



# THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Proven Strategies for  
Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter

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## The Big “So What”

The first few months of any career transition—be it a promotion, a new job or a lateral transfer—are critical and can determine if you succeed or fail in the new role. **This book presents a framework with strategies and tools to help shorten your learning curve and build momentum within the first 90 days of any new management role.** The impact is multiplied when the approach is applied organization-wide.



## Introduction

Each time a mid-level leader is hired or promoted, it takes approximately 6.2 months for him/her to get up to speed and deliver a positive net value. In any transition, the goal is to reach the breakeven point asap, i.e. the employee’s contribution meets the company’s investment. By applying the 90-day framework, you can get to the breakeven point up to 40% faster.

Leaders tend to fall into several transition traps that lead to a series of bad decisions, loss of credibility and alienation from potential allies. Without the right insights and support, a vicious cycle develops as they keep fumbling and wasting time/energy.

### TRANSITION TRAPS

- Assume **past success factors** will work in the new role.
- Rush to **act before learning** what’s essential. End up damaging credibility and being alienated.
- Waste time/energy trying to **do too many things**.
- Jump into **preconceived/premature conclusions** that cut off potential allies.
- **Focus on the technicalities** of the new job instead of critical area like culture, relationships and info channels.
- Focus on vertical relationships (e.g. boss & direct reports) and **neglect horizontal relationships** (e.g. peers & other stakeholders).
- Fail to clarify goals & mandate, thus **fall short of expectations**.



**VICIOUS CYCLE**  
**Bad decisions,**  
**Alienation,**  
**Loss of**  
**credibility &**  
**momentum**


## KEY QUOTES

*“The actions you take during your first few months in a new role will largely determine whether you succeed or fail.”*

*“Every successful career is a series of successful assignments, and every successful assignment is launched with a successful transition.”*

*“When a new leader fails to thrive, it’s a severe, perhaps career-ending, blow to the individual.”*

*“Transition failures happen because new leaders either misunderstand the essential demand of the situation or lack the skill and flexibility to adapt to them.”*

 On the other hand, when you start with the right fundamentals, you create a *virtuous cycle* that concurrently improves your effectiveness and builds credibility and momentum.

#### FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES/STRATEGIES

- Deliberately **prepare yourself** for the new role and its unique challenges.
- **Accelerate learning** of what matters: technical details, culture and politics.
- **Tailor your strategy** specifically for the role/situation.
- Build credibility and momentum with **early wins**.
- Build a healthy relationship with your boss(es). Manage expectations and **negotiate success**.
- **Align your plan** with the organization's strategic direction.
- Assess, align and **build your team**.
- **Build allies** internally and externally, vertically and horizontally.
- Maintain balance and **manage yourself**.
- **Accelerate others** to multiply the benefits.



**VIRTUOUS  
CYCLE**  
Good  
decisions,  
Key alliances,  
Build  
credibility  
& momentum



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#### KEY QUOTES

*"Do the right things... and you will rapidly create momentum that will propel you to even greater successes."*

*"Your overriding goal in getting up to speed and taking charge is to generate momentum by creating virtuous cycles, and to avoid getting caught in vicious cycles that damage your credibility."*

*"Your transition begins the moment you learn you are being considered for a new job."*

*"Joining a new company is akin to an organ transplant—and you're the new organ. If you're not thoughtful in adapting to the new situation, you could end up being attacked by the organizational immune system and rejected."*

 You can use these 10 principles/strategies for (i) any leadership level from a junior manager to a CEO, and for (ii) any type of career transition from a change in company to job scope or location.



## Strategies for Accelerating Transitions



### 1. Prepare in advance

Take a break before the transition to prepare yourself. Ideally, start your preparation once you're being considered for a new role.



Your new role and situation will bring different challenges that require different competencies.

- When you're promoted to a bigger role, you're often expected to (i) adopt a broader perspective without losing sight of critical details, (ii) delegate differently, (iii) exercise influence instead of relying on positional authority, (iv) develop new communication channels as you're now distanced from the frontlines, and (v) manage your higher visibility as a leader.
- When you join a new company, there're at least 4 additional areas you must quickly get up to speed on: (i) learning the

business *fundamentals* (e.g. products, strategies, financials and systems that affect you), (ii) connecting with key *stakeholders*, (iii) developing clear *expectations*, and (iv) blending in with the *culture* (i.e. the set of values, assumptions, norms, behaviors, symbols and languages). If you fail to adapt quickly, you may find yourself being alienated.



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**Prepare yourself:** Identify the transition challenges so you can address them effectively.

