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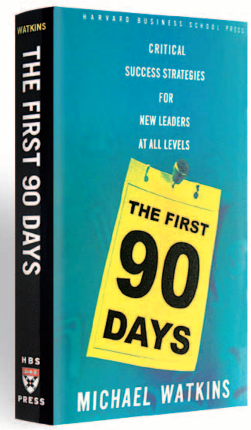

By Michael Watkins

Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders At All Levels

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In The First 90 Days, *Harvard Business School professor Michael Watkins presents a road map for taking charge in your first 90 days in a management job. The first days in a new position are critical because small differences in your actions can have a huge impact on long-term results.*

Leaders at all levels are very vulnerable in their first few months in a new job because they lack in-depth knowledge of the challenges they'll face and what it will take to succeed with their new company. Failure to create momentum in the first 90 days virtually guarantees an uphill battle for the rest of an executive's tenure.

The First 90 Days *will equip you with strategies and tools to get up to speed faster and achieve more sooner. This summary will show you how to diagnose your situation and understand its challenges and opportunities. You'll also learn how to assess your own strengths and weaknesses, how to quickly establish priorities, and how to manage key relationships that will help you succeed.*

CONTENTS

What You'll Learn In This Summary

✓ **How to promote yourself.** Successful executives put the past behind them and get a running start by learning all they can about their new job.

✓ **How to learn your new role faster.** A leader must customize his or her approach by quickly learning about the organization's culture and politics.

✓ **How to choose the right strategy.** Selecting the best strategy for your company requires carefully diagnosing the business situation. Only after you've analyzed the situation can you choose the right strategic plan that will get results.

✓ **How to make good things happen right away.** You want your boss, peers and subordinates to feel that something new and good is happening. Early "wins" excite and energize people and build your credibility.

✓ **How to build a winning team.** Without a great team, you'll face severe difficulties because no leader can achieve ambitious goals on his or her own.

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Promote Yourself

"Promoting yourself" doesn't mean self-serving behavior, grandstanding or hiring a PR firm to tell the world about you. It means mentally preparing yourself to move into your new role by putting the past behind you and getting a running start by working hard to learn all you can about your new position.

This takes a lot of effort, but it's essential that you do it. Many promising managers get promoted but don't do enough to change their perspective and successfully promote themselves.

A similar mistake is to believe that you'll succeed in your new job by doing the same things you did in your previous job, only at a higher level of authority. "They put me in this new job because of my skills and accomplishments," the reasoning goes, "so that must be what they expect me to do here." Doing what you know and avoiding what you don't know can seem to work, but there's a chance you'll keep on believing this until the walls come crashing down around you.

Establish a Clear Breakpoint

The move from one position to another usually happens so quickly it's all a blur. A worker rarely gets much notice before being thrust into a new job. The lucky new leader sometimes gets a couple of weeks to make the change, but more often the move happens in only a few days.

Because you might not get a smooth transition from one set of job responsibilities to another, it's essential to discipline yourself to make a smooth transition mentally. Pick a specific time, maybe a weekend, and use it to picture yourself being promoted. Consciously create mental images of letting go of the old job and embracing the new one. Think hard about the differences between the two positions and how you'll have to think and act differently in the new job. Take time to celebrate the move, even informally with family and friends. Touch base with your advisers to ask for some quick advice. The bottom line: *Do whatever it takes to get into a transition state of mind.*

Hit the Ground Running

Your transition begins the moment you learn you're being considered for a new position, and it ends about 90 days after you begin the job. At the 90-day mark, key people in the organization — your bosses, peers and direct reports — expect you to be making an impact.

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A New Job Requires A New Approach

Douglas Ivester was promoted to CEO at Coca-Cola in 1997 after working as Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer at the company. In 1999, after a series of blunders that eroded the confidence of Coke's Board of Directors, Ivester resigned.

To outside observers, Ivester appeared to be the perfect candidate for the job. An accountant by training, Ivester was unable to make the leap from COO to CEO because his extraordinary attention to detail, which had been a virtue in his previous jobs in finance and operations, proved to be a hindrance in his new position. Ivester could not free himself from day-to-day operations enough to take on the strategic, visionary roles of an effective CEO.

The cause of Ivester's failure wasn't what he couldn't do, but what he couldn't let go of. An impressive career came to a deeply disappointing conclusion because he persisted in focusing on what he felt most competent doing instead of focusing on what the CEO position required.

