



The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels

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Since its original release, *The First 90 Days* has become the bestselling globally acknowledged bible of leadership and career transitions. In this updated and expanded 10th anniversary edition, internationally known leadership transition expert Michael D. Watkins gives you the keys to successfully negotiating your next move—whether you're onboarding into a new company, being promoted internally, or embarking on an international assignment.

In *The First 90 Days*, Watkins outlines proven strategies that will dramatically shorten the time it takes to reach what he calls the "breakeven point" when your organization needs *you* as much as you need the job. This new edition includes a substantial new preface by the author on the new definition of a career as a series of transitions; and notes the growing need for effective and repeatable skills for moving through these changes. As well, updated statistics and new tools make this book more reader-friendly and useful than ever.

As hundreds of thousands of readers already know, *The First 90 Days* is a road map for taking charge quickly and effectively during critical career transition periods—whether you are a first-time manager, a mid-career professional on your way up, or a newly minted CEO.

The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels Details

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From Reader Review **The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels** for online ebook

Robin Peake says

A super helpful book at a time of transition. Gave me permission to do things differently.

Scott says

The First 90 Days is focused on providing proven strategies for effectively getting through transitions from one job to another job or one company to another. The book is marketed at professionals in all levels of an organization, but there is a secondary emphasis on those in a leadership role. Don't let that worry you if you are not in a formal leadership role. This book will still be helpful for you. I have read this book when I moved from a management position in one company to another. I read it again when I moved from a management position in one company to a non-management role in another company. I just finished reading for a third time while moving from one non-management role to another in the same company. It works for any material job change.

Watkins lays out his approach using 10 chapters focusing on each of the following topics:

1. Promoting yourself
2. Accelerating your learning
3. Matching strategy to the situation
4. Securing early wins
5. Negotiating success
6. Achieving alignment
7. Building your team
8. Creating coalitions
9. Keeping your balance
10. Expediting everyone

I really appreciated the chapters on accelerating my learning, negotiating success, and achieving alignment. I have found in my circumstances, there have been many times when I misread situations, failed to properly align expectations with my upline and team members, didn't ask the right learning questions when learning new tasks and processes. This book really helps to layout simple strategies and templates for personal use that help mitigate mistakes and help you stay on track during work and business-related transitions.

In today's business world, it seems that there is not much training available on how to successfully move from one role or job to another, let alone from one company to another. These changes can be dramatic and most onboarding lacks the information that we need most to succeed in new environments while avoiding pitfalls and political landmines. That's why the strategies in this book are so valuable and effective. The book is a quick read, about 250 pages in length.

I found this book to be very helpful in making my own professional transitions. It helped me with strategies that increased my learning curve during the transition. It helped me with prioritizing what seemed like overwhelming expectations in the new job role. It helped me avoid some pretty important pitfalls that would have set me back professionally and socially. It helped me learn and apply key lessons into my approach and

strategy that accelerated my transition into a new role or team.

Overall, I can honestly say that this book will make a difference for anyone going through a material work change, whether it is from one company to another, or one job role to another. I have successfully applied its lessons on three different occasions in my professional career and it made a remarkable difference. Trust me, if you are transitioning roles or accepting a promotion, it is well worth reading. Take notes and apply the techniques for yourself. It works.

Vinod Peris says

I was given this book by my boss at Cisco, Shailesh Shukla, when I took on a new role as head of engineering for MARSBU. If you are curious about the acronym, yes, it is the Business Unit from MARS. I opened the book and randomly landed on page 115 which had a section titled "Educate your Boss"; that definitely made this a must read.

The book is definitely a quick read and I had to pace myself so that I don't read it all in a couple of sittings and quickly forget all that I had read. There are some narratives in each chapter that outline some simple example scenarios, but the author fails to develop any of them beyond a couple of paragraphs. The main theme of the book is compelling. Whenever a manager takes on a new role, he/she will take several days to reach the break-even point, which is defined as the point where the executive creates more value than he/she consumes. Regardless of which level you are at, your first few days in a new role set the stage for your success and if you can properly plan your transition you can make the right first impressions and greatly improve your chances of success. Around 25% of the managers in a Fortune 500 company take on a new role every year. If this book accelerates the transition of even a small fraction of these, then it has achieved its purpose.

