The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan

How to Take Charge, Build Your Team and Get Immediate Results (Second Edition)

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Moving into a new leadership position is one of the toughest challenges an executive can face. Nearly half of new leaders fail in their first 18 months. Often, that failure is the result of crucial mistakes made in the first 100 days.

Whether you’re a veteran leader taking over a new organization or a novice moving into your first leadership role, this practical guide will help you manage your leadership transition so you can take charge, build your team and deliver results. Executive transition experts George Bradt, Jayme Check and Jorge Pedraza present proven solutions and cutting-edge techniques for getting started successfully in your new role.

The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan presents comprehensive, easy-to-follow career guidance that will help you master your new job — and the art of leadership — with proven tools, techniques and a step-by-step action plan.

Filled with timely guidance that applies directly to leaders in today’s global business environment, The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan is the ultimate guide for getting ahead — and staying there.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

• How to turn key stakeholders and direct reports into your allies.
• How to build your new team with early wins.
• How to fit into a new corporate culture — and shape its evolution.
• How to create, communicate and implement a new strategic direction.
• How to avoid common mistakes and pitfalls.
• How to build loyalty, trust and commitment with new colleagues.
INTRODUCTION

Forty percent of leaders going into new roles fail in their first 18 months. Why can’t they deliver? In most cases, they dig their own holes by missing one of the important tasks that must be accomplished in their first 100 days. Some don’t understand the impact of their early words and actions and inadvertently send their new colleagues the wrong messages. Some focus on finding a new strategy, but fail to get buy-in and build trust with their new team. Some do a lot of work and expend a lot of energy without accomplishing the one or two things that their most important stakeholders are looking for. All are unaware of some of the important steps required to achieve a successful transition. No leader wants this to happen; but it does, at an alarming rate.

Remember: Leadership is about inspiring and enabling others to do their absolute best together, to realize a meaningful and rewarding shared purpose. It’s not about you. It’s about them — those following your lead. How you set the direction and priorities, and what you do to inspire and enable them is important. But what is most important is what they see, hear, feel, believe and accomplish together as a team. Leadership is about your ability to create an environment where your team can deliver remarkable results and love doing it.

Create Your New Leadership Role

There are two dimensions to activating your leadership potential. The first is understanding and declaring your own leadership qualities and capacities. The second is interacting effectively with others in such a way that it becomes part of an organization’s or a market’s perception of you. Know yourself, and then help others know you. There are concrete steps you can take to position yourself for leadership roles and promotions.

Begin with the first dimension — know and declare yourself a leader. The “declaring” part is important since this is what best enables you to commit to your career path. Start by declaring this to yourself. Commit yourself. Your commitments become more real, however, when you share them with others.

Next, build a career plan. Great leaders are not made in a day. Leadership is built.

The Five-Step Career Plan

Here are the main steps:

1. Likes and dislikes: Go through your past activities and jobs and lay out everything you liked and didn’t like. Dig underneath to pull out the values that underlie some of your likes and dislikes.

2. Ideal job criteria: With these values in mind, lay out your ideal job criteria. Make sure the criteria line up with your strengths, values and interests.

3. Long-term goals: Next, consider your long-term goals. What do you want to achieve?

4. Options: The mindset that generates a sense of possibilities and options is the mindset that creates opportunities and fosters success. Create parallel options for yourself.

5. Choice: Compare your options by weighting your
criteria and evaluating each option’s results.

Once you’ve made your choice, write it down and go to sleep. If you wake up in the morning feeling good, then you’ve probably made a good decision. If you wake up with your gut indicating that you have made a mistake, you misled yourself. Most likely, you erred in weighting your ideal job criteria.

Communicating Leadership

Now, the second part: “Help others know you.” Once you’ve gotten a good handle on your strengths and goals, you are ready to think through positioning in a proactive and methodical way.

Start by understanding your existing strengths and talents that you can turn into strengths appropriate to meet your long-term goals. Then communicate your readiness for leadership by leading something, whether it’s a major project or the team outing.