- Pick a specific date and time and make a clear mental transition from the old job to the new one. Celebrate the upcoming shift, let go of the old job and start focusing on the new role.
- Know your key weakness or vulnerabilities (e.g. the types of problems/issues you're weaker at or tend to avoid). With this awareness you can (i) use self-discipline to improve, (ii) build a team that complements you and (iii) find the right advisers.
- Know your strengths and default mode of operation. Be aware that what worked in the past may not work in your new role.
- Have a learning mindset. It's easy to feel inadequate in an unfamiliar role and environment without a support network. Consider the challenges you're likely to face in your transition and your potential gaps or blind-spots. Start preparing yourself mentally for the transition: embrace the steep learning curve ahead, do your research in advance, and tap on any available onboarding programs and resources.



## 2. Speed up your learning

Don't assume you know what's required, rush into action, or apply solutions/systems you're familiar with. **Define what you must learn about the new role and quickly get up to speed on those areas.**



**Develop a learning agenda.** List down the questions you must answer and the hypotheses you must test.

- Make sure you cover key areas including: (i) technical (e.g. markets, systems, technologies), (ii) interpersonal (e.g. your boss, peers, direct reports), (iii) cultural (e.g. norms, values, expected behaviors) and (iv) political (informal processes and alliances).

## KEY QUOTES

"Recruiting is like romance,  
and employment is like  
marriage."



## KEY QUOTES

*“An actionable insight is knowledge that enables you to make better decisions earlier and so helps you quickly reach the break-even point in personal value creation”.*

- Learn about the organization’s past, present and future including:
  - (i) Past performance (e.g. goals, benchmarks, measures), reasons for past successes/failures and the history of change (e.g. what was attempted and by who).
  - (ii) Current vision and strategy (and how far they’re being implemented), people (e.g. who’s capable, trustworthy, influential), processes, potential land mines vs quick wins.
  - (iii) Future organizational challenges vs opportunities, key barriers and resources, cultural elements to be preserved vs changed.



**Identify the best sources to learn.** You can tap on a range of internal sources (e.g. managers, salespeople, cross-function integrators, old-timers) and external sources (e.g. customers, suppliers, distributors, analysts).



**Use structured learning** to gain the most actionable insights with the least time/resources. You can use strategic models (e.g. SWOT) and/or the learning cycle (info-gathering → analysis → develop and test hypotheses) to constantly refine your approach.

- Consider using questions like these to get structured inputs:
  - (i) What are the organization’s biggest challenges now and in the near future? Why?
  - (ii) What are the biggest untapped opportunities? What must happen for the organization to exploit them?
  - (iii) If you were me, what would you focus on?
- You can start with your direct reports, then refine the questions for other stakeholders. Compare the responses to identify common concerns and different perspectives.



**Develop a learning plan.** Define the specific action steps to achieve your learning goals. Ideally, focus your first 30 days on learning and break down your plan into 3 phases: (i) before you start your new role (e.g. speak with your boss, research data in the public domain), (ii) soon after you start work (e.g. speak 1-1 with your direct reports, check for clarity and alignment) and (iii) the end of your 1st month (e.g. consolidate and test your findings).



### 3. Tailor your strategy to your role/situation

Don't assume that what worked for you previously will work for your new role. Different roles/situations call for different strategies. **Assess the situation properly to develop the right plan.**



The **STARS** model represents the 5 situations that businesses typically face. Each situation brings different challenges and requires different responses. You must diagnose where your organization stands (and why) before you can identify the right strategy. Here's an overview of the key challenges in each STARS situation:

- **Startup:** to assemble the core capabilities (e.g. funds, people, tech) and get the business going.
- **Turnaround:** to get a struggling group back on-track.
- **Accelerated-growth:** to install essential systems, structures and processes so the business can scale up quickly.
- **Realignment:** to realign/rejuvenate a group that's at risk of getting derailed.
- **Sustaining success:** to bring an already-successful organization to new heights.



**Strategize based on your STARS mix.** Your organization will almost certainly have a mix of STARS situations, e.g. various products, plants or projects may be at different STARS stages. Diagnose the STARS portfolio you've inherited, how it fits with the rest of the organization and how best to approach each component. This lays the foundation for you to discuss options with your boss/team.

- Never jump in with preconceived solutions. To lead change, you must first **diagnose the situation**. Then, consider the challenges and opportunities presented by your STARS portfolio.
- Step back to **assess your role as a leader**, how this fits with your strengths/weaknesses and how you must adjust your learning agenda. For example, a turnaround may call for a *hero* who brings hope, vision and decisive action, whereas a realignment may call for a *steward* who influences change subtly using a



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## KEY QUOTES

*"You cannot figure out where to take a new organization if you do not understand where it has been and how it got where it is."*

*"Armed with insight into your STARS portfolio and the key challenges and opportunities, you will adopt the right strategies for leading change."*


*"Good leaders can succeed in all give of the STARS situations, although no one is equally good at all of them."*

blend of data and diplomacy. Once you're clear on your STARS portfolio, you can manage yourself and build complementary teams to effectively address the challenges.