There are a few things in the book, that while obvious, are a useful reminder for all of us. The author carefully underscores the importance of first understanding the situation that you are in, i.e. are you in a startup situation, or is it a mature organization in need of a turnaround, re-alignment or sustaining operation. Your strategies are different depending on the situation. There are several other nuggets that the book imparts and I will not give it all away here. The book does tend to get repetitive and does not have too much meat behind the nuggets of wisdom. Nevertheless, it is a useful reminder to all of us when we take up a new role. I recommend this book to anyone who is recently promoted or changing jobs and is most relevant before or as soon as you take on your new role.

Nina Ive says

This was recommended to me over a year ago and as I am preparing for a next step career move I thought I would give it a go. I found it easy to read and immensely practical. In most instances the examples are obvious. Like when you know in your head the types of things you should do, but you end up just forgetting and reverting to normal behaviour!

This book is designed to give a structured approach to changing that behaviour, setting you up for success. Each chapter has a summary of points, lots of interactive tables where you can plot your own examples, and real world examples that we have all seen happen in our careers at some point or other.

Even though this is designed to assist managers transition into new positions, I found a lot of value in situations beyond those first 90 days, such as strategies for creating alliances and getting business case approval. It also gives you the tools for assessing teams for skill capability and align strategies with collaborating teams or organisations.

I can see why this has been on the best seller list for the last 10 years, I think it will continue for another 10!

Ryan says

I'm very skeptical of business books - I see them as slightly more serious versions of Get Rich Quick books and Self Help books. But this was actually helpful. As someone who's worked in less traditional office and business settings, starting a new job in a real organization would be a very different experience. The First 90 Days provided some productive ways of thinking about how offices and coworker and boss relationships work. It also gave strategies of thinking about how to hit the ground running in any new situation. Planning for goals after the first day, week, month, two months, and three months helps you think about what you might want to be doing. Even for less senior people, the chapters that go through how a new CEO starts surveying her team and figuring out who should stay and go are interesting - you end up looking at a common situation through another set of eyes. Other helpful thoughts ranged from how you want to introduce yourself to new coworkers, how to organize priorities, and how to split up what you need to learn into easily manageable chunks. Much better than I thought it was going to be.

Alex Duncan says

A must for people in career transition.

Steve Sarner says

This was a helpful book. It validated many things I already knew but did not offer too many new ideas. The systems and processes recommended for getting started are generally simple common sense approaches.

That said, I think it is a great book for someone earlier in their career. I really could have used this many years ago when I inherited a senior team with a promotion. It offers sound and practical advice for situations of this nature and many others. It is a very solid read for a first time supervisor or manager too.

Kristine Morris says

If I was transitioning into a more senior role and I read this book, I think I'd quit before I even got started. There's a lot of organizational development, change management, people management, knowledge management, to scare anyone off - especially if you are trying to get a handle on these things in the first 90 days! While it proposes that the 90 day strategy is useful for managers at all levels, it is skewed towards

senior levels and Watkins' advice "even if this doesn't apply to you, read it anyway" seems a bit disingenuous considering the time crunch faced by a new manager.

I suspect that on a second reading some practical checklists (many the chapter summaries) would prove somewhat useful. The most important thing about the book is its premise. You need to plan for your transition and not just wing it.

Shahine Ardeshir says

Three separate individuals – on hearing that I was moving into a new organization – recommended that I read this book. And very shortly into it, I could see why.

This book is, quite simply, an excellent do-it-yourself manual for anyone who's moving roles, either within or outside their current organization. It is a simple read, that doesn't need flowery language or complicated models to give it credibility. It's based on a lot of extremely solid research. And most importantly, it lays out, chapter by chapter, all critical issues that you need to think about, plan for and be aware of when you move into a new organization. A lot of what the author talks about isn't rocket science (most good management books aren't), but is simply practical common sense, a lot of which may or may not have occurred to you on your own.

This is a book that will remain on my shelf, that I will dip into every time I am transitioning to a new role throughout my working career. It falls into that rare breed of management literature that is actually extremely useful, highly relevant and won't go out of fashion anytime soon. I'd recommend it highly, with two thumbs up.

