The First 90 Days
Critical Success Strategies For New Leaders At All Levels
by Michael Watkins

Whether challenged with taking on a startup, turning a business around, or inheriting a high-performing unit, a new leader's success or failure is determined within the first 90 days on the job. New leaders are expected to hit the ground running. Unfortunately many of them are left to sink or swim in this critical period.

With his bestselling book, The First 90 Days, author Michael Watkins offers proven strategies for moving successfully into a new role at any point in one's career. Watkins provides a framework to help leaders diagnose their situation, craft winning transition strategies, and take charge quickly.

By defining five main focus points and providing step by step action plans to jumpstart their success, Watkins helps new leaders build a personal transition blueprint to build early victories and achieve long-term success — no matter what type of leadership position they pursue.

Focus point one, Assessing Your Strengths and Weaknesses, teaches leaders how to match their strengths to their new position and shows them how to create a learning plan to become more knowledgeable about their company and position. With focus point two, Diagnosing Your Situation, leaders learn how to accurately identify the challenges associated with their new position and how to match their learning plan to those challenges. Focus point three, Securing Early Wins, centers around building creditability and identifying ways to improve business results. With focus point four, Negotiating With Your Boss, leaders learn how to develop a productive working relationship with their new boss and gain crucial support within the first three months. Finally, with focus point five, Building Your Team, leaders are given the tools to evaluate their current team and create a new team that can help them accomplish their goals.

So now let's learn Watkins' strategies for avoiding the most common pitfalls new leaders encounter and how they can prepare themselves for this intense and vulnerable period.

Focus Point 1: Assessing Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Before you can find success in your new position you must first examine your strengths and determine how they can support you in your new role. However, you will also need to pinpoint your weaknesses, especially those that pertain specifically to your new responsibilities, so that you can devise a learning strategy that will help you transition quickly and efficiently.

To begin determining your strengths you need to take a look at the successes you enjoyed in your previous position that helped you win your new position. What
talents brought you the most success? For example, was it your knack for product placement, your ability to increase employee morale, or your wizardry with budgeting that was the key selling point for promotion to your new position?

Once you have determined your key strengths you need to determine how those abilities will help in your new position and also how they could be a problem for you in the future. For example, if one of your key strengths is your unwavering attention to detail you may need to work on pulling back a little, especially if your new position calls for a more hands-off approach to management. This "strength" could be interpreted as micro-managing your team members and result in stifling their contributions.

Second, you need to identify any weaknesses you may have in relation to your new position. For example, if your previous position required that you excel in employee relations but never called for expertise in facilitating organizational operations between departments, you may need to acquire these skills.

Once you have determined your main strengths and weaknesses and pinpointed the areas that you need to improve on, it is time to develop a learning strategy. Start by reading available material about the company's people, performance, strategy, and structure. Next speak to your new boss about the history, culture, and politics of the organization. Finally, review the operating plans, performance data, and personnel data that relates to your position.

Once your research is done, compile a list of items that you need to explore further in order to be better prepared to tackle your new position. For example, as the new head of HR you may learn that the company has a fairly successful reward and incentives plan in place for employees, but that in recent years popular opinion of this program has plummeted. If employee incentives are not your strength you will need to add this area to your learning strategy. Read books on HR responsibilities, research incentive programs established by other successful businesses, and talk to key employees to get their input concerning an incentive program overhaul.

In order to devise the most successful learning strategy, ask yourself the following questions.

1. What critical skills do you need to develop first to make the biggest contribution to your new position? Example answers include: becoming more cost-conscious, increasing understanding of the management of financial risk, and learning more about cross-functional cooperation.

2. Who can you seek advice and insight from to better develop your learning strategy? For example, can your new boss guide you in determining the areas that need the most focus in your first ninety days? Can you meet with the former holder of this position and inquire about areas of suggested focus? Is there a colleague who may hold insight on your new responsibilities?
3. Where can you devote the most learning time in order to make the biggest impact? Managers of business units may want to conduct plant tours or process analysis in order to assess technical capabilities, the efficiency of current process, and the overall climate of the business. HR leaders may want to organize focus groups and discuss employee morale, interdepartmental cooperation factors, and leadership concerns in order to better prepare new strategies for the first ninety days.