Sell Before You Buy: Answer the Only Three Interview Questions

Remember three things during the interview process:

**Thing 1: You cannot turn down a job offer that you have not received.**

Before you accept a job, you must first get an offer. Then, and only then, you can decide if you should accept it. Do not do these steps out of order. Your initial focus should be solely on getting the job offer.

Everything you do in the interview process should be designed to get the company to offer you the job. This includes not only your answers to their questions, but also your questions to them.

At this stage in the process, your questions are not about helping you decide if you want the job. They are about helping them decide to offer it to you. Secure the offer first. After you’ve got the offer, figure out if it’s right for you.

**Thing 2: There are only three fundamental interview questions — ever.**

There are only three interview questions. Every question you’ve ever been asked, and every question you’ve ever asked in an interview is a subset of one of these three fundamental questions:

1. Can you do the job?
2. Will you love the job?
3. Can I tolerate working with you?

The questions may be asked in different words, but every question, however worded, is just a variation on one of these. As each question comes, it is your job to determine which of the three is really being asked.

**Thing 3: There are only three fundamental interview answers — ever.**

Since there are only three fundamental interview questions, there are only three fundamental interview answers. Every answer you give in an interview should be a subset of these three answers:

1. My strengths are a match for this job.
2. My motivations are a match for this job.
3. I am a good fit with this organization.

Your answers to questions will be more elaborate, but your answers should always be dressed-up versions of one of the three.

Since there are only three interview questions and three interview answers, all you have to do is prepare three answers in advance and recognize what question you are being asked. Then you are ready to ace any interview.

Map and Avoid the Most Common Land Mines

You cannot reduce the risks inherent in a new role until you identify them, understand their danger and either dance around them or purposefully deactivate them. Here are the seven most dangerous land mines:

1. **Organization.** Organizational land mines are encountered when an executive accepts a new role in an organization that lacks a clear, concise, differentiating and winning strategy. The best way to avoid this land mine is by making a powerful and fully informed choice, early on.

2. **Role.** Role land mines are encountered when expectations, resources or key stakeholders are not aligned. It is critical for new leaders to know exactly what their boss expects them to deliver and what resources can be controlled and influenced in order to deliver those expectations.

3. **Personal.** Personal land mines are the ones that the executive brings to the new job. They are activated when significant gaps exist in an executive’s strengths, motivation or fit for the job.

4. **Relationship.** Relationship land mines are most likely to occur when an executive fails to identify, establish or maintain key relationships up, across or down the organization. Relationship risks are particularly severe for people who are brought in as change agents.
5. Learning. Executives trigger learning land mines when they fail to grasp key information in any of the so-called 5Cs: customers, collaborators, capabilities, competitors or conditions. Executives often miss the importance of certain Cs or diminish the importance of one or more of them.

6. Delivery. Executives stumble on this land mine when they fail to build a high-performing team or deliver results fast enough. Delivery comes in all forms, but it is only valuable if it is what was ordered.

7. Adjustment. Executives can do everything correctly to this point, but if they do not see or react to the inevitable situational changes, new land mines will certainly be created.

Do Your Due Diligence on the Organization, Role and Fit

Before you accept a job, figure out organizational, role and personal risks during due diligence.

At the core, due diligence is an exercise in collecting and analyzing information to reduce the risk inherent in a decision. Here are three steps:

1. Decide what information to collect. Before accepting a job, you must gather information in the following areas to answer three fundamental questions around organization, role and personal risks:
   - Organizational Risk: What is the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage?
   - Role Risk: Did anyone have concerns about this role; and, if so, what was done to mitigate them?
   - Personal Risk: What, specifically, about me, led to you offering me the job?

2. Identify potential sources of information. You’ll need scouts, seconds and spies to help you. Scouts are people outside the company who can give you a view of what’s going on inside the company. Seconds are people who want to help you succeed. Spies are people on the inside who can give you special insight into what’s going on.