Emily says

Obviously, I should circle back and review this book more thoroughly in a few months. But it seemed useful to me. When you start a new job as an individual contributor, you mostly have to figure out the subject material and your boss, which is relatively straightforward and can unfold at its own pace. But if you have direct reports, you need to figure out what you're doing, what you should ask them to do, how to operate in a new culture, how much to change how fast, and how to work with your peers to manage projects and resources, too. This book offers a blueprint for finding out what you need to know, making contacts, and forming plans. Even if it seems to assume that you are the incoming CFO of a multinational widget concern, it is confidence-building to have a systematic plan to react to and adapt, an agenda that tells you how to start.

Edyth says

The First 90 Days is now one of my favorites, right up there with Leadership 2.0 (a must-read for leaders). This book is a great and practical guide to help any leader transition into a new job, position, and organization—within 90 days (a critical timeframe to be considered as “hitting the ground running”). There's a checklist at the end of every chapter to help you absorb key lessons, apply them to your situation, and tailor them to your own transition plan. The book is loaded with practical strategies, lessons, and advice for a smooth transition.

The First 90 Days - Chapter Summaries:

INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST 90 DAYS

- The actions you take in your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you succeed or fail.

1. **Promote Yourself:** Make the mental break from your old job and prepare to take charge in the new one. The biggest pitfall you face is to assume that what has made you successful to this point in your career will continue to do so.
2. **Accelerate Your Learning:** Accelerate the learning curve as fast as you can in your new organization. Understand its markets, products, technologies, systems, structures, and culture, and politics.
3. **Match Strategy to Situation:** Diagnose the business situation accurately and clarify its challenges and opportunities.
4. **Secure Early Wins:** Early wins build your credibility and create momentum.
5. **Negotiate Success:** Figure out how to build a productive working relationship with your new boss and manage his/her expectations. Plan for a series of critical conversations. Develop and gain consensus on your 90-day plan.
6. **Achieve Alignment:** Figure out whether the organization's strategy is sound. Bring its structure into alignment with its strategy.
7. **Build Your Team:** If you are inheriting a team, evaluate its members and restructure it to better meet the demands of the situation. Make tough early personnel calls.
8. **Create Coalitions:** Influence people outside your direct line of control. Rely on supportive alliances, internal and external, to achieve your goals.
9. **Keep Your Balance:** Work hard to maintain your equilibrium and preserve your ability to make good judgments, professionally and personally.
11. **Expedite Everyone:** Help everyone in your organization—direct reports, bosses, and peers—accelerate their own transitions. The faster this is done, the faster you can perform.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND SINK OR SWIM

- The biggest danger you face is belief in a one-size-fits-all rule for success.

Bob Selden says

As a keen student of new manager behaviour always on the lookout for new ideas, I picked up “The First 90 Days” with great anticipation. Michael Watkins sets out to provide new managers (he calls them “leaders”) with a 90 day plan for taking over in a new role. There's lots to recommend this book. There's also lots to question.

In “The First 90 Days”, the author stresses the importance of building momentum during the critical transition phase from new manager to successful manager. A 90 day acceleration plan is suggested that includes 10 transition challenges ranging from “promote yourself” through “score early wins”, to “expedite everyone”. One needs to look further than the title of these challenges as they are often more than what they seem. For example, “promote yourself” has more to do with changing your perspective to fit the new role rather than self-promotion.

I particularly liked some of the practical tips included in this book, such as the “Problem Preferences Assessment” which enables the new manager to quickly select the most appropriate and rewarding problem areas to address. Also a suggestion to write yourself a letter as if you had been in the role for three years describing what others said about your success in the role, is a nice way to set a broad vision for the new manager. Chapter 5 “Negotiate Success”, which is all about managing your boss through the 90 day plan, is worth the price of this book alone.

I have three areas of criticism. Firstly, whilst the book has a fantastic array of suggestions, strategies, tips etc, I feel it would take more than 90 days to implement them all, let alone do the work that is required in the role. As such, it would make a great text for students of management, but could overwhelm the new manager looking for some quick or directed advice.

Secondly, although the author stresses otherwise, the book seems more suited to upper level roles than first line supervisors. For example, Chapter 6 “Achieve Alignment”, looks at quite a sophisticated process of crafting strategy, assessing coherence, assessing adequacy and modifying strategy.

