First 90 Days Technical Leader Checklist

A restraint-first approach to your first three months

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A restraint-first approach to your first three months as CTO, VP Engineering, or technical director.

Before You Start: Red Flag Assessment

- [ ] Research the role's turnover history (3+ people in 2 years is a warning)
- [ ] Verify timelines are realistic, not already committed
- [ ] Confirm technical decisions aren't politically protected
- [ ] Ensure you're getting straight answers in interviews

Weeks 1-4: Deep Listening

Your only job is to understand. Not to form conclusions. Not to identify problems.

1:1 Meetings

- [ ] Schedule 1:1s with every direct report
- [ ] Go at least one level deeper where feasible
- [ ] Block 60-90 minutes per conversation
- [ ] Take notes but don't share observations yet

Shadow Mode

- [ ] Attend key meetings without contributing

- [ ] Announce explicitly: "I'm here to learn, not to judge"

- [ ] Observe team dynamics and decision-making patterns

Documentation Review

- [ ] Read architecture documents

- [ ] Review post-mortems from the last 12 months

- [ ] Study strategy decks and roadmaps

- [ ] Browse Slack/Teams history for context

Questions to Ask

- [ ] "What's working well here?"

- [ ] "What would you change if you could?"

- [ ] "What do I need to understand about this team's history?"

- [ ] "Walk me through a typical week for you"

- [ ] "What should I absolutely not change?"

Questions to Avoid

- [ ] "What would you do differently?" (too leading)

- [ ] "Why do you do it this way?" (sounds like criticism)

- [ ] "Have you considered...?" (you're not here to advise yet)

Weeks 5-8: Mapping the Landscape

Form your picture internally. Don't announce conclusions yet.

What's Working

- ☐ Identify processes that are actually effective

- ☐ Note team strengths and capabilities

- ☐ Document successful patterns to preserve

Pain Points

- ☐ Distinguish genuine problems from surface complaints

- ☐ Understand constraints that shaped current decisions

- ☐ Note which issues have been raised repeatedly

Political Landscape

- ☐ Map who has influence (formal and informal)

- ☐ Identify who has concerns about your arrival

- ☐ Note who feels overlooked or undervalued

Private Documentation

- ☐ Write down your observations (for yourself only)

- ☐ Identify gaps in your understanding

- ☐ Note questions that still need answers

Weeks 9-12: Small Wins Only

Apply strict criteria to your first visible actions.

Good First Action Criteria

☐ Visible — people notice you did something

☐ Quick to implement — days, not weeks

☐ Reversible — if it doesn't work, you can undo it

☐ Goodwill-building — makes someone's life easier

☐ Low risk — no technical debt, no political landmines

Safe Quick Win Ideas

☐ Fix an annoying process bottleneck

☐ Approve a tool the team has wanted

☐ Remove an unnecessary meeting

☐ Resolve a long-stuck support ticket

☐ Clear a blocker everyone agrees on

Actions to Avoid

☐ Reorganising team structure

☐ Introducing new development processes

☐ Changing the technology stack

☐ Setting aggressive new targets

- [ ] Publicly critiquing past decisions

Managing Expectations

Script for Executives/Board

"My priority in the first 90 days is understanding the real state of our technology and team. I'm conducting a thorough assessment so that when I propose changes, they'll be grounded in context and more likely to succeed."

Script 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 to be effective."

Reminder for Yourself

The urge to act is often anxiety in disguise. You were hired for your judgement, not your speed. Demonstrating restraint is itself a signal of maturity.

Common Mistakes Checklist

Avoid these in your first 90 days:

- [ ] Reorganising teams before understanding why they exist

- [ ] Introducing new tools in month one

- [ ] Criticising your predecessor

- [ ] Making promises about timelines or outcomes

- [ ] Confusing activity with progress

90-Day Reflection

At the end of your first quarter, ask yourself:

☐ Do I understand why things are the way they are?

☐ Have I earned legitimacy through demonstrated understanding?

☐ Am I in a position to lead meaningful change?

☐ Is this situation actually fixable, or should I reassess?

The leaders who make the biggest impact over years are often the ones who made the smallest visible changes in their first months.