3. Gather and analyze the information. Trust is the grease that lets communication work and, conversely, communication is what builds and sustains trust.

   A genuine concern about the organization’s ability to succeed will start opening the doors of communication. That, coupled with a sensitivity and concern for the person you are seeking information from, will further open those doors.

Categorize Risk

Now what do you do? Categorize the risk as low, manageable, mission-crippling or insurmountable and then take appropriate action.

- **Low Level of Risk.** If the organization has a sustainable competitive advantage for now, and if key people are aligned around a common, clear definition of the role you’re going to take, and if you would hire yourself for that role in this organization at this time, you should be in good shape at the start.

- **Manageable Level of Risk.** If the organization knows how to create sustainable competitive advantage, but they haven’t locked it in yet; if the role is clear, but not everyone is aligned; or if you don’t exactly have the strength they thought you did, but you know how to compensate for that gap, go ahead and accept the job and manage these risks as you go.

- **Mission-Crippling Risk.** This is where you’ve uncovered something that is going to keep you from being successful unless you can change it. Before you accept this role, you should be certain that you have the authority and can implement the necessary changes to resolve or mitigate this risk. If not, you should walk away.

- **Insurmountable Barrier.** An insurmountable barrier is a mission-crippling risk that cannot (or will not) be resolved. If it feels insurmountable, it is. Listen to your intuition.

Act Differently When You Are Promoted From Within

The fundamental difference between moving to a new company and getting promoted from within is that you are already on track. Unlike when you join an organization for the first time and have to create a new positioning for yourself, when you’re promoted from within, people already know you or know people who know you. Thus, to a large degree, this is an exercise in repositioning yourself within the organization.

When you have been promoted from within, keep the following rules in mind:

- **You cannot control the context.** While you may not be able to influence the circumstances surrounding an open role, you can often influence planned promotions in advance.

- **It is hard to make a clean break.** More often than not, you will still be accountable for your old job even after you start your new job. If you falter with the transition of your old job, the results can impinge on your success in your new role.
**There is no honeymoon.** As an insider, you’re expected to be fully up to speed the moment you start your new job.

Here are actions for those promoted from within:

1. *Prepare in advance.* Work to understand the context and complexity of the new situation.

2. *Take control of your own transition.* Be proactive and control the message and communication cascade — the timing of who hears what and in what order. Clarify what has changed and what has not changed.

3. *Accelerate team progress after the start.* This is where your knowledge of the organization can really help.

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**Take Control of Your Own Start**

Many leaders fall into the trap of thinking that leadership begins on Day One of a new job. *Like it or not, a new leader’s role begins as soon as that person is an acknowledged candidate for the job.* Everything new leaders do and say and don’t do and don’t say will send powerful signals, starting well before they even walk in the door on Day One.

If you embrace this concept and do something about it, you increase your chances of success.

This bonus time between acceptance and start can be referred to as the fuzzy front end. It often comes at the worst possible time, interfering with the last days of an old job or with time earmarked for taking a vacation, catching up with household errands or generally unwinding a little before the big day.

The good news is that, more often than not, key elements of the fuzzy front end can be addressed in relatively short order. Even so, strive to stretch out the time between acceptance and your start date. Adding days before your official start is one of the best ways to get more done during your first 100 days.

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**Choose the Right Day to Be Day One**

You can create time in a few ways; but the best way to stretch the fuzzy front end is by taking these action steps:

- Identify key stakeholders.
- Craft your message.
- Manage your office setup.
- Manage your personal/family setup.
- Conduct pre-start meetings and phone calls.
- Deploy an information-gathering and learning plan.
- Plan your first 100 days.

The pre-start meetings and phone calls are a great chance to jumpstart relationships by getting into learning, expectations and implementation.

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**Decide How to Engage the New Culture**

You have important choices to make before Day One.

One choice that you must make in advance is how best to engage with the existing culture. Cultural engagement is extremely important in a successful transition, and it is essential that executives know what their cultural engagement plan will be before walking in the door for Day One.

