives, communicate your strategy to the team, including both key stakeholders and your functional team. Challenge the general notion that executive leaders have to leave their peers alone and turn their attention to the next issue. Do this by actively cultivating stakeholders and meeting regularly with them — even if it's more of a social call.

- **Continue to refine the strategy, budgeting and planning processes.** The annual process is your first opportunity to deeply influence the organization, its priorities and its investments. Make this a top priority, particularly in your first year on the job.

Target Outcomes

- A strategic "script" for the function, showing the starting point, destination, reason for the change and initial first steps —Focus your script as a clear A-to-B storyline supplemented by straightforward logic

- Refinement of priorities, based on feedback from stakeholders and alignment to current business needs

- Clarified team roles and objectives that ensure all employees know the specific responsibilities and goals they will be evaluated against

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Setting unclear team roles and objectives. Ensure all team members know the specific responsibilities and goals they will be evaluated against based on the new strategy. This is particularly important if you have made any structural changes. Be sure to provide a well-reasoned explanation for your decisions.

Relying on infrequent or ineffective communication. Communicate regularly with the CEO, your direct reports and key stakeholders to determine what actions to initiate, speed up, continue, slow down or stop. Use these meetings to socialize successes since you've taken on the role and to gain additional buy-in and support for your initiatives.

Resources

Build Employee Trust Through Better Communication: Cultivate employees' trust by helping them make sense of company decisions and engaging in open dialogue.

The 12 Principles Every Organizational Change Needs to Succeed: Review 12 principles to use in all future change initiatives.

Measure

This phase is all about assessing outcomes relative to your transition plan, identifying new insights, showcasing early wins and rolling out new organization refinements and updated operational processes.

With a couple of iterations under your belt, you should evaluate your functional performance by answering the following questions:

- What went as planned? What did not work?

- What new insights were revealed through these initial phases?

- What is the tangible difference when we achieve the goal?

- What progress can I demonstrate toward the stated goals?

Review the Plan and Make Adjustments

- **Execute postmortem reviews.** When wrapping up an initiative, review the goals and outcomes with the owner. Discuss any shortcomings and identify opportunities to improve the process for the next initiative. Check that those affected are producing the intended outcomes, and update your own perspective when necessary.

- **Summarize outcomes and key findings in 1:1s with CEO and key stakeholders.** Toward the end of your first 100 days, prepare a short presentation for your CEO and other key stakeholders. This presentation should tell the story of your project outcomes and key findings in simple and summarized terms. Provide a summary of key lessons, potential organizational and process changes and next steps. Ask for feedback.

- **Iterate your metrics gathering.** It is said that every answer leads to another question, and this is certainly true with respect to business metrics. Perhaps a problem you could have found earlier will lead to tracking a new metric to detect the same problem in future initiatives. Perhaps a successful optimization points to its natural successor. In any case, you can never sit still:

  - Review detailed metrics — Use the identified measurement points to capture performance information. Evaluate performance to discern more detailed patterns and insights by answering "Where did my team overachieve and underachieve against target goals?"

  - Create linkages back to KPIs — Answer "How do these results link back to overall corporate KPIs?" Look at both correlations and potential causal relationships.

- **Update and adjust your future plans.** After one quarter of execution, use what you've learned about internal procedures, team capabilities and organizational dynamics to update your future plans and goals. Be sure to discuss with your manager whether this requires modification of your key performance metrics for potential upstream and downstream effects.

Target Outcomes

- Feedback from key stakeholders on your effectiveness in navigating the first 100 days to identify areas that require further attention

- An assessment of outcomes related to your plan goals

- Updated priorities that ensure perpetual alignment with your organization's mission-critical initiatives

- List of metrics to kick-start a process of continuous improvement and identification of new or emerging metrics to track

- Refined short- and long-term strategic goals and operational objectives

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Assuming the learning is done. Never assume your new title and reputation are enough to gain support and influence. To avoid misalignment, you must continually revisit your understanding of the organization's culture and build that knowledge into your ongoing plans. For instance, ask:

- Are there multiple levels of decision making — or is it flat?

- Are workflows, processes and policies loosely defined or highly structured?

- Does the organization strive for incremental improvement or breakthrough innovation?

Underestimating the team's readiness for change. The desire to demonstrate success as quickly as possible can impede your success if there is a perception of jumping to hasty conclusions, not recognizing contributions, quickly dismissing alternative ideas and micromanaging direct reports. Adept executives recognize their enthusiasm for a quick win may be matched by their new team's readiness for change. They also recognize that success depends on active engagement from the team and mitigation of any lingering change fatigue.

Resource

Developing Digital KPIs to Measure Digital Progress in a New Executive Role: Use this research to develop metrics and KPIs that lay out your digital business journey and enable you to achieve expected business outcomes.

Communicate Successes

- **Regularly communicate the status of projects.** Establish a reporting mechanism for your stakeholders that provides an appropriate level of detail for sales initiatives. While getting established in your role, err on the side of overcommunication to develop trust and support.