Focus Point 2: Diagnosing Your Situation

Once you have researched the critical areas in your new position and determined the most successful learning strategy to address them, you need to diagnose the situation and explore ways that you can initiate the right types of change without making enemies. One common failure factor shared by new leaders is the tendency to rush to change once an idea seems solid before determining how the change will affect the company culture. Making changes without an understanding of the organization’s politics can lead to loss of support and eventual failure.

In order to complete a thorough and accurate diagnosis you need to answer a few questions.

1. What type of business situation are you entering into? The four main situations include start-up, turnaround, realignment, and sustaining. With a start-up situation your main focus will be the building of a product or company. In a turnaround situation your focus will be on taking what is bad or failing about the organization and appropriating changes that will lead to success. For a realignment situation you will focus on revising an area that is headed for trouble and leading it in the right direction. Finally, with a sustaining situation your focus will be on nurturing the factors that have led to company-wide prosperity and adding your own strengths to further that success and take the business to the next level. Identifying new market areas or initiating an employee benefit program would be good focus points at a start-up. However, identifying small changes in processes like product delivery that can quickly show financial improvements is a better focus point area in turnaround situations.

2. What challenges exist because of your particular business situation? If you have taken over as a manager in a start-up situation you may be faced with developing the processes of an entire team and setting them on the path to growth. On the other hand, if you are a new manager in a turnaround situation your biggest challenge may be increasing employee morale while making tough decisions regarding personnel cuts.

3. What is the climate in your new business situation? Before you can point out areas of improvement and initiate change you will need to gauge the psychological frame of mind of the organization. Is the company ready for change? How do they view your position? Test the waters with a focus group or by interviewing key employees and then tailor your strategy to include their opinions and feelings.
Focus Point 3: Securing Early Wins

Once you have a strategy for successful leadership in mind you need to determine ways that you can implement that strategy to gain early wins. By creating solid, tangible improvements in your first ninety days on the job you can win support and begin to develop a solid reputation.

The best way to do this is to determine your long-term goals and work backwards until you discover steps you can take during your transition period that will build creditability while preserving and laying the groundwork for your future vision. For example, as an HR leader you may want to research incentive programs and eliminate a benefit that doesn't work while adding in a small benefit that will eventually fit inside your improved, future package. Or, as a financial leader you may want to make a small change to a packaging process that helps streamline the process and also fits into your future cost-reduction plans.

The following questions will help you determine where you can have the greatest impact early on and help set the course for securing early wins.

1. Using the information you gleaned during the diagnosis of your situation, what are the three main priorities that you need to address? What can you do now that will lead to early success and still fit in with these future goals? For example, if a long-term priority in your new position is to increase customer satisfaction by 20% in six months, an early win strategy could be to offer an added incentive for customer service representatives who complete each call with a positive solution.

2. Decide on one change that your employees and superiors will see as positive and determine if the psychological atmosphere is right for that change. For example, a marketing leader may realize that product development needs a boost in budget. Before allocating extra funds get feedback on your idea from other departments heads. If the increase in budget is met with universal approval, then laying the groundwork for increased sales with boosted funding would be seen as an early win company wide.

3. Which of your top three priorities would lend itself well to a pilot project? Developing and launching a positive project in order to jumpstart change can set the tone for your future leadership. Define the project, explain its winning properties and choose a motivated, highly-talent team to make it a reality. This pilot project can help others see your vision more clearly, motivate them for change, and boost your support.

Focus Point 4: Negotiating With Your Boss

In order to establish a productive working relationship with your new manager there are five main issues that you need to address. By addressing these areas you can gauge your manager’s feelings on the challenges ahead and use that information to devise a successful working relationship strategy. These issues
include how your boss sees the current business situation, what his true expectations of you are, what his management style is like, what types of resources he will grant you to get the job done, and where he believes you need to develop personally to really get the job done.

Although you could just schedule a meeting and try to get to the heart of the matter by asking each of these questions directly, you are more likely to get the answers you need by taking a more indirect approach.

Start by designing some comprehensive questions that can be asked causally during regular meetings that address each issue. For example, you can gauge your manager's business situation opinion by asking what he feels was a turning point for the company. His answer will let you know how he envisions the company's current health. Or, to determine expectations, you can explain your new pilot project strategy and ask for feedback. If he states that area A is more important, then you will know that is where he would rather see initial results.

In order to get a feel for your manager's management style you can mention that you will be emailing him your thoughts on the latest project. If he counters that with a request for face-to-face updates he may lean towards a more hands-on approach and hope for the same style from you.