The executive transition experts at PrimeGenesis have developed an ACES model, which lays out three cultural engagement choices: assimilate, converge and evolve, and shock. After the decision to take the job in the first place, this may be the most important decision you make in your first 100 days.

1. *Assimilate.* Assimilating is the safest way to engage the culture. If they wear white shirts, you wear a white shirt.

2. *Converge and Evolve.* This is a relatively safe middle way that will allow you to move things in the right direction over time. Here you converge with the existing culture first, and then help it evolve over time as appropriate. Most of the time this is going to be the preferred approach.

3. *Shock.* Shock is the opposite of Assimilate. Trying to immediately jumpstart the culture to your way is the most threatening and risky move you can make. There will be active resistance and pushback. Shock is something you only want to use when you must.

You must pick the right approach if you are to have any hope of a successful transition.

Culture can be referred to as “the way we do things here.” Culture is the combination of what people do and say with their underlying core values. A good shorthand is “Be. Do. Say.” It works for people and for organizations:

- **Be:** The underpinning of culture (and integrity) is what people really are, their core assumptions, beliefs and intentions.
- **Do:** These are behavioral, attitudinal and communication norms that can be seen, felt or heard such as signs and symbols like physical layouts, the way people dress, talk to each other and interact with each other.
- **Say:** What people say about their culture can be found in things like mission statements, creeds and stories.
For a culture to be sustainable, these three must be in sync. Just as your own values, actions and words need to line up, the same is true for an organization’s.

**Drive Action with an Ongoing Communication Campaign**

Everything great leaders say and do flows directly from their own core values, beliefs and intentions. They live their message. This is why your 100-Day Action Plan should be a subset of your overall communication plan and why you need to think through what’s really important to you, to the people you’re communicating with, and what and how you want to communicate, before you say or do anything.

**Six Steps of a Communication Campaign**

The six basic steps of a communication campaign are:

1. **Plan** the campaign and key elements: message, signs and symbols, media and touch points. Great communication campaigns pivot off a central message. Think “We’re going to be No. 1 or No. 2 or we’re going to get out,” which was used for one of Jack Welch’s early drives at General Electric. Your message is the key that unlocks personal connections.

2. **Seed** the message before you start, on Day One and throughout your early days. You generally do not want to start with a big launch that catches everyone by surprise. Instead, you’ll want to seed your message with an ever-growing set of stakeholders before your launch.

3. **Launch**, leveraging work on the Burning Imperative as appropriate. Launches can be big, subtle or somewhere in between, and the style of the launch should match what is comfortable for you and your team. It also needs to be in keeping with the culture of the organization, unless you are trying to shock the existing culture.

4. **Roll out**, leveraging milestones and celebrating early wins. Launching is a major step. Now you have to make it real by proving that you are going to deliver those achievable next steps. This is where you will likely want to deploy some sort of public scorecard where everyone can see results against key milestones.

5. **Reinforce** when doubters inevitably raise their heads by implementing your role sort. There will be a crisis of confidence at some point. Make it clear that you are committed to the changes. This is a good time to shine the spotlight publicly on some people who are still in the way, perhaps implementing your role sort to move some people out.

6. **Institutionalize** by embedding key routines and processes. You’ll want to put in place practices that will ensure the changes you have made so far become part of the fabric of how you do business.

**Planning Day One**

When planning your Day One, there are some general guidelines and principles to consider:

- **It is personal.** As a leader, you impact peoples’ lives. Those people will try very hard to figure out you and your potential impact as soon as they can.

- **Order counts.** Be circumspect about the order in which you meet with people and the timing of when you do what throughout Day One and your early days.

- **Messages matter.** Have a message. Know what you are going to say and not say.

- **Location counts.** Think about where you will show up for work on Day One.

- **Signs and symbols count.** Be aware of all the ways in which you communicate, well beyond just words.