- **Highlight quick wins.** Share quick wins as they happen with your manager and stakeholders. What happened? What was the outcome? How were you able to deliver those results quickly? While it may be too early to obtain well-documented feedback about all of your initiatives, look for news you can share drawn from informal conversations with the team.

- **Promote your team's successes.** Don't count on your team's accomplishments to filter through the organization on their own. Rather, send email updates or consider launching internal marketing campaigns to showcase some of the initiatives and successes of their owners. Integrate these positive updates into your communication strategies to improve morale and build momentum. Recognize your team too — spend time letting your team know what is working well and recognizing those who have contributed to the function's success.

Target Outcomes

- Documented list of successes, key lessons learned and areas for improvement

- Evidence of early feedback and quick wins for your CEO/manager and other relevant stakeholders

Barriers to Success and Actionable Solutions

Focusing communication on operational and functional metrics. Executive leaders underestimate their reliance on department-specific reporting assets and jargon in presentations, which can hinder stakeholders from easily understanding and reacting to insights and recommendations. To improve the quality of C-level presentations and explain performance, executive leaders should identify and highlight metrics that show how department goals and programs influence CEOs' business and agenda priorities.

Communicating up but not down. Any time you communicate successes to stakeholders, think about if and how you should also communicate to your team. Use this as an opportunity to share personalized, yet transparent, feedback with your direct reports. The goal is to maintain assessing individual performance with an eye toward optimizing your organization goals.

Taking all of the credit. One of the quickest ways to lose trust and drive disengagement within your team is to take all of the credit for early wins. Make sure to recognize those who contributed to early successes when giving updates, and where possible, allow them to join you in presenting results.

Resources

Use Data Storytelling to Explain Department Performance: Review how to effectively explain department performance to stakeholders through data storytelling techniques that provide descriptive, diagnostic and prescriptive insights.

Rules for Presenting Proposals to the Board of Directors for Transitioning Leaders: Learn a small number of practical board rules to ensure effective communications with the board that get board approval.

Document Revision History

The Transitioning Executive Leader's First 100 Days - 14 April 2020

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Quick Answer: How Much Time Does a New Executive Have to Make an Impact?

5 Common Pitfalls to Avoid in a Leadership Transition

Best Practices for a High-Impact Executive Transition

Focus Area	Key Activities
Prepare	▪ Learn the organization culture ▪ Build a communication plan ▪ Align on expectations for the role
Assess	▪ Assess your function ▪ Build relationships
Plan	▪ Create a function strategy ▪ Identify early wins
Act	▪ Execute on quick wins for the function ▪ Define a next set of strategic initiatives
Measure	▪ Review the plan and make adjustments ▪ Communicate successes

Table 1: Ten Cultural Dimensions to Assess as a New-to-Role Executive

Dimensions informed by the business operating model: What kind of environment do you work best in, and how does your new organization operate?		
Dimension	**Extreme 1**	**Extreme 2**
1	Layered: Multiple layers of management, with emphasis on hierarchical decision making and problem solving	Flat: Fewer layers of management, with emphasis on centralized decision making and problem solving
2	Structured: Tightly defined structure and workflows, with adherence to articulated processes and policies	Unstructured: Loosely defined (or continually redefined) approaches to work, with limited use of articulated processes or policies
3	Fast-Paced: Pace of business operations, decision making, and organizational change is notably fast	Slower-Paced: Pace of business operations, decision making, and organizational change is more deliberate
4	Stable: Business strategy and operations remain largely unchanged, with incremental adjustments over time	Fluid: Business strategy and operations shift frequently, with both step-function and incremental adjustments over time
5	Breakthrough Innovation: Orientation toward achieving fewer, larger, step- function changes/improvements to strategy and questions	Incremental Improvement: Orientation toward continually driving a series of smaller, more gradual changes/improvements to strategy and operations over time
Dimensions informed by dominant interpersonal styles: What is your style, and what is the dominant style in your organization?		
Dimension	**Extreme 1**	**Extreme 2**

6	Direct: Communication style emphasizes matter-of-fact expression and forthright exchanges	Indirect: Communication style leans toward nuanced, subtle expression and implicit exchanges.
7	Individual: Emphasis on individual achievement, with goals, recognition and rewards aligned to personal success	Team: Emphasis on team achievement, with goals, recognition and rewards aligned to team success
8	Risk-Oriented: Emphasis on experimentation and trial and error; focus is on quantity of ideas, with less emphasis on risk mitigation aspects of each data	Risk-Averse: Emphasis on alignment to central and/or tried and true processes and methodologies; focus is on fewer, more thoroughly vetted ideas
9	Detail Orientation: A comprehensive understanding of resources, timelines, options and ROI is required to make the case for an idea, proposal, business plan or strategy	Macro Perspectives: Emphasis is on presenting the overall vision, long-term objectives, and high-level risks/benefits associated with the idea, proposal, business plan or strategy
10	External Focus: Prioritize externally sourced ideas and market feedback in strategy setting and decision making	Internal Focus: Prioritize internal best practice and key operational learning in strategy setting and decision making

Source: Gartner