#### 4. Negotiate success and manage expectations

Your relationship with your new boss is critical for your success. Take 100% responsibility to **establish a healthy work relationship with your boss and set clear, realistic expectations about your goals, mandate and resources**. In addition, find out if there're other stakeholders who can affect your evaluation and rewards.

 Aim to address 5 key areas with your boss in your dialogues. Monitor where you stand and what to focus on in the next 30 days. You can also incorporate these 5 conversations into your interactions with your direct reports.

- **Situational diagnosis**: Find out how your boss sees your STARS portfolio. It's easier to get support when you have a common understanding.
- **Expectations**: Align your expectations for your short/mid term goals and their deadlines. Remember to (i) focus on quick wins based on your boss' priorities, (ii) identify out-of-bounds or sensitive areas to avoid, (iii) present data and explanations when there're differences in views, (iv) always under-promise and over-deliver, and (v) keep clarifying until you're crystal-clear on what's expected.
- **Resources**: Based on the agreed STARS situation, goals and expectations, consider the existing resources you can use and the additional resources you must secure with your boss' help. Prepare prior (e.g. get concrete data or support from allies) so you can present the pros and cons of your request. Focus on the results and benefits for stakeholders including your boss' interests.
- **Style**: Observe and diagnose your boss' style (e.g. preferred communication/decision-making approach) and decision-making boundaries (e.g. what types of decision he/she wants to be consulted on). Where your styles differ, take the initiative to adapt to your boss' style. Highlight any differences to avoid misunderstanding (e.g. point out that you have similar goals



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*"Negotiating success means proactively engaging with your new boss to shape the game so that you have a fighting chance of achieving desired goals."*

*"Whatever your own priorities, pinpoint what your boss cares about most, and aim for early wins in those areas."*

*"Assume that the job of building a positive relationship with your new boss is 100 percent your responsibility."*

but different approaches to achieving them). Score points with people that your boss respects and seek their advice.

- **Personal development:** After a few months (when you've built a foundation with your boss) you can seek feedback and discuss your development priorities. Focus on both hard and soft skills.



**Agree on your 90-day plan.** Use the first few weeks to come up with a 90-day plan, breaking it down into 30-day blocks. Share it with your boss and get buy-in. Use the first 30 days to diagnose the situation, identify key priorities and develop your plan for the next 30 days. After every 30 days, jointly review the progress you've made and set expectations for the next 30 days.



## 5. Clinch early victories

If you fail to build momentum during your transition, it'll be much harder to drive results in the subsequent months/years. **Aim to secure early wins in your first 90 days.**



**Focus on agreed business goals.** Don't waste time/energy on low-hanging fruits with minimal impact. Focus on initiatives that:

- Are aligned with the business goals expected of you; and
- Can shape desired behaviors to help you achieve those goals.

Focus on just a couple of core initiatives that'd make the *most* impact for your STARS situation, are aligned with your boss' priorities and the organizational culture.



There's only so much you can deliver in 90 days. The key is to use a phased approach to progressively build momentum.

- **Establish personal credibility in your first 30 days.** Once people form an impression about you, it'll shape how they view your subsequent actions and results.
  - (i) Create a *positive first impression*: demonstrate values that others admire or can relate to, be decisive and exhibit positive energy and high performance standards.



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## KEY QUOTES

*"When you're deciding where to seek early wins, you may have to forgo some of the low-hanging fruit and reach higher in the tree."*

*"Addressing problems that your boss cares about will go a long way toward building credibility and cementing your access to resources."*

*"Your earliest actions will have a disproportionate influence on how you're perceived."*



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## KEY QUOTES

*“Figure out what role people are expecting you to play and then make an explicit decision about whether you will reinforce these expectations or compound them.”*

*“The choice of behavior change techniques should be a function of your group’s structure, processes, skill, and—above all—situation.”*

*“The higher you rise in an organization, the more you must play the role of organizational architect.”*


(ii) Act on new insights so people can see that you’re a *fast and willing learner*. Define 3-4 areas where you can deliver visible improvements quickly with minimal resources.

(iii) Wherever possible, create incidents that can be shared as stories to *build your reputation*, e.g. making a firm decision to take an unethical staff to task.