The author: Michael Watkins is an associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. He is the author of *Breakthrough Business Negotiation: A Toolbox for Managers*, the coauthor of *Right From the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role*, and the author of *Leadership Transitions*.

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Promote Yourself

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The three-month time frame isn't written in stone — the time depends on the type of situation you're in. But for planning purposes, you should use the 90-day mark as an important milestone. It will help you realize that you've got to get things done in that short time frame. If you're fortunate, you may get a month or more between the time you learn you're being considered and your first day on the new job. Use that time to educate yourself about your organization.

Assess Your Vulnerabilities

You've been offered your new position because the people who hired you think you've got what it takes to succeed. You probably do. But it can be disastrous to rely too much on the skills and knowledge that made you successful in the past.

One way to focus on your vulnerabilities is to evaluate your *problem preferences* — the types of problems that you prefer to work on. Everyone likes doing some things more than others, but doing so is like exercising your right arm and ignoring your left — the strong arm gets stronger and the weak one atrophies. Creating this type of imbalance leaves you vulnerable in situations that call on you to be "ambidextrous."

You can do a lot to overcome your vulnerabilities, including developing *self-discipline, team building* and getting *advice and counsel.* You'll have to force yourself to devote time to important activities that you don't enjoy and that might not come naturally. In addition, you must find people in your organization who are skillful in these areas and learn from them.

As you advance in your career, there will be changes in the advice and counsel you require. With promotions comes the need to get good "political" counsel — experienced corporate advisers can help you understand the politics of the organization, which is especially important when you plan to implement change. ■

Accelerate Your Learning

Usually when a new leader swerves off course, failure to learn is a factor. There is so much new information to absorb that it's difficult to know where to focus and important signals can be missed. Or when a new boss focuses too heavily on the technological side of the business — products, customers, technologies and strategies — critical learning about culture and politics is shortchanged.

The fact that few managers have received training in systematically diagnosing an organization compounds the problem. Those who have had such training are usually human resource professionals or former management consultants.

Even in situations in which a leader has been brought in solely to impart new ways of doing things — such as corporate turnarounds — the leader still has to customize his or her approach by learning about the organization's culture and politics.

Defining Your Learning Agenda

The starting point is to define your learning agenda, ideally before you even formally enter the organization. A learning agenda establishes your learning priorities and consists of a focused set of questions that will guide your inquiry. As you learn more, you'll make conclusions about what is going on and why. Your learning will begin to shift toward fleshing out and testing those conclusions.

During your transition, you'll learn from various types of hard data (e.g., financial and operating reports, strategic and functional plans, employee surveys, press accounts, and industry reports). But to make effective decisions, you'll also need "soft" information about the organization's strategy, technical capabilities, culture and politics. The only way to obtain this intelligence is to talk to people who know about your situation. Identifying promising sources will make your learning more complete and more efficient.

Adopting Structured Learning Methods

Once you have an idea of what you need to learn and where to seek it, the next step is to understand the best way to learn.

When diagnosing a new organization, start by meeting with your direct reports one-on-one and ask them these five questions:

1. What are the biggest challenges the organization is facing (or will face) in the near future?

2. Why is the organization facing (or going to face) these challenges?

3. What are the most promising unexploited opportunities for growth?

4. What would need to happen for the organization to exploit the potential of these opportunities?

5. If you were me, what would you focus on? ■

Match Strategy to Situation

Far too many new leaders don't effectively diagnose their situations and tailor their strategies accordingly. Then, because they don't understand the situation, they make unnecessary mistakes. This painful cycle happens because people usually model their transitions on a limited set of experiences.

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Match Strategy to Situation

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Matching your strategy to your situation requires diagnosing the business situation carefully. Only after you've diagnosed the situation can you act wisely about the challenges of your new job and the opportunities and resources available to you.

Diagnosing the Business Situation

The four broad types of business situations that new leaders must contend with are start-up, turnaround, realignment, and sustaining success (ST_ARS). These are the defining features of each of the ST_ARS situations:

1. Start-up. In a start-up, you've got to assemble the capabilities (people, funding and technology) needed to get a new business, product or project off the ground.

2. Turnaround. In a turnaround, you take on a unit or group that is in trouble and work to get it back on track. Both start-ups and turnarounds involve a lot of resource-intensive construction work — there isn't much existing infrastructure and capacity for you to build on. To a significant degree, you get to start fresh, but both require that you start making tough calls early.

