

## LESSON 20

# Maximize the First 90 Days

The first three months of anyone's career are a critical period of adaptation and acceptance, absorption, and understanding. It's an important time to glean who the most important players are—those whose jobs directly touch yours and key stakeholders' in particular—and the point at which you'll determine how to best interact and communicate with them. But it's also a period during which to connect with *everyone* around you. Some combination of thoughtful listening and silence, observation, and action are critical during the first 90 days of any job. Only after that period of induction is action required.

—Alan Keesee, FACHE,  
chief operating officer, Capital Regional Medical Center,  
Tallahassee, Florida

IN THE US NAVY, when a new captain takes over a ship, the entire crew assembles to see a physical manifestation of the change of command. The new captain boards the ship as the retiring one disembarks, usually after a handshake and wave, in a ceremony that takes place under the gaze of all the sailors. It is abundantly clear who is now in charge.

Although you may not have the luxury of such a definitive induction ceremony in your new job, a proper beginning will ensure a successful tenure. A rocky start can mean a poor fit or be difficult to recover from—but not always. As the old saying goes,

you have but one chance to make a good first impression, so it's important to start a new job carefully, thoughtfully, and properly.

Here are a few ideas to guide you in those early days:

- **Understand your role.** Before your first day, you should have a good idea of what those who hired you expect of you. What are the parameters of your authority and responsibility? Whom do you supervise? What's detailed in your official job description, and which responsibilities of yours may not be so clearly delineated? With time, of course, your role will become more sharply defined—but in those early days, if you are not sure what is expected, ask. Be frank about things that seem confusing or vague. As you gather information, goals—for yourself and for your organization—will likely crystallize.
- **Articulate your expectations to your staff—and the organization at large.** Call a department meeting early on, and ask for introductions and short background summaries from your colleagues. Offer some information about yourself as well before outlining your general concept of management. Listen attentively, and, above all, be friendly and do your best to appear comfortable even if you don't entirely feel it. Early impressions are often lasting impressions—and it's the rare person who's an affable combination of leader and mentor, listener, and strategist. Do your best to be that person.
- **Observe, listen, and ask.** You'll likely be leading some who are older than you and who have years of rich professional experience and perspective. These employees are often the people from whom you can glean the best, most pertinent, and most useful information. Such people are potent allies, too, and some may have seen many executives come and go. Get them on your side by being a thoughtful, responsive listener. Ask them about their

projects, and see if they have ideas for improving things. Often, people have been waiting for someone to ask their opinion—and they'll relish the chance to offer it. Really listen to the responses you get. The most proficient executives learn to observe, listen, and ask questions well before they act.

- **Study the history and culture of your organization.** Savvy executives will alter their focus and approach based on current environmental realities. Tap a few colleagues as advisers who can help you during your first few months to fully understand the organization, where its roots lie, and where it's headed.
- **Gather information for at least a couple of months before instituting change.** Try to find out if the organization has any pressing problems that must be immediately addressed. If so, you may not have the luxury of delaying decisions. Otherwise, wait to act while you gather information.
- **Set goals for yourself and the organization as you begin your new position.** Try to determine what actions are necessary to ensure the organization's success. Here are a few critical questions to guide your goals: What are the most important existing and potential revenue sources? Who are your best and most important customers? Don't try to set too many goals at once—between three and five at the outset are probably enough. As you're marking them, be sure to clearly communicate the goals to the organization, your boss, and your colleagues.
- **Show leadership and professionalism in everything you do.** Your employees and colleagues will be watching and evaluating everything you do, say, and write. Be deliberate, but be careful and wise, too. Remember your manners, don't interrupt, and be unfailingly polite. And do your best to remember people's names.

- **Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!** Start your tenure by being a clear and honest communicator. People should understand your messages and will appreciate your transparency. And talk the talk. Be certain that when you say yes, you follow through. The same goes for saying no. If you can't do anything about a problem, say so. Your candor will be remembered—and appreciated.
- **Be visible.** All employees like to see their leaders. On the first day or two, visit all areas of the organization, from the common areas to the labs. Visit areas that do not often get attention, such as the boiler room, the surgical suite, the cafeteria or kitchen, and the loading dock. Word that there is a new leader traipsing around will quickly spread. And while you're being visible, introduce yourself to everyone you meet. Ask them what they do for the company, what they like about it, and what they dislike. You should continue these rounds—a critical part of what the best leaders do—throughout your tenure.
- **Ask routinely for a status report from *all* of your stakeholders.** Asking only your high-level advisory group how things are going might not reveal the entire picture. Ask a variety of people, “How are we doing? What mistakes are being made? What can we do better?”

Good planning and execution will ensure that you start your new position in good order. And a good start often leads to a good tenure.

## EXERCISE 1

Keep a journal of events that happen in the first 90 days of your tenure, and set a goal for personal action during that period. When you have finished the first 90 days, set your sights on goals for the next 90 days.

## EXERCISE 2

During the first 90 days, make a list of all the people you would like to meet during “listening rounds.” When you meet with each one, jot down key discussion points. Ask, “What three things work really well here?” and “What three things don’t work so well?” Before ending each meeting, ask, “Is there anyone else you think I should meet with or get to know?”

## RESOURCES

- Stein, M., and L. Christiansen. 2010. *Successful Onboarding: Strategies to Unlock Hidden Value Within Your Organization*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Watkins, M. 2013. *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed, Faster and Smarter*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.