- As you work on your early wins, start identifying key initiatives to lead subsequent changes. Tailor your approach to match the situation.

(i) *Use the right approach*. A plan-and-execute approach only works if there’s (a) widespread acceptance of the need for change, (b) a clear problem-diagnosis, (c) a clear vision and strategy, and (d) adequate expertise and support for detailed planning and execution. So long as 1 or more of these elements are missing, you’ll need a more evolutionary approach: involve people in the research, learning and brainstorming process to cultivate understanding and buy-in.

(ii) *Manage behavior change*. Don’t try to tear down the existing culture or behavioral norms all at once. Play up positive elements of the existing culture while you change the negative elements, so you retain a sense of familiarity.

-  **Watch for potential problems** that could explode in your face, including changes in the external/competitive environment (e.g. laws, economic conditions, competitors’ moves) and challenges from internal capabilities or organizational politics.



## 6. Get alignment

The more senior you are as a leader, the more you must be able to understand and align various organizational components (e.g. strategy, structure, processes and resources). **During your first 90 days, focus on identifying potential misalignments and developing an initial plan to address them. Do not rush into action.**



Examine where your unit stands in relation to the wider strategic direction. Check for alignment between your *mission* (what to achieve), *vision* (why you do what you do) and *strategy* (how you allocate resources and make decisions to attain the mission).






## KEY QUOTES


Learn about your organization's 4Cs (customers, capital, capabilities and commitments), and zoom in on 3 things:

- Coherence: Are the overall mission, vision and strategy and their sub-components (e.g. products, goals, technologies) aligned?
- Adequacy: Can you achieve success in the next 2-3 years based on the overall direction and agreed priorities for your unit?
- Execution. Is there a gap between what people do vs what they say? If so, is the issue with strategy formulation or execution?

If there are major issues at the strategic level, you must persuade your boss and key stakeholders to review the existing strategy.

 Ensure your unit's structure, processes and skills support the strategic direction.

- Structure involves your reporting lines, coordination, decision-making, and performance-management systems. It decides who has authority to do what. Look out for common problems such as silos or incentives that're misaligned with desired behaviors/outcomes. There's no perfect structure; don't make structural changes without carefully weighing the pros and cons.
- Check if your unit's processes are aligned with the structure/goals of your group and organization. If changes are required, bring the relevant parties together, map out the process-flow and jointly resolve the bottlenecks and misalignments.
- Assess if your unit has the skill bases (individual- and team-level skills, knowledge and expertise) to support the agreed priorities and strategies. Look for gaps and under-utilization of such skills.

 Define the following: (i) the areas of alignment needed, (ii) how/when to make those changes, and (iii) the best sequence of change. For instance, in a turnaround, you may need to address the underlying strategy first, while in a realignment, it may be better to focus on processes and skills.

*"There is no perfect organizational structure; every one embodies trade-offs. Thus, your challenge is to find the right balance for your situation."*

*"Process analysis stimulates collective learning."*

*"No matter how charismatic you are as a leader, you cannot hope to do much if your organization is fundamentally out of alignment."*



## 7. Build your Team

Your team members are vital for your success. **Whether you're inheriting an existing team or building a new one, you must assess, align, and mobilize every member on your team.**



**Evaluate your team.** Use the first 30-60 days to assess the caliber of your team members, group dynamics and roles.

- Define your desired team member criteria, taking into account (i) how far you can personally influence each criterion, (ii) the diversity of expertise and level of teamwork needed for your STARS portfolio, and (iii) how critical each position is to team success.
- Assess each team member against those criteria and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses e.g. using 1-1 interviews or giving them specific challenges.
- Evolve your team. In about 30 days, you should be able to broadly classify people into 3 groups: (i) who to keep (with/without development), (ii) who to replace (with low/high priority) and (iii) who to observe further.



**Align your team.** With the right people, you can now focus on achieving the team goals.

- Articulate a clear and inspiring vision that addresses intrinsic motivators. Present it in a visual, narrative way that helps people to see how they're serving a wider purpose.
- Define clear goals and metrics.
- Define the right blend of incentives, including individual vs team incentives, monetary vs non-monetary incentives.



**Lead your team** to achieve the collective goals. Aim to jointly reach the team breakeven point asap. Learn how your team works, e.g. what roles each member plays, how often do they meet, how are decisions made etc. Identify what to change/retain and celebrate success.



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### KEY QUOTES

*"The most important decisions you make in your first 90 days will probably be about people."*

*"You will know you've been successful in building your team when....the energy the team creates is greater than the energy you need to put into it."*



## 8. Build alliances

Build relationship capital and cultivate allies internally and externally, including those within and outside your reporting line.



