You’re in Charge — Now What?
The 8-Point Plan

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Introduction
Ever since the dramatic, sweeping changes Franklin Delano Roosevelt instigated in his first 100 days as president of the United States, that period of time has held special significance for any leader taking the helm of an organization.

“The first 100 days are critical because you set a strong tone about how you want to run the company,” says Paul Pressler, who a few years ago moved from chairman of Walt Disney Parks to CEO of Gap Inc. “The organization is assessing every move, every word, what you say and what you don’t say. I’m not sure that if you stumble in the first 100 days it’s fatal, but it’s a major opportunity missed and would take you a long time to recover.”

No matter what your profession, what level you’re at or what type of organization you work in, you can expect to experience numerous “first” 100 days over the course of your career. The average professional with 35 years of experience today has held six or seven different jobs. A fast-track manager will switch jobs within a company every 2½ to three years, not counting other significant career transitions, such as heading up important projects or taking on additional functional responsibilities.

Each new leadership role will demand that you adjust to a different culture, operating process, support system and management style within the organization. As Jeffrey Immelt, who took over as chairman and CEO of General Electric in 2001, notes, “I’ve not only had a lot of first 100 days over the course of my GE career, I’ve had a lot of first 100 days since becoming CEO!”

Tom Neff and James Citrin studied more than 100 of the most visible leadership transitions over the past five years to understand what went right and what went wrong. From that, they distilled an eight-point plan for the first 100 days, to build a solid foundation for the full term in office:

1. Prepare yourself during the countdown.
2. Align expectations.
3. Shape your management team.
4. Craft your strategic agenda.
5. Start transforming culture.
6. Manage your board/boss.
7. Communicate.
8. Avoid common pitfalls.

The Countdown
Everyone’s countdown period to a new leadership post is different, depending on whether you come into it from inside the organization or were recruited from the outside, whether you’re entering a stable company or one in crisis, and whether you’re jumping right into a new job from an already demanding one or have the luxury of some free time for additional preparation.

But all countdown periods share a common goal: to learn as much as you can about the new world you’re going to enter, so you can figure out
how best to explore and navigate your way through it. When leaders are asked what they feel is important to get off to the right start, these items top the list:

- Absorb information.
- Define the company’s challenges.
- Establish credibility and win employees’ trust.
- Assess the senior management team.
- Prepare yourself emotionally.

With the information you gather, you can turn to the most concrete deliverable of the countdown period: drafting a 100-day agenda. Agenda is the right word, because you can’t possibly have enough insight yet to craft a detailed plan or an in-depth strategy. But you should certainly have a clear idea of what you believe to be the key issues you’ll be focusing on, and some form of organizing framework for the key actions you want to take.

Aligning Expectations

Setting proper expectations is one of the most important things a new leader has to do to get off to the right start. Whether you’re coming into a company from the outside or being promoted from within, you’ll develop expectations about all the things you’re about to face, from your priorities and the management team to the organizational culture and the company’s competitive positioning. Those expectations will help shape your agenda, guide your thinking and articulate your definition of success in your first 100 days.

But you’re not the only one with expectations. Everyone affected by your arrival will have a view, either explicit or subconscious, of what you want to achieve in your early weeks and how you should go about doing it.

If these different perspectives don’t align, you’ll be setting off on a path marked by misunderstanding, anxiety, tension and, all too often, failure. You can’t achieve your goals if you’re trying to navigate towards them with divergent maps.

You need to explain who you are, where you come from, why you’re there, what you plan to accomplish and how you hope to do it. Remember that you don’t need to have all the answers — in fact, people will be suspicious if you imply that you do. Address doubts and fears, and neutralize lingering resentments about your promotion or hiring from those who may feel hurt or awkward about it. Finally, don’t disrespect your predecessor.

No One Can Do It Alone

There’s a lot of truth in the familiar saying, “None of us is as smart as all of us.” The problems and challenges that businesses face are too complex and interdependent to be solved by any one person or any one discipline, especially in the time frame demanded by today’s business environment.

And you don’t just need a team — you need a strong team. An astonishing number of managers surround themselves with people of similar backgrounds. But Jeff Immelt at GE looks for team members who can complement, rather than supplement, his strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond assessing the competence and credibility of each team member, you need to evaluate the personal contribution and impact each makes, both on the team and on the rest of the organization. Ask yourself the following questions about each person:

- Is he or she a positive influence on the people she works with?
- Is her concern for self-interest more than balanced by a concern for the collective good of the organization?
- Does she nourish her peers and subordinates, or exploit them?
- Do her actions uphold your standards and values, or does she merely pay lip service to them?
- Is she a good role model for the kind of leadership the organization needs?