Finally, I’d like to see more positive case studies to illustrate rather than the “what went wrong” scenarios provided in a number of chapters. Although in real life, we often learn more from our mistakes, in a teaching role (such as this book) it is far more effective for the reader if he or she can see what works and implement this, rather than what doesn’t. I would recommend this book as an excellent text for management students and a resource for management teachers/educators. If you’re a new manager reading “The First 90 Days”, then go straight to the practical “How to” areas, otherwise your 90 days will be up before you finish reading.

Themistocles says

Well, let's put it this way: if you need this book, then you obviously have no place in managing anything, and your pet goldfish is probably already dead out of neglect and lack of food.

Really?? Is this one of the best business books of the last years? Published by Harvard Press? For the love of god... As Dilbert would say, I was blinded by the obvious time and again and got tired of the oh-so-original (NOT!) charts and diagrams very soon. What practical advice the author gives could have been summed up in 50 pages or so. The case studies are nicely drawn, but very few and very short. The rest is page filling.

I guess the only positive about this book is that it gives you a time frame to accomplish things, but even this is not always possible; for instance, it says that for the first month you just listen and listen... but this is not always possible, certainly not in companies with no 'leader assimilation' period.

Better spend the money to buy a round of doughnuts for your coworkers, it'll be more worth it.

Robert Chapman says

The saying goes that you have 90 days in a new job or position to make an impact and demonstrate competence. This book is all about how to create and execute against a 90 day plan to ensure a successful transition.

Four specific types of transitions are covered in detail with examples of both success and failure and the conditions which contributed to the end result.

The four types of transitions are called the STaRS model:

- start-up
- turnaround
- re-alignment
- sustaining success

Each of these transitions requires a specific set of behaviors and a unique plan to make the transition successful.

I found the level of detail provided for each transition type excellent, it covers everything from how manage up to how to deal with direct reports and peers. Being in a new position at work myself, this book was very timely and has provided with me with excellent guidance in how to approach and manage the challenge.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is about to undertake a transition.

Erika RS says

I think I must not be the target audience for this book because I found it dull. The book had a number of useful techniques but it was definitely targeted toward leaders in more traditional companies than my workplace. I would like to read a book with fundamentally the same content but written for folks in the more casual parts of the software industry.

Since I did find the book useful but boring, I include a detailed summary below.

The first 90 days after a transition are critical for establishing yourself in the new position. Companies often fail to prepare leaders for successful transitions.

There are key steps you can take to help your transition succeed:

Promote Yourself. Make a mental break from the old job. Don't assume that what made you successful before will make you successful now. Be aware of what sort of problems you'll need to solve and how they differ from the types of problems you've been good at solving in the past.

Accelerate Your Learning. Create a plan for learning about the past, present, and future of your new organization. Look at both concrete facts and subjective impressions. Learn from internal sources and

external sources. Start learning what you can before you've transitioned into your new role. Share and discuss your learning plan and learnings with your team and your boss(es).

Learn iteratively. Focus on learning the most important things first and then coming back and adding more depth and breadth. When meeting with individuals, ask everyone the same set of questions in the same order; this gives you a set of easy to compare answers.

Match Strategy to Situation. There are some common categories of situations a leader will be taking on. Knowing what type of situation you are taking on can make the difference between success and failure.

The four most common situation types are startups, realignments, turnarounds, and sustaining success. Each has different challenges. For example, in a turnaround, you don't have a lot of time to succeed but everyone acknowledges that change is necessary, while in a realignment you may have time but people may disagree on the need for change.

Secure Early Wins. Don't get lost in the big changes that you see when you enter an organization. Focus on securing early (generally small) wins to help build momentum. This helps you focus in the early days, and it also helps to build your credibility with the people you're working with. Ideally, the size of your wins will increase over time and all work toward some long term goal.

This chapter provided a valuable framework for the elements that must be necessary before a person can enact change. There must be sufficient *awareness* that change is needed. There must be a *diagnosis* of what needs to be changed and why. There must be a *vision* and strategy for change. There must be a *plan* for change. Finally, there must be people who *support* implementing the plan. Before trying to cause change, a leader should look at each of these elements and strengthen any that are weak.