3. Realignments. Your challenge is to revitalize a unit, product, process or project that is drifting into trouble. This requires that you reinvent the business.

4. Sustaining success. In a sustaining-success situation, you're responsible for preserving the vitality of a successful organization and taking it to the next level. Keep people motivated by inventing a new challenge.

Understanding the History

An important point is that businesses (as well as projects, processes, products and plants) tend to move predictably from one type of situation to another. Understanding the history of your new organization will help you manage challenges and opportunities.

If start-ups grow, they eventually become sustaining-success situations. Those who managed the start-up may move on to guide new start-ups while managers who are more experienced at running larger businesses take over. This is how healthy companies enter a *growth cycle*.

Realigning an organization usually means redirecting its resources by abandoning aging product lines and developing new technologies. It can also mean changing the organization's strategy, structure, skills and even its basic corporate culture.

Participants in a start-up are usually more excited and hopeful than workers in a troubled company in need of a turnaround. But the employees in a start-up are typically much less focused on key issues than those in a troubled organization simply because the start-up still lacks vision, strategy and structures.

Therefore, a large part of successful transitioning depends on your ability to transform the prevailing organizational psychology. In start-ups, where the prevailing mood is often one of excited confusion, your job is to channel that energy into productivity. In turnarounds, you may be dealing with a group of people who are close to despair — it is your job to provide a light at the end of the tunnel.

Focusing Your Energy

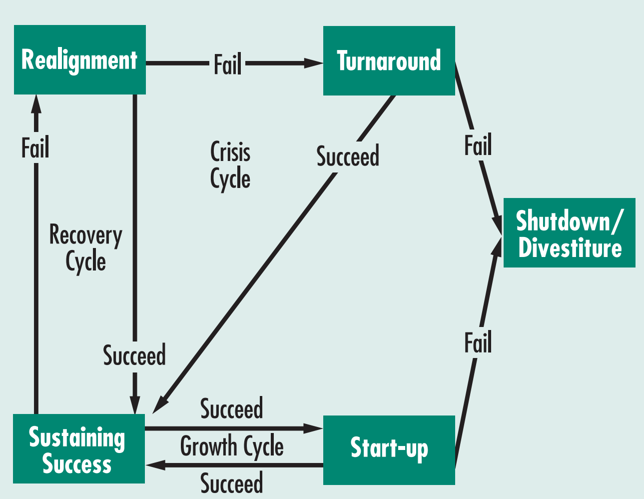
Clearly understanding the type of situation you're in helps you decide what you must do in your first 90 days. Such clarity helps you make three early choices:

1. How much emphasis will you place on learning as opposed to doing?

2. How much emphasis will you place on offense as opposed to defense?

3. What should you do to get some early wins? ■

The ST_ARS Model



Secure Early Wins

By the end of your transition, you want your boss, your peers and your subordinates to feel that something new and good is happening. Early wins excite and energize people, build your credibility, and quickly create value for your organization.

It's crucial to get early wins, but it is also important to get them the right way. These are the most common traps that afflict new leaders:

- **Failing to focus.** It's very easy to take on too much during a transition, and the results can be disastrous. You can't hope to achieve results in more than a few areas. It's essential to identify promising opportunities

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Secure Early Wins

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and then focus on translating them into wins.

● **Not taking the business situation into account.** What constitutes an early win will differ drastically from one business situation to another. Simply getting people to talk about the organization and its challenges can be an important accomplishment in a realignment.

● **Not adjusting to the corporate culture.** Leaders who come into an organization from the outside can fall into this trap. After absorbing a different organization's culture, they bring with them its view of what a win is and how it is achieved. Be sure you understand what your new organization does and does not view as a win.

● **Failing to get wins that matter to your boss.** It's essential to get early wins that energize your employees, but your boss's opinion about your accomplishments is very important, too. Even if you don't fully endorse his or her priorities, you must keep them in mind as you decide what early wins to pursue.

● **Letting your means undermine your ends.** Process matters. If you achieve impressive results in a way that colleagues think is manipulative, underhanded or inconsistent with the corporate culture, you're asking for trouble. An early win accomplished in a way that illustrates the behavior you hope to instill in your new organization is a double win.

Establishing Long-Term Goals

In the first 90 days, a key goal is to build personal credibility and create organizational momentum. Secure some early wins to leverage your energy and expand the potential scope of your subsequent actions.