Crafting Your Strategic Agenda

A well-grounded view of what your organization stands for — its reason for being — is the foundation on which
to build your strategic agenda. Most likely you have more time than you think to develop it. While people expect a new leader to bring a fresh perspective, a new style and probably a new energy level, most don’t expect a wholesale new direction, at least early on.

There’s a lot to be said for effective listening and not sharing plans prematurely. Vision for vision’s sake is counterproductive. Determining a course for the organization is a process that usually requires more time than most people foresee. It should be iterative, building off your strategic agenda, sharpening and clarifying the path based on experimentation and feedback.

Focus on a few themes. If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. Look to secure some easy wins, to establish your credibility as a leader fast.

Culture Is the Game
Before his days at the helm of IBM, Lou Gerstner considered culture just one element in an organization’s makeup, no more intrinsic to success than any other aspect of good management. But the decade he spent morphing IBM from industry dinosaur to dynamic leader convinced him otherwise. “Culture isn’t just one aspect of the game — it is the game,” Gerstner says.

Among the imperatives for any new leader are understanding the organization’s culture and determining whether change is needed. Most managers, however, receive little or no training in how to define an organization’s culture, let alone how to change it.

The way to assess a culture is to start really listening to how employees describe the organization. Within most generalizations — such as “Dell is analytical and measures” or “The core of Merrill Lynch is its army of retail brokers” — lies an inner core of truth.

Ask the following questions to gain further understanding of the lay of the land:
- What is the essence the company stands for?
- How is it really different from its competitors?
- What do the people who are most successful have in common?
- What are the common traits among those who have failed?
- Who are the five most respected people in the organization and why?
- What are the characteristics of the organization’s failures or missed opportunities?

In developing culture change, you might adopt new measures of success, institute new operating procedures, make changes in your management team, set new expectations, identify and encourage change leaders, and lead by example. Gerstner, in a presentation to the 420 top managers at IBM, showed the existing elements of the company’s culture, and what he wanted them to change to, on a chart.

Answering to a Higher Authority
When Hebrew National wanted to underscore the quality of its kosher hot dogs, it famously advertised that it “answered to a higher authority.” Similarly, one of the keys to success in any new job is establishing a productive relationship with your boss.

That applies whatever position you hold — even CEO. “Everyone has a boss,” says Steve Reinemund, chief executive of PepsiCo. “There are always checks and balances.”

When Richard Parsons became a chief executive for the first time, at the Dime Savings Bank of New York, his predecessor gave him a salient — if slightly exaggerated — piece of advice. “Fifty percent of the CEO’s job is managing the board of directors,” he told Parsons, “relating to the board, and keeping them informed, comfortable, supported and united.”

The best place to start establishing a productive working relationship with your boss or board is to understand the motivations of your higher authority. Beyond growing revenues, controlling costs, developing strategy and making investments, managers will also want loyalty, good advice and your help in advancing their careers.

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Communication

Communication skills are key to leadership. If your people don’t know what the direction is, they won’t know where to go. But communication is much more than promulgating a message. It’s just as much the gathering of disparate thoughts and information that will help to shape the message.

That’s why interactive forms of communication have become so popular. Town-hall meetings with an open microphone for questions and answers, brown-bag lunches with smaller groups, and regular roundtables all offer opportunities to have dialogue and talk about what’s on people’s minds. All of these are especially important during your first 100 days.

Enabling people to get to know you on a less formal basis serves another important purpose. It shows them what kind of person you are. “People have to see demonstrated leadership ability if you want to get your leadership agenda through,” says Dave Peterschmidt, CEO of Securify. “You have to be able to communicate in such a way that when people walk away from a conversation with you, they feel, ‘This person is a straight shooter. He’s honest with me, and he doesn’t screw around.’”

Resisting Temptation

You can seal shut the window of opportunity represented by your first 100 days and actually create the underpinnings for failure if you fail to avoid the top 10 traps for new leaders:

1. Setting unrealistic expectations.
2. Either making rash decisions or suffering from analysis paralysis.
3. Being a know-it-all.
4. Failing to let go of your past identity, and always reminding people of the better place you came from in the past.
5. Sporting “the emperor’s new clothes” and allowing yourself to be isolated from the truth.
7. Succumbing to the savior syndrome.
8. Misreading the true sources of power in the organization.
9. Selecting the wrong priorities — picking the wrong battles to get into.
10. Dissing your predecessor.

Conclusion

What you do during your first 100 days has the potential to establish your foundation as a true leader. But it’s also important to remember that this period is just a step. Every manager is going to have many first 100 days, simply because of the world we live in. You’ll have to prove your credibility again and again. But like fine steel, each tempering will make you stronger and better able to handle the challenges of the first 100 days, the next 100 days and the 100 days after that.

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