Negotiate Success. You are responsible for setting up a productive relationship with your boss, even if your styles differ. Use conversations with your boss to set clear expectations of what you plan to get done when and potential opportunities or issues. Don't use these meetings to go over checklists or complain fruitlessly.

The book suggests 5 types of conversations you should have with your boss. These conversations are roughly chronological, but will repeat over time as situations change.

The situational diagnosis is a chance for you to understand your boss's perspective on the current business situation. The expectations conversation is where you work to understand what you need to get done, what success looks like, and how performance is measured.

In the style conversation, you'll learn how to communicate most effectively with your boss, being on the lookout for ways their preferred style differs from yours. Once you know what you're trying to accomplish, you'll need to have a conversation about what resources you need.

Finally, once you've proven your credibility with small wins, it's a good time to talk about your own personal development. These conversations should inform your 90 day plan, and you should also present your plan to your boss to get their buy in and feedback.

Achieve Alignment. The insight of this chapter is that the strategy, structure, systems, skills, and culture of an organization all need to be aligned to achieve success. The strategy should lead the direction, with structure, systems, and skills working to support that strategy. Culture is the often invisible background that all of these systems work against. It is the hardest to change but often the most influential.

Build Your Team. Obviously, having the right team is critical to success. What's less obvious is that it's important for a new leader to restructure their team quickly to avoid the expectation that change is not going to happen. But the team should not be changed too quickly, because a new leader has to get to know the existing team and too much churn causes instability.

What I found most valuable from this chapter was the list of 6 criteria you can use to evaluate members of your team. *Competence* evaluates whether or not they have the technical ability necessary for the job. *Judgement* evaluates whether or not the person makes good decisions, especially in difficult situations. It's also important that a team member bring the right kind of *energy* to the team. They need to be able to *focus* on the right priorities, and they need to have good *relationships* with the rest of the team. Finally, you need to have people you can *trust* to follow through on their commitments.

The book suggests dividing 100 points among the 6 criteria to weight their value and then evaluating each of your team members on these criteria. I found this framework to be useful because I find that, when it comes to evaluating people on my team, it's often hard to assess non-technical skills consistently across people and across review sessions. Explicitly defining and weighting the list of criteria would help to make evaluation more consistent. I plan to use this technique in the future.

I also appreciated the range of categories for team members after the initial assessment. A team member may be someone you want to keep in place, keep and develop, move to another position (that's a better fit), observe for awhile (and help them develop), replace (but not urgently), replace (urgently). This range of categories provides room for people who could succeed on your team but aren't currently, a situation where it's easy for things to go badly if you don't work to be aware of the possibilities.

Create Coalitions. To enact change, you need support. It's important to figure out who are supporters, opponents, and convincibles. To turn convincibles into supporters, you want to change their perception of the choice they have to make. Often, maintaining the status quo is seen as zero cost and change is seen as high cost. Thus, as a general strategy, to get support for change, you want to raise the perceived cost of the status quo and lower the cost of change. Bribes and threats are two blunt ways of doing this, but better is to create compelling framing arguments, setting up action-forcing events such as commitments to take particular actions, getting people to change their behavior (which can lead to them changing their minds), and leveraging small commitments that will lead to larger change (e.g., get someone to come to a meeting, then review a design, then evaluate a prototype, etc.).

Keep Your Balance. All these techniques for getting off to a strong start are useful, but they're all for naught if you let yourself get overwhelmed by the change. To maintain balance, you need to adopt strategies for success, use discipline in executing those strategies, and build your support system.

Key to maintaining discipline are taking time to plan, deferring commitment to prevent yourself from becoming too busy, setting aside time for hard work, taking time to step back from high stakes situations, focusing on the process by which you try to implement change and how others perceive it, and staying aware of how your feeling (perhaps by using structured reflection), and knowing when to quit.

Your support system needs to include not just your professional support system at work and outside of work. It also needs to include your family. Change in your job can often mean change for your family. Keeping your family healthy is key to preventing a destructive feedback loop.

Expedite Everyone. Finally, for these techniques to be most effective, make sure that everyone is using structured transition techniques. As a leader, it's easiest to spread structured transitions to your team, but you

can also work to spread it to your peers. If everyone can transition more effectively, then the company as a whole will be more successful.
