

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Building A Winning Team When You Come Onboard



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A Winning Team in the First 90 Days

The most important decisions you make in your first 90 days will probably be about the people on your team. If you succeed in creating a high-performance team, you can exert tremendous leverage in value creation. If not, you will face severe difficulties, for no leader can hope to achieve much alone.

– Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*, Harvard Business School Press, 2003.

Assessing a team—deciding who should stay and who should go—is one of the most critical tasks an executive faces when transitioning into a new position. It can create or destroy leverage—and leadership is ultimately about leverage.

Each year, about 25 percent of managers in typical *Fortune* 500 companies change jobs. Most spend an average of four years in a given position. High-potential leaders in mid-senior ranks move more frequently: every 2.5 to 3 years. These statistics demonstrate why leaders must build strong teams, composed of the right people in the right jobs, as quickly as possible.

The first weeks are crucial for learning and evaluating. Leaders must maintain the right balance of confidence and humility, while asking probing questions and actively listening. During this time, leaders are most vulnerable. Without a firm support network in place, they must learn everything they can about the organization, its strategies, customers and team members in the shortest possible timeframe.

Leaders must dedicate a large percentage of learning time to getting to know existing team members. If you are promoted to a new position from within the organization, you are likely acquainted with some of its key people. Transition from the outside, and you face the task of identifying and placing the right people into the right positions—a much greater challenge. Either way, you must choose wisely, without disrupting short-term performance.

How do you assess your existing team as quickly as possible? How do you reduce your learning curve and jumpstart your team's performance in the first 90 days? What are the most common mistakes leaders in a new position make?

How to Assess an Existing Team

When performing your evaluation, you'll find some excellent, some average and some unsatisfactory people in place. You will inherit a group with its own dynamics and habitual ways of working. You cannot afford to make one of the most common errors: gathering them in a room, telling them that you're in charge now, and that you'll be making some changes. Instead, you will need to sort out who's who, the functions people perform and how the group has worked in the past.

Go in and shake the tree, and you're guaranteed to lose some of the best leaves along with the rotting ones. Always evaluate thoroughly before acting. Hasty action compromises trust and credibility: you may inadvertently lose valuable team members.

If you are like most leaders, you will form an impression each time you meet someone. Hold onto those thoughts, but *don't* hold them as truths. Remember: They are merely first impressions. Allow them to register, don't suppress them, and then allow other factors to influence your ultimate appraisal.

You also must decide which criteria to use when evaluating your people. Michael Watkins, an associate professor of business administration at Harvard and author of *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*, suggests using the following:

- Competence - Does this person have the technical skills and experience to do the job well?
- Judgment - Does this person exercise good judgment under pressure or when faced with sacrifice for the greater good?
- Energy - Does this team member bring the right kind of energy to the job, or is he/she disengaged, burned out or unfulfilled?
- Focus - Does this person stick to priorities, or is he/she easily distracted and scattered?
- Relationships - Does this person get along well with other team members, supporting team decisions?
- Trust - Can you trust this person to be honest, consistent and reliable?

Probing Questions

Prepare to meet formally with each person by reviewing available personnel history, performance data and other appraisals. During your meeting, ask probing questions. Watkins suggests the following for a comprehensive evaluation:

1. What do you think of our existing strategy?
2. What are the biggest challenges we face in the short term? In the long term?
3. What are the biggest opportunities we face?
4. What resources could we leverage more effectively?
5. How could we improve the way the team works together?
6. If you were in my position, to what would you want to pay attention?

Be on the alert for nonverbal cues. While a person's actual words have merit, much is revealed by body language, as well as what a person omits and the way in which he communicates:

- What doesn't he say?
- Does he volunteer information or wait until he's asked?
- Does the person reveal areas of weakness or only strengths?
- Does the team member blame others or take responsibility for specific things?
- Does the person make excuses?
- How consistent is his body language with his words?
- Which topics evoke a lot of energy?
- What is this person like outside of meetings, when he interacts on an informal level with others?
- Does he tend to be cordial, polite, tense, competitive, judgmental or reserved?

Testing for Judgment

It can be difficult to assess an individual's ability to make decisions and judgments. This is quite different from evaluating technical skills and knowledge. You must observe the person's ability to make sound predictions and develop good strategies for avoiding problems.

One strategy for evaluating judgment involves asking questions about areas outside of work, such as sports, hobbies or other interests. Ask people to offer predictions for their favorite athletic teams and how they have reached their conclusions. Observe whether they easily commit to predicting an outcome or prefer to play it safe. Your goal is to gauge whether their rationale makes sense and how capable they are in exercising expert judgment. Individuals who have found passion outside of the work world are likely to do so in their chosen business field, as well.

Assessing the Team

After evaluating individual team members, you need to learn and understand how the existing team functions. This requires you to study data and reports from meetings, as well as any climate surveys. Take the time to determine whether team members share similar impressions of the situations they face. Major differences point to a lack of team coherence.

Group dynamics will become evident in first meetings. Observe how individuals interact in your presence and the roles people take. Who speaks easily? Who holds back? Are there alliances? Nonverbal cues inevitably surface each time someone speaks up in a meeting.

Restructuring a Team

Within a short period, you will be able to outline a plan for restructuring your team:

- Who will you keep in place?
- Who will you keep and develop?
- Who will you move to another position?
- Who will you observe for a while?
- Who will you replace (low priority)?
- Who will you replace (high priority)?

Alternatives to Termination

Even if poor performance is well documented, it can be difficult and time-consuming to let people go. Consider alternatives, such as moving them to other positions within the team that are better suited to their skills. Or, you may want to remove someone from the team and place him elsewhere in the organization. Do this, however, only if you are positive that he can perform well there. Shifting one problem employee to another department will damage your credibility and reputation.

To keep your team functioning while you build a better one, you may need to retain an underperformer while searching for his replacement.

Always treat people with dignity and respect, and allow them to find positions elsewhere when it becomes clear that their skills no longer suit the organization's needs. Do what you can to help them find a better fit. Remember: People form lasting impressions of you based on how well you manage this part of your job.

Common Mistakes

When it comes to building a winning team, many leaders in new positions stumble, partly because it is extremely difficult to let people go. Failure to act decisively and quickly prolongs the transition period and can derail your efforts. Here are some of the most common mistakes leaders make, from Watkins's book *The First 90 Days*:

Keeping the existing team too long. You should decide who will remain and who will go within your first 90 days. After six months, you should have communicated your planned personnel changes to key stakeholders, your boss and HR.

Not repairing the glitches. Develop options right away, even if you have to hire people in temporary positions. You can't let the engine stop running while you recharge the batteries. You may be able to find people at lower levels of the organization.

Not working organizational alignment and team-restructuring issues in parallel. It isn't enough to have the right team in place. Members must be aligned and clear about the organizational mission, goals and values.

Not holding onto the good people. You need to look for ways to signal to the top performers that you recognize their capabilities. Reassurance can do wonders.

Undertaking team-building before the core team is in place. Don't strengthen the bonds of a team whose members will not continue with you as a cohesive group. Wait until you have the right people in place.

Making implementation decisions too early. Wait until core members of your new team are in place before attempting to secure their buy-in for changes. You cannot afford to delay some issues, but it's difficult to get buy-in from people when they haven't been part of the decision-making process.

Trying to do it all yourself. The process of restructuring a team is full of legal, emotional and company policy complications. Don't undertake this on your own. You have HR people who can advise you and help you chart a strategy.

This is a Sage Leaders' Summary of the 2003 book written by Michael Watkins,
The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels
Boston, MA. Harvard Business School Press

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(Setting A Great Example)

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