**Know your influence goals and landscape.** Go through the list of desired early wins. Map out the “influence networks” of people with formal or informal power e.g. info, relationships or access to resources. From the list of influencers and decision-makers, identify:

- Potential supporters, what you’d like them to do by when.
- Potential adversaries and ways to overcome their opposition.
- People who’re indifferent/uncommitted but may be persuaded.



**Develop your influence strategies.**

- Take some time to understand the “pivotal people”, including their intrinsic motivators (e.g. need for power or recognition), extrinsic motivators (e.g. pressures from circumstances), and how they may perceive the options you’re presenting.
- Based on these insights, use suitable influence strategies to build your alliances. Some approaches include: (i) using consultations to understand their real concerns and interests, (ii) framing your options in a way that appeals to their logic, principles/values or emotions, or (iii) using social influence by linking your idea to respected opinion leaders or strongly-held values/beliefs. You can also get your boss’ help to connect you with the key internal and external stakeholders.



## 9. Manage yourself

A transition can be overwhelming as you juggle the need to deliver results in the midst of uncertainty and lack of knowledge. **You must balance between others’ advice and your own judgment, and between the demands of the new role and your family.**



**Build self-awareness.** Step back and reflect on what you’re most positive or worried about the transition. Take proactive, deliberate



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### KEY QUOTES

*“Success in winning over adversaries can have a powerful, symbolic impact.”*

*“Alliance building entails figuring out whose support you need, mapping the patterns of influence, and identifying potential support and opposition.”*

*“You cannot hope to create value at work if you’re destroying value at home.”*

*“The life of a leader is always a balancing act, but never more so than during a transition.”*

steps to address your biggest challenges and avoid making mistakes that'd add to your transitional stress.



Use these 3 anchors to manage the transition:

- Use the 90-day strategies above to tackle transitional challenges and build momentum.
- Build strict routines and habits, e.g. set aside time daily and weekly to review your results and upcoming plans, dedicate distraction-free time daily to do the most critical tasks, and set aside time for quiet reflection and stock-taking.
- Build support systems, e.g. set up your office properly, get your family in order (especially if relocation is involved) to avoid fighting multi-front battles, and cultivate a network of trusted internal/external advisers who can guide you on technical, cultural and political areas.



## 10. Accelerate everyone

At an individual level, a failed transition hurts your career. At an organizational level, every failed transition translates into real costs—from an under-performing junior staff to strategic errors by a senior leader. **Imagine the returns on investment if your organization can accelerate every transition by 10-40%.**



Identify key transitions. Start by identifying (i) the number of transitions in your organization, (ii) the types of transitions (e.g. onboarding, promotions, lateral moves), and (iii) the most critical transitions. This helps you to allocate resources more optimally.



Assess and improve current transition systems (e.g. coaching programs, learning materials):

- Ensure there's a common model behind different types of transitions (e.g. onboarding, lateral, vertical and international transitions). Things will work more seamlessly when everyone uses similar frameworks, languages and toolkits, e.g. STARS portfolios, alliances, 90-day plans.
- Within the common framework, tailor the content and activities into structured, bite-sized support based on the (i) transition-



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## KEY QUOTES

*"Ultimately, your success or failure will flow from all the small choices you make along the way."*

*"Every failed transition... exacts costs from the organization."*

*"Leaders need to be offered transition support in digestible blocks."*

type (e.g. adjust the content and activities for local promotions vs international transfers) and (ii) *leadership level* (e.g. using personal coaching for senior leaders vs group coaching for junior leaders).

- Assess if the tools are effective and if the benefits justify the costs.
- Identify the key human resources (e.g. bosses, HR personnel, peers) and information systems involved in transition support. Ensure the stakeholder and systems are aligned such that (i) all stakeholders are motivated to provide support and know how to do so effectively, and (ii) transition support is properly integrated with other talent management systems e.g. hiring and leadership development systems etc.



## Other Details in the Book to Look out For

For each of the 10 strategies summarized above, the book also includes (i) a short example to illustrate the associated transition challenges, (ii) a list of questions to help you apply the ideas to your transition, and (iii) various tools, assessments and checklists. For more details, please visit [www.genesisadvisers.com](http://www.genesisadvisers.com)

## About the Author



Dr. Michael D. Watkins is a Canadian author best known for his expertise on accelerating transitions. Dr. Watkins is co-founder and chairman of Genesis Advisers, an executive onboarding and transition acceleration company. He was a professor at The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the Harvard Business School, and INSEAD in France. He is also a Professor of Leadership and Organizational Change at International Institute for Management Development in Switzerland.



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## KEY QUOTES

*“Transition support is a team sport.”*