

CHECKLIST

# First 90 Days as a Technical Leader

A Restraint-First Checklist

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

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# First 90 Days as a Technical Leader

A restraint-first checklist for CTOs, engineering managers, and technical founders stepping into new leadership roles.

## Weeks 1-4: Deep Listening

Your only job in the first month is to understand. Not to form conclusions. Not to identify problems. Just to absorb.








- ☐  Schedule 1:1s with every direct report
- ☐  Go one level deeper — meet skip-level reports
- ☐  Shadow key meetings without contributing
- ☐  Announce explicitly: "I'm here to learn, not to judge"
- ☐  Read architecture documents and post-mortems
- ☐  Review strategy decks and roadmaps
- ☐  Explore Slack/Teams history for team dynamics
- ☐  Ask open questions: "What's working well?"
- ☐  Ask: "What would you change if you could?"
- ☐  Ask: "What do I need to understand about this team's history?"

### TIP

The moment you start offering opinions, people stop telling you the truth and start performing for the new boss.

## Weeks 5-8: Mapping the Landscape

Now you can start forming a picture. But keep it internal.

- ☐  Identify what's actually working (there's always more than you think)
- ☐  Note genuine pain points vs. surface complaints
- ☐  Understand constraints that shaped current decisions
- ☐  Map the political landscape
- ☐  Identify who has influence
- ☐  Note who has concerns
- ☐  Recognise who feels overlooked
- ☐  Write your observations down for yourself
- ☐  Don't share conclusions yet
- ☐  Look for gaps in your understanding


### WARNING

Don't confuse activity with progress. Sending lots of emails and scheduling lots of meetings isn't leadership — it's noise.

## Weeks 9-12: Small Wins Only

Apply strict criteria to what qualifies as a "safe" first move.

### Good First Actions

- ☐  Fix an annoying process bottleneck

- ☐ ☐ Approve a tool the team has wanted
- ☐ ☐ Remove an unnecessary meeting
- ☐ ☐ Resolve a long-standing deprioritised ticket
- ☐ ☐ Make a symbolic gesture that shows you're paying attention

### Actions to Avoid

- ☐ ☐ Do NOT reorganise team structure yet
- ☐ ☐ Do NOT introduce new development processes
- ☐ ☐ Do NOT change the technology stack
- ☐ ☐ Do NOT set aggressive new targets
- ☐ ☐ Do NOT publicly criticise past decisions

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Your first 90 days aren't about proving yourself. They're about earning the right to lead meaningful change later.

## Managing Upward Expectations

Use these talking points to buy yourself time.

### For Boards and Executives

*"My priority in the first 90 days is understanding the real state of our technology and team. I'll share my initial observations at [specific date]."*

## For Your Team

*"I'm not here to prove how different I am from what came before. I'm here to understand what's working, what isn't, and what you need from me."*

## For Yourself

- ☐ ☐ Recognise the urge to act is often anxiety in disguise
- ☐ ☐ Remember: you were hired for your judgement, not your speed
- ☐ ☐ Demonstrating restraint is itself a signal of maturity

## Red Flags to Watch For

Before you even start — or as you discover them:

- ☐ ☐ High turnover in the role (3+ people in 2 years)
- ☐ ☐ Unrealistic timelines already set before you've assessed
- ☐ ☐ Key technical decisions made by non-technical stakeholders
- ☐ ☐ Opacity about the real state of things
- ☐ ☐ Political protection around poor performers
- ☐ ☐ Founder/CEO who micromanages technical details

### WARNING

The best leaders I know have walked away from roles that looked great on paper. Sometimes restraint means acknowledging you're in an unwinnable situation.