- **Timing counts.** Decide which day you want to communicate as Day One to facilitate other choices about order and location.

**Take Control of Day One: Make a Powerful First Impression**

According to researcher Elizabeth Hilton, our brains remember information “presented first and last, and have an inclination to forget the middle items.” People will vividly remember their first impressions of and their last interaction with you. While you can update their last interaction constantly, you are going to be stuck with those first impressions.

So, be careful about the messages you send with your words, with your actions, with the order of your actions, and with the signs and symbols you deploy. This is why Day One is the pivot point for onboarding. Many people who are important to your new role will form their first, indelible impression of you on this day.

There is no one right way to do this, but there are many wrong ways to do this. It is all about the first impression received. Different people will have different impressions of the same thing depending on their perspective and filters. The problem is that prior to your first interactions with them, you can’t understand their perspective and filters. So not only is there no one right answer, it will be difficult to figure out the best answer...
for your particular situation. This is another reason it is so valuable to get a jumpstart on relationships and learning during the fuzzy front end. Not only does that let you manage your initial impressions on those people outside the noise of Day One, it will help you make better choices about your Day One.

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**Embed a Strong Burning Imperative by Day 30**

On top of everything else you have to do, and all the other demands on your schedule, make the time to implement the building blocks of tactical capacity. The starting point, and indeed the foundation, is the Burning Imperative with its components of headline, mission, vision, objectives, goals, strategies and values. Experienced, successful leaders inevitably say that getting people aligned around a vision and values is the most important thing they have to do.

The Burning Imperative is a clear, sharply defined, intensely shared and purposefully urgent understanding from each of the team members of what they are “supposed to do, now” and how this imperative works with the larger aspirations of the team and the organization.

The Burning Imperative must have a shorthand summary or headline most likely containing a strong, action-oriented verb. This is a brief statement, or tagline, that reminds each team member of the entire range of work from mission through strategy and the statements behind each step and, specifically, of their commitments and responsibilities in relation to that work.

For the Burning Imperative to drive everything everyone actually does every day, it must be truly embraced by all. Thus you should strive to get it in place and shared early on, within your first 30 days at the latest.

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**Exploit Key Milestones to Drive Team Performance by Day 45**

Milestones are the building blocks of tactical capacity that turn a Burning Imperative into a manageable action plan. The power of milestones is that they let you know how you’re doing along the way and give you the opportunity to make adjustments. They also give you the comfort to let your team run toward the goal without your involvement, as long as the milestones are being reached as planned.

Deploying a mutually supportive team-based follow-up system helps everyone improve performance versus goals. Follow these three steps as well as the prep and post instructions:

**Prep:** Circulate individual milestone updates to the team to read before each meeting so you can take update sharing and reporting off the agenda, while still deploying a disciplined process to make sure information flows where it needs to go.

1. Use the first half of each meeting for each team member to headline wins, learning areas and areas in which the person needs help from other team members, but do not work through items at this point.
2. Pause at the halfway point of the meeting to prioritize items to discuss so the team can discuss items in the right priority order instead of first-come, first-serve. These will be the most important items for this team to work as a team at this time.
3. Use the second half of the meeting to discuss the overall team’s most important issues and opportunities with regard to milestone delivery in priority order.

**Post:** Defer other items to the next meeting or a separate meeting.

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**Over-Invest in Early Wins to Build Team Confidence by Day 60**

Early wins give the leader credibility and provide the team confidence and momentum — three very good things.

Here is a relatively simple prescription for early wins:

1. **Select one or two early wins from your milestone list.** Choose early wins that will make a meaningful external impact. Select early wins that your boss will want to talk about. Pick early wins that you are sure you can deliver.
2. **Establish early wins in your second month and deliver by your sixth month.** Early means early. Make sure you select early wins in your first 60 days that you and the team can deliver by the end of your sixth month. Select them early. Communicate them early. Deliver them early.
3. **Over-invest resources toward early wins to over-deliver.** Do not skimp on your early wins. Allocate resources in a manner that will ensure timely delivery. Put more resources than you think you should need against these early opportunities so your team is certain to deliver them better and faster than anyone thought was possible. Stay alert. Adjust quickly.
4. **Celebrate and communicate early wins.** As your first early wins are achieved, celebrate the accomplishments with the entire team. In conjunction with your communication campaign, make sure your early
wins are communicated as appropriate.

