

REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST WEEK OF THE FIRST 90 DAYS

This column presents examples of how to apply some techniques from the book "The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels" by Michael D. Watkins" when facing a job transition.

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I recently began a new job as the head of finance for a mid-sized company in a new location and a new industry. During the interview process, it was recommended I read "The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels" by Michael D. Watkins to help prepare me for the transition.

The comments below reflect how I used some of the techniques from "The First 90 Days" during my first week on the job, and how I intend to continue using them through the rest of my initial 90 days.

After reading the book, six key techniques have stuck with me. I have created six fictional scenarios below that parallel my experiences at the new role to demonstrate how I applied these six techniques. My goal is to continue using these six techniques over the remainder of the first 90 days.

To understand the structure of the article, turquoise text outlines a technique from "The First 90 Days." In italics, I detail how I applied the tool in a similar situation and my plan to use it for the rest of my initial 90 days.

1. Take time to diagnose the situation to make more informed decisions.

"Hey, Spencer, great to meet you in person! I want to introduce you to Patricia, she's in charge of corporate development. We want you to help her prepare a financial projection of the potential acquisition of a small firm in another jurisdiction."

"Hi Spencer, we're happy to have you join the team. Below is a summary of the work we have finished so far.

It is a summary of everything you need to know about the deal."

In this scenario I relied on Patricia's report for information but resisted the urge to solely depend on it. After preparing the initial draft, I consulted others for a more comprehensive understanding. Despite the desire to impress quickly, my approach over the rest of the 90 days involves thoroughly reviewing material before seeking meetings with those familiar with the issue and prioritizing a more complete understanding over immediate engagement.

2. Engage with long-tenured employees who have valuable insights into a company's history, culture and how to get things done.

"Hi Spencer, I'm Kristina!"

Kristina has been with the company for over five years, and not a single purchase goes through the company without first passing over her desk.

"Hi Kristina, I am trying to get an understanding of the processes here. Could you please run me through the process from reception to payment of an invoice here, including how it ends up on the P&L?"

In the first week, Kristina was able to give me a full understanding of not just how things are done now, but also provided comprehensive insights into current practices and the context leading to our current state. They also introduced me to key individuals handling various tasks, a valuable tip that swiftly enhanced my understanding of the corporation and its people. I plan on maintaining this relationship and looking for conversations with other long-tenured employees.

3. Building relationships with individuals in other departments to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the company's culture, structure, and challenges.

"Hey Spencer, why the long face?"

Brandon was part of the maintenance department responsible for making sure the maintenance team always had enough maintenance equipment in stock to perform their tasks.

"Hey Brandon, I'm a little stressed trying to get a hold of some of the processes here."

"I understand... I am also a little stressed. We have a problem with getting our required maintenance equipment on time. There is sometimes a long delay between the time we submit a request and the time we receive the equipment."

Engaging with other departments is key to my onboarding strategy. Despite a demanding workload and steep learning curve, I'm committed to connecting with different departments. Early on, I've seen the value in uncovering insights that remain hidden within your own department. My goal is to attend company events and meet leaders from other departments, and not only when cross-departmental issues arise.

4. Actively engage with the team

"Vanessa, Lauren, could we please have a quick meeting?"

Vanessa and Lauren are the two directors on my finance team.

"I need you to help me understand this ERP system. I know you both have a lot of experience, could we please schedule a few meetings this week to help me understand the different cost centers and how to produce different reports?"

In my first week, I met with each team member to grasp their roles and establish rapport. I learned the processes from both junior members and their managers, as repetition aids my understanding. To

ensure ongoing clarity, I'll implement weekly meetings for the team and leadership, individually and as a group.

5. Aim for early wins in areas important to the boss

"Spencer, I need you to help Jayshawn with our budgeting process."

Jayshawn is leading the budgeting process, and he wants to know the important details in the total spend of the different departments to help make projections and important budgetary decisions for next year.

"No problem! I'll get those to you ASAP!"

Starting my new job, I knew my boss had urgent issues, but priorities can shift in a dynamic environment. I adapted my plans quickly, realizing the need to be flexible. Moving forward, I'll avoid rigidity in my weekly plan, constantly questioning the changing urgency of my various tasks, and I'll be alert to the necessity of adjusting my priorities.

6. Balancing short-term and long-term goals; addressing immediate challenges and laying the groundwork for sustained success

"Spencer, I want you to meet Gustov, the founder and owner of the company."

"Spencer! Great to meet you! I want to talk to you today about our new expansion plan. We want you to help us understand the different financial risks that may be present."

In my first week, I juggled tasks from various sources, realizing the importance of balancing short-term and long-term goals. While my inclination to finish tasks quickly is useful, I have learned to avoid a checklist approach. As I enter my second week, I'm sending my boss a priority list, outlining focus areas that need to be completed now and initiatives to start now for completion in the coming quarters. Recognizing the challenge of maintaining this approach, I intend to continue to send my boss my dynamically changing priorities every Monday. I know from previous experience that this is a difficult habit to maintain, so I will carve out time at the beginning of every Monday morning in case I don't complete it on Sunday night.

Leadership transitions often involve uncertainties and unforeseen challenges

“A Mac! How am I supposed to use Excel on a Mac?!”

Although the above situation is meant to be humorous, it reflects the unavoidable reality I need to accept with my transition that there will be a lot of unforeseen challenges and uncertainties during my first 90 days. In those circumstances, one of my favorite quotes is from Jocko Willink, a retired SEAL.

“How do I deal with setbacks, failures, delays, defeats, or other disasters? I actually have a fairly simple way of dealing with these situations, summed up in one word:

Good!... When things are going bad, there's going to be some good that will come from it.”