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Every employee is a star at the six month mark—either a rising star or a falling star. Which would you rather be?

Your First 90 Days

Setting the Tone for a Successful Career

By Phil Holberton

Learn how to:

- Connect with your boss
- Pick low hanging fruit
- Plant seeds to bear fruit later
- Build winning teams
- Establish your goals
- Be a helper or advisor
- Manage yourself

You've just accepted a job with a substantial organization. As a new manager/leader, you have your work cut out for you, but can't wait to get started. You're ready to take all you've learned and rush in, proving you're worthy of promotions and being hired in the first place.

Those are common feelings for anyone starting a new position. But please slow down and be strategic. Many careers have sidetracked during the first 90 to 180 days in a new job because the entry was too fast. When this happens, you risk being marked permanently as having limited potential, or worse yet, you may not make it to your one-year anniversary!

> "Careers have been sidetracked because entry was too fast."

Integrating into a new organization takes quite a bit of thought and savvy. Ignoring the potential difficulties can cause much distress. There are, however, seven steps you can take to smooth your transition.

This is true whether you are a CEO, COO, C-suite executive or a Manger. Don't let your title dictate your strategy.

1. Connect With Your Boss

In the exuberance of the recruiting cycle, promises made can turn out to be unfulfilled later. Let's face it, during the hiring dating game, many bosses (Boards) make promises or commitments they can't deliver (or live up to) upon once the hire is made.

So establish ground rules for working with your boss. Some bosses like daily updates, while others want to be briefed in writing. Sit down with your manager and talk through how you'll interact with one another. Get it right from the beginning. Don't wait until the relationship becomes strained. Invest the necessary time to get your new relationship off to a great start.

Failing to effectively communicate with your new boss can have disastrous consequences. For example, new employee Thomas was hired to become his boss' replacement after she announced plans to retire in 12 to 18 months. But when he came on board, Thomas behaved as if he already had the boss' title. He wasn't even courteous enough to check in with her on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, he didn't reconfirm his assumptions at the outset and was fired before his first year ended. This tragedy cost the company a substantial sum of money in hiring and replacement costs. It also cost Thomas his job and was a blow to his self-esteem.

This problem could have been avoided if he took the obvious and important action of aligning himself with his boss' thinking and fully understanding her needs. After all, bosses have bosses and are under pressure to deliver, as well. It's not always about us.

On the other hand each of us is interested in creating value where we work. We also need to branch out from our cozy office confines by partnering with other folks to improve the company's bottom-line performance. A spirit of collaboration will help carry you a long way.

> "Include other members of the organization into the design of your objectives."

2. Pick Low-Hanging Fruit First

Most human resource managers coach professionals coming into an organization to initiate two specific actions to manage the risk that accompanies their assimilation. First, "pick some low-hanging fruit" by making decisions or working on projects with a low risk of failure and enable the organization to feel good about the accomplishment. If a new manger accomplishes something early on that everyone feels good about, then she has accelerated her acceptance into the organization.

3. Plant Seeds to Bear Fruit Later

Second, "plant seeds" and lay a foundation for those actions or activities that require a longer timeline to bear fruit. Work with your boss and strategize with him or her about activities you can undertake to favorably impact the business in the long term.

Don't be afraid to think outside your comfortable confines. Think bigger than your functional area. As you plan these longer-term projects, consider the following:

Go at a measured pace. Organizations can absorb only so much change at one time. Pace the change and work with small pilot groups to ensure you're on track.

Educate your constituents, both within and outside your functional area. Communication is key – never take that for granted. Remember, you'll be venturing into uncharted waters, and it's important to bring people along. They want to be sure that whatever you engage them in, they'll be able to support the direction in which you're headed.

Include other members of the organization into the design of your objectives. Expand the concept of teamwork and spread it beyond your parochial interests. Reach out and include others to help you achieve your objectives. Demonstrate how you can add value to the entire organization by including others.

I learned the power of cross-functional teamwork as a practicing senior financial executive at a major Fortune 500 company. The Finance function I headed up was challenged to see how we could be supportive and also consult to other executives about running their divisional profit and loss statements (P&L).

It was a period of extraordinarily high inflation, and investments

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in working capital became a big issue. We worked with divisional presidents and their management teams on reducing their investment in inventories and accounts receivable – improving their working capital Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

In a sense, we calculated the cost of working capital and these interest charges became part of their P&L. Suddenly, the divisional presidents took a greater interest in reducing their working capital as the savings in imputed interest expense went directly to the bottom line and impacted their bonuses. This goes to show that when you demonstrate how your objectives will benefit the rest of the organization you will generate overall buy-in to what you're trying to accomplish."

