



The First 90 Days

Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels

by Michael Watkins

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Take-Aways

- The transition into a new leadership role presents 10 key challenges, from leaving the past behind to learning your new job and analyzing your opportunities.
- New leaders enter into one of four situations: a start-up, turnaround, realignment or sustaining success – or sometimes, a combination of these situations.
- Learn as much about the organization (written and unwritten) as quickly as you can.
- Understand how organizations evolve over time and determine what stage of the life cycle describes your organization. Most organizations follow a predictable cycle.
- To determine the best approach, first correctly diagnose the situation and your role.
- To accelerate your successful transition, determine your most critical challenges and opportunities. Develop a plan to achieve results within the first 90 days.
- Consider the firm's history and culture, and your boss's priorities before taking action.
- Don't let the qualities that led to your promotion stall or derail you in your new role.
- Build your personal credibility within the first few weeks.
- Identify people who are critical to you. Form good working relationships fast.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Applicability

10

Innovation

8

Style

8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to meet the 10 key challenges necessary to accelerate your successful transition into a new leadership role; 2) How to diagnose your organization's situation; and 3) How to handle the challenges and opportunities of four new leadership roles.

Recommendation

It doesn't matter what level of the organization your new leadership role is in – from project supervisor to CEO – every promotion brings a period of transition, the need for new skills and a set of new expectations, challenges and opportunities. Just because you've been successful in one leadership role, you can't assume that your old strategy will automatically succeed in your new role. It probably won't. Take an analytical approach. Diagnose the situation and adapt your strategy to it. Michael Watkins' book tells you exactly how. If you will soon begin – or have already begun – a new leadership role, this book is an invaluable resource to help you map out your strategy, get on your boss's good side and accelerate your transition. Watkins provides fundamental information for anyone who wants to become a leader and stay on top, because he teaches you how to make a successful transition when your time comes. *getAbstract.com* recommends this excellent book to any leader at any level who is going through or embarking on a period of transition into a new role. Here's how to help make the transition more successful, faster and easier – on your staff, your boss and yourself.

Abstract

Challenges in 10 Key Areas

To accelerate your transition into a new leadership role, master these challenges:

1. **"Promote yourself"** – Break from your old role, mentally and physically. Put the past behind you. Focus on the new situation, its challenges, skills and opportunities.
2. **"Accelerate your learning"** – In a new leadership role, learn the organization's history, products, services, market, systems, structures, politics and culture. Absorb the unwritten rules, identify the key players and learn the job's technical aspects.
3. **"Match strategy to situation"** – Analyze and diagnose the challenges and opportunities in your new role? Line your approach up with the specific situation.
4. **"Secure early wins"** – Build credibility with small, significant successes.
5. **"Negotiate success"** – Communicate with your new boss to identify expectations, challenges, opportunities and timelines. Read the boss. Understand his or her communication preferences and working style. Find out what your boss wants and create a plan to deliver exactly that. Under promise and over deliver.
6. **"Achieve alignment"** – Analyze the organization's architecture. Determine if its systems, structures, strategies, resources, culture and skills are aligned or at cross-purposes, creating friction. Eliminate sources of conflict. Rectify any misalignment.
7. **"Build your team"** – Identify and hire the right people. Mentor, counsel, teach and restructure to provide a solid base. These people are the foundation of your success.
8. **"Create coalitions"** – Build a network of influence. Identify potential supporters and opponents. Influence others by building alliances and creating win-win situations.

"Your transition begins the moment you learn you are being considered for a new job."

"It is essential to figure out what you need to know about your new organization and then to learn it as rapidly as you can."

“All too often, promising managers get promoted but fail to promote themselves by undertaking the necessary change in perspective.”

“Negotiating success means proactively engaging with your new boss to shape the game so you have a fighting chance of achieving desired goals. Too many new leaders just play the game, reactively taking their situation as a given and failing as a result.”

“A related mistake is to believe that you will be successful in your new job by continuing to do what you did in your previous job, only more so.”

“Early wins build your credibility and momentum.”

Find out who has the potential to make you or break you; get on their good side now. Maintain your integrity. Set the tone for future relationships. Don't burn any bridges.

9. **“Keep your balance”** – Maintain work-life balance. Seek mentors; see the big picture.
10. **“Expedite everyone”** – Accelerate everyone's transition. When your role changes, so do the roles and relationships of those near you. Ease their lives. Share experiences.