In general, “early wins” are not synonymous with “big wins.” They are the sometimes small, yet meaningful wins that start the momentum of a winning team.

Secure ADEPT People in the Right Roles with the Right Support by Day 70

Of all the tools in your toolbox, putting people in the right roles is one of the most powerful.

When it comes to sorting people and roles on your team, you need to work with a short-term and a long-term framework. Initially, you must look at your team to determine what, if any, short-term moves should be made. Then, in the longer term, you must continue to monitor your team. The executive transition experts at PrimeGenesis use a process called ADEPT to develop the team over time.

Here is the context for this and ideas you can apply over time:

**Acquire:** This involves scoping roles, identifying prospects, recruiting and selecting the right people for the right roles, attracting those people and onboarding them so they can deliver better results faster.

**Develop:** Development includes assessing performance drivers, and developing skills and knowledge for current and future roles.

**Encourage:** Encouragement involves providing clear direction, objectives, measures, etc., and supporting your team with the resources and time required for success. It also includes reinforcing desired behaviors with recognition and rewards.

**Plan:** Monitor people’s performance over time and assess their situation and potential.

**Transition:** Migrate people to different roles to fit their needs/life stage, and the company’s needs.

Evolve People, Plans and Practices to Capitalize on Changing Circumstances

The 100-day mark is a good moment to start thinking about how you are going to evolve your people, plans and practices over time to capitalize on changing circumstances. It’s useful to set up a predictable rhythm. This allows people to spend less time worrying about the process and more time figuring out how to react and capitalize on the inevitable changes around them.

Following are elements to consider on a regular basis:

- **People.** *Succession planning* involves aligning the longer-term organizational development plans with the longer-term (three-plus years) strategic plan. Do this on an annual basis.

  - **Performance management and talent review** (one-year horizon, run annually) include tracking progress of the longer-term succession plan and the corresponding talent needs. Do this on an annual basis.

  - **Plans.** Your *strategic review* involves conducting a detailed long-term look at the business (three-year horizon), which leads to choices around how to create and allocate resources over that longer-term horizon. Do this on an annual basis.

  - **Your operational review** ensures that the right operational plans (one-year horizon) are in place that will enable you to deliver the next year’s goals. Do this on an annual basis.

  - **Practices.** *Business reviews and plan updates* include tracking progress in the context of the operational plan (one-year horizon) and making midcourse adjustments along the way. Do this quarterly.

  - **Milestone updates and adjustment** require you to track the monthly milestones to keep the team focused on the most important things — as a team. Do this monthly.

  Thinking about these things with these horizons allows you to have a good balance between long-term thinking and short-term execution.

  Major changes that are enduring require a fundamental restart. These can be material changes in things like customer needs, competitors’ strategies, or the economic, political or social environment in which you operate. They can be internal changes such as reorganizations or acquisitions. Whatever the change, hit a restart button. Go back to the beginning, do a full situation analysis, identify the key stakeholders, look at your message again, restart your communication campaign, and get your people, plans and practices realigned around the new purpose. Remember, the fittest adapt best.

Recommended Reading List

If you liked *The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan*, you’ll also like:

1. **Common Purpose** by Joel Kurtzman. When a leader is able to bring about common purpose, the results are outsized, measurable and inspiring. Kurtzman offers strategic advice to implement the practice.

2. **How the Best Leaders Lead** by Brian Tracy. This celebrated author returns with essential knowledge that even experienced leaders need in order to improve performance.

3. **The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader** by John Maxwell. Maxwell provides a concise, accessible leadership book that helps readers become more effective leaders from the inside out.