As you look for ways to create momentum, keep in mind that the actions you take to get early wins should do double duty. Your efforts should:

1. **Be consistent with A-item business priorities.**
2. **Introduce the new patterns of behavior you want to instill in your organization.**

Armed with an understanding of your A-item priorities and objectives for behavior change, you can now create detailed plans for how you'll secure early wins during your first 90 days and beyond. You should think about what you must do in two phases: building credibility in the first 30 days and deciding where you'll focus your efforts to achieve improvements in performance in the following 60 days.

Building Credibility

You can't hope to have a measurable impact on performance in the first few weeks in your new job, but you can score small victories and show colleagues that things are changing. Your objective at this stage is to build personal credibility. Since your earliest actions will have a huge influence on how you're perceived, think about how you'll get "connected" to your new organization. What messages do you want to get across about who you are and what you represent? What are the best ways to convey those messages? ■

Negotiate Success

Negotiating success means engaging with your new boss to shape the game so you have a good chance of achieving your goals. Too many new leaders just play the game, reacting to the situation that exists and failing as a result. Negotiate with your boss to establish realistic expectations, reach agreement on the situation, and secure sufficient resources to get things done.

Focusing on the Fundamentals

When experienced managers are asked about building a productive relationship with a new boss, their observations usually consist of do's and don'ts. Here are six don'ts:

● **Don't trash the past.** There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by criticizing the people who led the organization before you arrived. You must understand the past but concentrate on assessing current behavior and results.

● **Don't stay away.** If you have a boss who doesn't reach out to you, or if your relationship with your boss is uncomfortable, you'll have to reach out yourself. Otherwise, the quality of communications could be permanently damaged.

● **Don't surprise your boss.** It's no fun bringing bad news to your boss. The danger that the messenger (you) will be shot is real, but most bosses consider it a greater sin not to report emerging problems early enough.

● **Don't approach your boss only with problems.** You don't want to be perceived as bringing nothing but problems for your boss to solve. Give just a few minutes' thought to how to address the problem, your role in solving it, and the help you'll need.

● **Don't run down your checklist.** Even senior managers tend to use meetings with the boss as opportunities to run through their checklist of things they've been doing. There are times when this is appropriate, but it's rarely what your boss needs or wants to hear.

● **Don't try to change the boss.** Assume that you're not going to change your boss, and adapt to his or her style and idiosyncrasies.

Better Ways to Negotiate

There are fundamental do's on this topic as well. If you follow them, life with your new boss will be easier.

● **Take 100 percent responsibility for making the**

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Negotiate Success
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relationship work. Don't expect your boss to reach out or offer the time and support you need. Assume that it's your responsibility to make the relationship work.

- **Clarify mutual expectations early and often.** Begin managing expectations right away. It's smart to talk openly about bad news in the beginning and to lower unrealistic expectations.
- **Negotiate time lines for diagnosis and action planning.** Don't let yourself get caught up immediately in putting out fires or trying to make decisions before you're ready. Buy yourself some time to diagnose the new organization and come up with an action plan.
- **Aim for early wins in areas that are important to the boss.** Figure out what the boss cares about most. Once you know, aim for early results in those areas. In part, your job is to shape your boss's perceptions of what can and should be achieved.
- **Try to get good grades from those whose opinions your boss respects.** Your new boss's opinion of you will be based partly on your direct interactions and partly on what he or she hears about you from trusted colleagues. Your boss may have relationships with people who are now your subordinates. Be aware of the many channels through which information about you and your performance will reach your boss. ■

For Additional Information on not changing the boss, go to:
http://my.summary.com

Negotiating for Resources

As you look for commitments for resources, keep these principles of effective negotiation in mind:

✓ **Focus on underlying interests.** Probe as deeply as possible to learn the agendas of your boss and any others you're trying to get resources from and consider what's in it for them.

✓ **Look for mutually beneficial exchanges.** Seek resources that support your boss's agenda and advance your own. Look for ways to help peers advance their agendas in return for help with yours.

✓ **Link resources to results.** Emphasize the ways your team's performance will improve if more resources are dedicated to your group. Create a "menu" that lays out what you can achieve with current resources and why you need more.

Achieve Alignment

The higher you climb in an organization, the more you assume the role of organizational architect, creating an environment in which others can perform well. No matter how charismatic you are, you can't hope to do much if key elements in your unit are out of alignment.

