

CHECKLIST

First 90 Days as a Technical Leader

A Restraint-First Checklist

Xavier Fuentes

xavierfuentes.com

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.