The resources and personal development conversations can usually be handled with the same strategy. Start by devising a plan that shows what you can do to reap results with your current budget or skills and then devise a scenario that shows the increases or improvements that can be reached with increased resources or by taking a course on personal development. For example, you could complete a plan that showcases the returns that can be expected with the current budget and then showcase the increased returns that could be achieved with a 10% increase in resources.

Devise a strategy for learning more about your boss and the expectations he holds for you by answering the following questions.

1. What have you done in the past to effectively build a relationship with a supervisor or employee and how can that technique be used in this new situation? For example, if you previously met with problems that needed to be brought to your supervisor's attention by tempering the news with suggested positive action plans and the system worked, try using that approach in your new role.

2. Take a look at the information you learned about your new company in focus point two. Keeping in mind the current business situation you are facing, what key area do you believe is the most important to your manager? How can you use this area to devise style, resource, and expectation questions for your boss? For example, if boosting employee morale is integral to your initial success, ask questions like "I feel that meeting with a focus group of employees to better determine overall job satisfaction levels is important before making any benefit changes, do you
have any suggestions?"

3. How can you use your ninety-day plan to open conversations with your boss? Why not summarize the goals you hope to reach or make a checklist of your most important milestones and share the list with your manager. This may help to unearth his style and expectations, and give you very valuable insights.

Focus Point 5: Building Your Team

Securing early success and laying the groundwork for future victory cannot be attained without the help of a motivated, talented team. However, the team you have inherited may not be ideal. How you manage your team, how you change your team's players, and your expectations of the team will do a lot to make or break your future success.

When devising a winning strategy that will help you build the most successful team, you will need to concentrate on three main areas. First, you need to develop an accurate and fair way to assess the performance of your current team members. If the team is unaware of the tools used for assessment, or if the tools are too broad or constrictive, you can hurt employee morale or improperly measure a person's performance.

Second, you need to decide how you will make personnel changes. How you let someone go or promote someone on the team will set the stage for what you value and how you are perceived. As a manager you will want your employees to see you as strong and focused but not as unapproachable or quick to judge. Devise a plan that will allow you to remove certain players from the team while allowing them to keep their dignity and create a plan that will allow for promotion without hard feelings from other team members.

Third, you need to devise a team operating plan that clearly states your expectations and defines the roles of your team members so that the team moves forward as a whole towards your future vision. Things to cover in the plan include decision-making processes, restructuring processes, and incentive processes.

Use the following action steps to build your team for success and growth.

1. Develop a performance review plan that focuses on your key objectives and expectations. Share the plan with your team and set a timeframe that allows everyone a chance to acclimate to the requirements. For example, state that you intend to increase customer satisfaction by 20% within the next six months. Next, spell out how your team members can achieve this increase and score well on performance reviews by setting tangible team goals. One aspect can be the requirement that at least seven out of every ten customer service calls ends with a positive result or action. Then, give your team at least three months to achieve this requirement. As incentive to buy-in to the new requirements you can offer performance bonuses to ensure team members quickly comply.
2. Before letting a team member go, examine the circumstances and make sure that the problem is with the employee and not the tools he has been given to do his job. If you still need to remove the employee, attempt to laterally “promote” him or match him to a more suitable position in the company. For example, if an employee fails to meet your customer service expectations maybe a position behind the scenes is more befitting.

3. Develop an operational blueprint for the team. The decision-making process needs to detail your expectations clearly. Do you want members to consult with you before they move forward? Do they consult first with other key personnel? Or, do they measure team consensus and move quickly? The restructuring processes needs to be clear and needs to outline exactly what each person's role is to be on the team. Their old responsibilities may not be in alignment with the new vision so it is your job to draw the lines clearly. Incentive processes need to include a reward system that compensates employees for exceptional work, and a focus process that allows members to understand their role and how it affects others and the vision as a whole.

Conclusion

Adopting and implementing a successful strategy during your first ninety days as a new leader is a challenging undertaking. However, by applying the proven focus points from The First 90 Days you will not feel as though you have been left to sink or swim.

By focusing your time on accelerated learning, in-depth strategy design, establishing creditability, and building a supportive, goal-oriented team you can make sure that at the end of your ninety days you are really making a difference in your new position so that your new organization needs you, as much as you need them.