If strategy, structure, systems and skills are within your purview in your new position, you need to begin to analyze the architecture of your organization and assess alignment among these key elements. You can't hope to do much more than conduct a solid diagnosis and perhaps get started on addressing alignment issues in the first few months. But plans to assess the architecture of your group and to begin identifying areas for improvement should be included in your 90-day plan.

Designing Organizational Architecture

Begin by thinking of yourself as an architect of your unit or group. This may be a familiar role for you, but it probably isn't. Few managers get systematic training in organizational design. Because managers typically have limited control over organizational design early in their careers, they learn little about it. It is common for less senior people to complain about misalignments and to wonder aloud why "those idiots" higher up let obviously dysfunctional arrangements continue. By the time you reach the mid-senior levels of most organizations, however, you are well on your way to becoming one of those idiots. You are well advised to learn something about how to assess and design organizations.

To equip your group to achieve its goals, these five elements of organizational architecture must work together:

1. Strategy: The core approach the organization will use to accomplish its goals.

2. Structure: How people are grouped in units and how their work is coordinated.

3. Systems: The processes used to add value.

4. Skills: The capabilities of the various groups of people in the organization.

5. Culture: The values, norms and assumptions that shape behavior.

Identifying Misalignments

Organizations can become misaligned in many ways. One important goal during your first 90 days should be to identify possible misalignments and design a plan to correct them. Common types of misalignment include:

- **Skills and strategy misalignment.** Let's say you head an R&D group and your goal is to increase the number of new product ideas your team generates. If your group doesn't understand the latest techniques and support tools that would help you perform experiments faster, your group's skills don't support its strategy.
- **Systems and strategy misalignment.** Imagine you're the leader of a marketing group whose strategy is

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Achieve Alignment

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to focus on a new segment of customers. If the group hasn't established an effective way to compile and analyze information about those customers, your group's systems fail to support its strategy.

● **Structure and systems misalignment.** Suppose you manage a product-development group whose members are organized by product line. This structure lets employees with specialized expertise focus on specific products, but in this case, it has a downside — the group doesn't have systems that compensate for the overlapping expertise of different product teams.

Avoiding Some Common Traps

Too many managers rely on simple fixes to address complicated alignment problems. Be alert to these all-too-common pitfalls:

● **Trying to restructure your way out of deeper problems.** Resist changing structure until you understand whether restructuring will address the root causes of the problems.

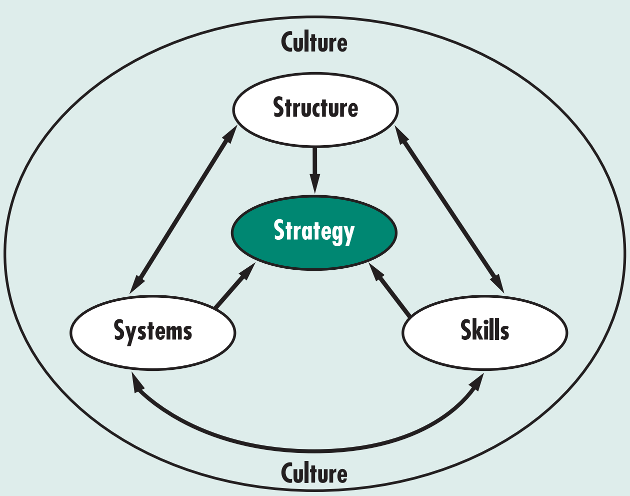
● **Creating structures that are too complex.** This is a related trap. Although it may look good on paper to create a structure, such as a matrix in which people in different units share accountability, too often the result is bureaucratic paralysis.

● **Automating problem processes.** Automating your group's core processes may yield significant gains in productivity, quality and reliability, but it's a mistake to simply speed up an existing process through technology if the process has serious underlying problems.

● **Making changes for change's sake.** Resist the temptation to tear down the fences before you know why they were put up. New leaders who feel self-imposed pressure to put their stamp on the organization often make changes in strategy or structure before they really understand the business.

● **Overestimating your group's capacity to absorb strategic shifts.** It's difficult for a group to change because of large-scale changes in strategy. Focus on a few vital priorities and make changes gradually if time allows. ■

Elements of Organizational Architecture



Build Your Team

If you create a high-performance team, you can exert tremendous leverage to create value. If not, you'll face severe difficulties because no leader can hope to achieve ambitious goals on his or her own. Poor personnel choices will usually come back to haunt you.