Four Leadership Situations

Your new leadership role probably falls into one of the following four situations, as defined by the “Stars” model. The acronym stands for “start-up, turnaround, realignment and sustaining success.” Each has its own specific characteristics, challenges and opportunities:

1. **Start-up** – Whether you are leading a new company, division, department or product line, a start-up offers great opportunities. People lack pre-existing attitudes or routines. You have a clean slate, and energetic, enthusiastic participants. Since you are starting from scratch, creating the best systems and structures may involve trial and error. Resources may be limited and you must unite strangers as a strong team. Make decisions quickly, get comfortable taking risks and help key players channel their energies toward common goals. You may need to make decisions without a lot of data, assess the results and tweak your approach. Don't “wait and see.” Start-up leaders play offense. Focus on learning technical skills and setting a direction. Get the right people and empower them. Creating a winning start-up is inherently rewarding.
2. **Turnaround** – Like a start-up, this requires making quick decisions with a limited amount of data to minimize losses and to make the firm into a sustainable lean, mean core of operation. Unlike a start-up, however, employees are rarely enthusiastic. They may realize something has to change, drastically and soon, but they are probably demoralized and gloomy. Re-energize them while simultaneously making some tough, often painful decisions including possible personnel cuts or changes. This takes a strong leader. Achieve some early wins with timely, key decisions so people will believe in your ability to achieve a real turnaround. Teach them why change is required and show that your changes strengthen the business. Identify what is working. Keep that and discontinue the rest. Turnaround leaders play defense, but after the tough calls, you usually get credit for the result: a viable, successful organization.
3. **Realignment** – Leading a realignment often feels thankless. Be sensitive to the organization's culture and politics, people's feelings about perceived failures and their discomfort with change. Whether you have been promoted internally or hired in, start slow, learn all you can before making assumptions or taking actions that could damage your credibility and your future ability to lead. Identify key supporters and potential areas of resistance. Convince people that change is in their best interest, but don't just jump in and make changes quickly. Initially, focus on learning rather than doing. Don't make quick, rash decisions. Mistakes could alienate the people you need. If the current team cannot see the need for change, or is in denial, you might have to restructure from the top down. Build a team that focuses on making change work, not on preserving the past. Realignment is more oriented toward offense than defense, but approach the offense with a defensive slant. Identify what works and keep doing it. You face a tricky balance: getting enough information to make good decisions and acting on those decisions, without creating resistance or hostility.
4. **Sustaining Success** – Becoming the leader of an ongoing success is a good position. Now maintain that success or take it to the next level without alienating anyone. Focus your strategy on defense. Learn all you can about the organizational culture, politics and decision-makers. Since things are working well, be cautious about change. Have

“Learning should be a primary focus of your plan for your first 30 days on the job.”

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

“The higher you climb in organizations, the more you take on the role of organizational architect, creating the context within which others can achieve superior performance.”

“To change your organization, you will likely have to change its culture. This is a difficult undertaking.”

a solid group of supporters and a good business case for any changes. Don't cause unnecessary problems for yourself. Before deciding, determine how others will perceive your choices. Since the firm is successful, people and systems are in place and the foundation for future success has already been laid. But, don't assume that you can sit back and relax. You will be challenged to follow in your predecessor's footsteps; you'll be continually compared. As with a start-up, figure out how to find and develop new opportunities to take your organization to an even higher level.

How to Accelerate Your Leadership Transition

Organizations go through phases. If you lead your business through one phase, it will naturally go to the next. A well-managed start-up becomes a sustaining success. A poor start-up or bad realignment may require a turnaround. A good turnaround or realignment becomes a success. The situation you enter may not be tidy. It may be a combination, such as realignment as part of starting a new product line or division. Understanding these phases and matching your strategy to them can accelerate your transition. Take these steps:

- Correctly diagnose your firm's phase. Is it experiencing a combination of two phases?
- Study the situation's characteristics, challenges and opportunities; draft a learning agenda and a learning plan. How will you learn all you need to know? What resources will you use?
- Develop your best strategy: offense or defense, making quick decisions or keeping a low profile until you understand the organization's culture more thoroughly.
- Consider your past successes. What led to this promotion? Ask yourself: if I keep doing what I did, will that work or not? Do I need to change to succeed in this role?
- Consider your natural tendencies and comfort levels, strengths and weaknesses. How will they help or hurt your results? If you tend to sit back and study, analyze and reanalyze, that could be harmful in a start-up, which requires taking risks and acting quickly. Conversely, this tendency would help you in a sustaining success situation.
- Seek out key players who can help you and get them in your corner.
- Learn everything you can about the organization, including its culture.
- Identify a few meaningful things you can do to register some quick successes – particularly with your new boss – and establish your credibility.
- Identify potential problems; focus on those that create conflict. Prepare to fix them.
- Plan and implement changes in organized waves. Break between them so you can assess each initiative's merit. Try not to keep the firm in a “constant” state of flux.
- Set long-term goals for your tenure (typically two to four years if you survive the first 90 days). Let your short-term goals and early wins lay the groundwork.
- Plan how to introduce yourself to your new staff so people know a bit about you from the start – not necessarily what you plan to do, but what kind of a person you are. If you are in town, you may do this in person; if not, you could use a video or e-mail.
- Use pilot groups or projects to test new ideas before rolling out a complete change.
- Ask about problems. Don't miss learning about an issue just because the discussion is uncomfortable.
- Employ a straightforward, plan-and-implement change tactic only if everyone knows change is needed, if you know what you want to change and why, if that change supports your long-term vision and if you have a plan for implementation. If any of these elements is missing, devise a collective learning process to fill in the gaps.
- Discuss expectations and priorities with your new boss; identify resources, develop your antenna for the corporate culture, and negotiate expectations about what you will learn, do and deliver in 30 to 90 days. Do not try to change your boss. Adapt.

“Your weaknesses can make you vulnerable, but so can your strengths.”

“The life of a leader is always a balancing act, but never more so than during a transition.”

“A shared framework for transition acceleration is...an organizational asset. In addition to reducing the costs of disruption, a common approach to managing leadership transitions can help you to identify and retain the best leadership talent.”

- In the first couple of weeks, create a written 90-day plan for your transition, focusing the first 30 days on learning and establishing your credibility. Get the boss's buy-in.
- Create a personal development learning plan with goals, priorities and checkpoints.
- Work with your direct reports as you do with your boss. Accelerate their transitions.
- Assess the team you've inherited, identify weak links or people who are in the wrong positions. Create a plan for addressing personnel issues within six months. Prune where necessary, but be sure that your plan enables the team to continue to perform well during changes. Recognize good performers so they don't jump ship in the face of uncertainty. Assess each team member based on competence, judgment, energy, focus, relationships and trust. Consider performance, previous appraisals, skills, responses to probing questions, and verbal and nonverbal cues.
- Work with your team to set team and individual goals, performance metrics and incentives. Reassess roles, responsibilities, team dynamics, processes, procedures and your leadership style. Develop a plan to implement any necessary changes.
- Form alliances with your boss, your direct reports, your peers and others who can help or hinder you. Build relationships before you need them. Stay in regular contact, including socially. Observe power connections and existing alliances. Figure out who will support or oppose you, and who could be persuaded to join your supporters.
- Develop a persuasive strategy to influence the swing votes in your favor. You can offer incentives, eliminate the option of maintaining the *status quo*, rationally argue your case, appeal to their values, or start with small changes and build on them.
- Stay balanced and grounded during the first 90 days. Transitions are tough and stressful. Minimize the negative effects by focusing on crucial objectives. Establish boundaries pertaining to your time and commitments. Try to stay flexible and don't get defensive. Connect to people, develop a support network, stay open-minded and tackle difficult problems without procrastinating. However, at a certain point, working more hours doesn't make you more productive; it decreases your productivity.
- Maintain balance by scheduling carefully. Include planning time, defer commitments until you determine their impact on your productivity, set aside time for tough projects, keep emotional distance when you feel overwhelmed, reflect on your progress and limit your work hours. Stay in touch with your mentors.
- Help your family cope during this transition. Your new leadership role affects them.
- What worked in the past may not work now. Your role changed; adapt your skills.
- Achieve the initial “wins” that matter to your boss, who is critical to your success.
- Help others implement the strategies that accelerated your transition process.

To develop successful future leaders within your organization, expose them to many different management functions and leadership situations. Give them opportunities to work in a variety of places and cultures. Expose them to increasing responsibility, and support their training, since diverse leadership jobs require different skills.

About the Author

Michael Watkins is the author of *Leadership Transitions*, an award-winning eLearning Program offered through Harvard Business School Publishing. He is a Professor of Practice at the European business school INSEAD and the founder of Genesis Advisers LLC, a leadership strategy consultancy.