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4. Build Winning Teams

Just like anything else in life, building successful teams is the key to completing complex assignments, especially when projects cross into other functional areas. One of the biggest impacts you can have on an organization is to improve the operating efficiency of the organization.

The next step is to articulate a team mission. Many times, because we're so excited to get on with the work, we fail to take the necessary, initial steps to ensure smooth team functioning. In your team's mission statement, include statements that cover the following:

What does the team do? What's the team's purpose? Getting this right will save a lot of aggravation later. Fail to do this correctly and risk the demise of your team.

Who will benefit from the team's work? Who's the customer? In forming your team, especially with individuals outside your functional area, recruit, appoint or assign individuals who are conceptually on board

with the teams intended purpose. This will go a long way to gathering organizational support for the project and its intended outcomes.

What are the operating principles of the team? How often does the team meet? Establishing the team's values early on will contribute enormously to its successful operation.

5. Establish Your Goals

Whether you're an individual contributor, member of a team or the leader, establishing goals will facilitate achieving your objectives. Many professionals dive right into their new jobs without the faintest idea where they're headed. Operating on emotion and without much thought, they wade into off-limits areas or inadvertently get ahead of themselves in terms of organizational acceptance.

Be S.M.A.R.T. about establishing your goals:

S is for specific. Be specific about what you want to accomplish, be realistic in what you promise and then over-perform. In our eagerness to make an impression, we may be tempted to promise more than we can deliver. Resist that temptation at all costs. If you under promise and over perform it will never hurt you.

M is for measurable. When listing your goals, make sure you can measure whether they've been achieved. After goal achievement, celebrate and set a new goal.

A is for attainable. Don't be a pie in the sky. Set goals that aren't too easy, but are realistic. Consistently achieving your goals will give you the self-confidence to achieve the ultimate goal: Your vision of where you are headed

R is for relevant. Whether individual or team-based, goals should be

consistent with overall company goals. Relevancy is always important.

T is for time. Be specific about the date by which you want to achieve your goal. Be relentless about achieving it and disciplined in your approach to managing your time.

6. Be a Helper or Advisor

When you join a new organization, take on the attitude of a helper or advisor. Whether you are at the highest or the lowest level within your department, you'll enjoy a productive career if you're ready and able to help others. Even if you are CEO (at the top of the pyramid), with the attitude of helping others – also know as servant leadership – you will enable the organization to achieve great results.

> "Individuals with balanced lives end up being more successful."

Helping others will assist you in gaining organizational support for your own endeavors. You'll be operating with the maximum level of interpersonal skill — the WD-40 of an organization that smoothes things out, prevents friction and ensures maximum effectiveness.

All businesses are starving for good leaders, but pushing yourself on the organization — as opposed to being invited in and accepted is a tricky endeavor. This is where you need to trust your gut. Be alert to whether you're making progress on being accepted, as opposed to coming across as the new "boss." Work on those 20% of the activities that will produce 80% of the value.

7. Manage Yourself

Often, when we get involved with a new project or activity, we're so focused on achieving great results that our life gets out of balance. We fail to take care of our physical well-being, ignore our family or lose touch with our spiritual dimension.

Leading psychologists conclude that individuals with balanced lives end up being more successful. Now, that doesn't mean successful individuals have all aspects of their lives neatly balanced 100% of the time.

When starting a new job, there's always a tendency to jump right in and devote as many hours you think it takes to make your mark. That's okay. But be sensitive to the need for balance, and don't let that phase go on forever. Step back and allow yourself to withdraw from the immense energy devoted to getting started.

Desh Deshpande, a noted Boston entrepreneur who's founded several companies, says, "In life we juggle several balls, work, family, friends and your own philosophy. These balls are crystal balls, except for the work ball, which is a rubber ball. If ever you get into crunch time and have to drop a ball, make sure to drop the work because the rubber ball bounces back. If ever you shatter the other balls, it is very difficult to get them back."

Hard-charging professionals need to allocate time, almost daily, to rebalance their personal ecosystems. We're not able to be present for ourselves, our colleagues, our teammates or the company if we're totally strung out.

In the end, we all want to create careers that are meaningful to ourselves personally and to others we're privileged to serve, whether they're inside the company or our external customers.

Recharge your batteries, early and often. You and your colleagues will be the better for it. And, with your batteries recharged, you'll find it easier to successfully navigate the challenges and rewards of your new job.

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