# On your marks!



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*Jill Storey* examines the importance of the first 90 days in a new role and how to plan them

## Key Points

## What is the issue?

Professionals can expect to hold 15-20 roles in their careers, so ‘transitioning’ is becoming the new must-have leadership and success skill

## What does it mean to me?

Moving on from your previous role can be emotionally draining. Ensure you are well rested, fit to start with your energy levels and reserves topped up.

## What can I take away?

Today’s leaders must be self-aware and resilient. Know your stress limits and be prepared to walk away when you are getting close to them.

The first 90 days of a new role can determine your success or failure and have implications for the rest of your career. Initial impressions are crucial since perceptions are formed quickly and, although they may be based on limited information, once formed they typically stick.

How many people are fully prepared and treat this three-month period of their lives with the planning and respect it deserves?

If you consider that 40% of executive transitions fail in the first 18 months would you approach your transition differently?

In 2012 Future Workplace’s Multiple Generation @ Work survey revealed that most millennials could expect to hold 15-20 roles during their careers. This fluidity pointed to ‘transitioning’ becoming the new must-have leadership and success skill.

## Before you start

It is easy to jump into your new role under pressure to start and keen to please your new boss. However, once you appreciate the importance of the first 90 days and the energy and commitment required, you will see the value of taking a mental break to let go of your old role and allow time to think about and prepare for the new one.

Moving on from your old role can be emotionally draining. Your energy levels may be depleted at a time when you need additional reserves to cope with the new information you must absorb from the different environment, your responsibilities, the expectations of the boss, and the spotlight your colleagues may put you under.

The sports-minded may like to think of themselves as corporate athletes training for their big event. Rest, fitness and topped-up energy levels, with some in reserve, are essential.

You may spend time reflecting on your old role and any feedback you received and consider what you are going to resolve to do differently in future.

One tip picked up from Maynard Webb, Yahoo chairman and former eBay CEO, is to start working before day one. He says: ‘You’ve just gone through this big dating

process and you’re selected as “the one”. You won’t see them again until your wedding day. That doesn’t make any sense.’ Think of ways to keep connected and keep the conversation going.

Image

| WHERE SHOULD I SPEND MY TIME ? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Current % | Focus area | Desired % |
| 20 | Market maker | 50 |
| 10 | People leader | 25 |
| 30 | Knowledge specialist | 15 |
| 40 | Operational manager | 10 |

## Picture the ‘end game’

This is the fun and creative part before the new role and the inevitable politics. To meet your desired outcomes create a vision and have a plan of where you are going. You need to think here about the ‘big picture’ and your legacy aspiration. What do you want to be recognised for in two years? As part of this you will want to be mindful of the hopes and priorities of key stakeholders. This is not to say you will not tack your own course but you will be mindful and conscious of their expectations.

Once you know where you are headed you can start to determine how you can have the biggest impact over the next 90 days and identify what is going to make you successful.

If, for example, your new role is as the head of tax or as a partner in an accounting or legal firm, picture what a successful person would look like in that position and ask yourself:

- What are the key ingredients for success as a head of tax or partner?
- What are the key challenges in my new role?
- How do I play a greater strategic role?
- How do I develop a clear story for the market?
- How do I develop talent of the future?
- How do I improve my stakeholder management?

Let’s say you become a new partner and decide that, in response to the first question, the four key ingredients to success are being a market maker, a people leader, a knowledge specialist and an operational manager. It may be interesting in this case to estimate how you spend your time in each of the areas and ideally how you think it should be spent (see panel).

This is a useful exercise to apply to any role and track how you can make a change over time.

## The first 30 days – the observation and listening phase

In the first 30-day phase you should be doing more of the listening and less of the talking. Listen to everyone you meet and learn as much as you can – in particular about the organisation if it is a new one but also the competition and the industry as a whole.

Try to understand the DNA and the culture. Accelerate your learning of the systems, products and technologies. Be systematic and focused about this – create a plan covering what you need to learn and how you will do it.

In this first phase ask your new colleagues for lunch or coffee, build relationships early and pick colleagues’ brains. Start to assess the talent in your team and how to develop them.

Consider who your stakeholders are and how they will influence the landscape and support key priorities. Think about people’s styles and how best to relate to them.

Importantly, put the customer at the centre of everything you do and build their engagement.

In your own mind identify key priorities and assess their importance and their urgency. In your mind put these in order – and ask whether, if you could do only one, which would it be?

## 30 to 60 days – the clarification phase

It is now time to go back to your boss to clarify your assessment of the situation and your mutual expectations. By now you should be starting to gain an awareness of how your boss likes to work and their own goals and aspirations.

During the clarification phase gain agreement and support for your strategy and negotiate timelines and the resources required for your action plan. You will be identifying opportunities to create value and improve corporate performance. By this stage you are starting to move from the listening phase to contributing to the conversation.

As part of the clarification phase, assess your team’s strengths and weakness and the skills you require for your future vision. You will need the courage to make personal calls concerning people. Consider who gives you energy and displays high potential and the impact they have on others.

In this phase consider the barriers or risks to prevent you succeeding and how you can mitigate these. Think about building key messages and your own personal brand. Link back to your legacy – what do you want to be known for?

## 60-90 days – the action and implementation phase

Once you have selected your team and the roles they will play in your action plan it will be necessary to obtain their buy-in. Engage them in thinking through some of the issues to be managed or dealt with to help the smooth implementation of your plan. Ask yourself what would be the fallout from the change and how it would be handled.

Securing early wins should be the focus to build your credibility and create momentum. Your visible success will help you develop followers. Building a broader

coalition of supporters across the business is beneficial because your longer-term success will depend on your ability to influence people outside your line of control.

As you achieve early wins highlight your achievements to your stakeholders but do this in a way that puts your boss in a good light and helps accelerate everyone in your team.

Towards the end of the 90-day period ask for feedback from your boss, your peers and your team. Take time for some structured reflection to assimilate what you have learned over the period and how you will use this to plan the next 90 days. Look again at your end game and evaluate whether your legacy vision needs tweaking.

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| KEY THEMES OF YOUR 90 DAY PLAN | | |
|---|---|---|
| 30 days | 60 days | 90 days |
| Observation and listening phase | Clarification phase | Action and implementation phase |
| Listen more than you talk | Share observations with your boss | Secure some early wins |
| Learn as much as you can | Evaluate and decide on your team | Communicate, communicate, communicate |
| Spend time with people | Clarify mutual expectations with your boss | Accelerate your team and create coalitions |

## Lessons – what to avoid

There are five common mistakes to try to avoid in the initial period:

1. Trying to be the ‘golden child’
2. Trying to fix everything immediately – you can’t change the world overnight; even the obvious takes time
3. Focusing too much on the technical skills of the job at the expense of people and the organisation’s politics
4. Assuming what made you successful in the past will continue to do so in the future

5. Sticking to what you know and working extremely hard at that while failing to adapt to your new environment

## Remember your wellbeing

People often forget that the factors that cause chronic illness later in life relate to earlier years.

The start of your new role will be a stressful period but it is not the time to put self-care on hold. The self-care you apply now will pay off and it is important that you embed it from the start in your routines and way of working.

The leaders of today must be self-aware and resilient, know their stress limits and walk away when they get close to them.

Knowing the basics is essential. Keep your body moving and active, get enough sleep and eat well. Set aside some non-negotiable downtime each day. Monitor how you feel and attend to signs of discomfort.

And, lastly, be brave and be bold!