Finding the right people is essential, but it's not enough. Begin by evaluating current team members to decide who will stay and who will have to go. Then create a plan for obtaining new people and moving the people you keep into the right positions without doing too much damage to short-term performance. But even this is not enough. You still must establish goals, incentives and performance measures that will propel your team in the desired directions.

Avoiding Common Traps

When it comes to building a winning team, many new leaders stumble. The result may be a delay in reaching the break-even point, or it may be outright derailment. These are some of the traps new leaders fall into:

● **Keeping the existing team too long.** Some leaders clean house too quickly, but it's more common to keep people on board too long. Whether because of pride or because they shy away from tough personnel calls, many leaders end up with less-than-outstanding teams. This means they will have to either shoulder more of the load themselves or fall short of their goals.

● **Not repairing the airplane.** Unless you're in a start-up, you don't get to build a team from scratch: You inherit a team and have to mold it into what you need to achieve your A-team priorities. Molding a team is like repairing an airplane in midflight. You will not reach your destination if you ignore the necessary repairs.

● **Not working organizational alignment and team restructuring issues in parallel.** You can't build your team before reaching clarity about changes in strategy, structure, systems and skills. Building your team prematurely could put the right people in the wrong jobs.

● **Not holding onto the good people.** Uncertainty about who will and will not be on the team can lead your best people to look for opportunities elsewhere.

● **Starting team-building before the core team is in place.** It's tempting to launch team-building activities

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Build Your Team

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right away. New leaders with a consensus-building style often are eager to begin collaborating with their direct reports, but some group members may be leaving.

● **Making implementation-dependent decisions too early.** When implementing your plans requires buy-in from your team, you should postpone making decisions until the core members are in place. It can be very difficult to implement decisions that commit new people to courses of action they had no part in defining.

● **Trying to do it all yourself.** Keep in mind that the process of restructuring a team is fraught with emotional, legal and company policy complications. Find out who can best advise you and help you chart a strategy. The support of a good HR person is indispensable to any effort to restructure a team.

Assessing Your Existing Team

You're likely to inherit some good performers, some average ones and some who simply aren't up to the job. You'll also inherit a group with its own internal dynamics and politics — some members may even have hoped for your job. During your first 30 to 60 days, you must sort out who's who, what roles each individual plays, and how the group has worked together in the past.

Inevitably, you'll form impressions of team members as you meet them. Don't suppress these early impressions, but step back from them and take the time to make a more rigorous evaluation. ■

For Additional Information on evaluating team members, go to: http://my.summary.com

Create Coalitions

If your success depends on the support of people outside your direct line of command, it's important to create coalitions to get things done. Direct authority is never enough to win the day. "Influence networks" — informal bonds among colleagues — can help you generate support for your ideas and goals.

It's up to you to build coalitions that will help you achieve your goals. To do so, you'll need an influence strategy. Figure out whom you must influence, select those likely to support and resist your key initiatives, and persuade "swing voters" to join your side.

Mapping the Influence Landscape

One common mistake made by new leaders is to devote too much time to the vertical aspect of influence — reaching upward to bosses and downward to direct reports — and not enough to the horizontal dimension that involves peers and external constituencies. This error is understandable — you naturally gravitate toward the people you report to and those who report to you. After all, they're the primary channels through whom you'll have an impact in your organization.

Sooner or later, you'll need the support of people over whom you have no direct authority. You may have little or no relationships with these people, so you'll need to invest time and effort in building a new base.

Identify the Key Players

How can you figure out who will be important for your success? It should become obvious as you get to know the organization better. Identify the key relationships between your group and others. Customers and suppliers, within the company and outside of it, are natural focal points for relationship building.

Get your boss to connect you. Ask for a list of 10 key people outside your group whom he or she thinks you should get to know, then set up meetings with them. Consider doing the same when you have new direct reports coming on board: Create priority relationship lists for them and help them make contacts.

Also, try to identify the sources of power that give people influence in the organization. The usual sources of power in an organization are: expertise; access to information; status; control of resources, such as budgets and rewards; and personal loyalty.

Eventually you'll be able to pick out the people who exert heavy influence through formal authority, special expertise, or sheer force of personality. If you can convince these individuals that your goals have merit, broader acceptance of your ideas is likely to follow. Identify your supporters and your opponents. ■

For Additional Information on identifying supporters and opponents, go to: http://my.summary.com

Test Their Judgment

Some very bright people have terrible judgment, and some people of average competence have extraordinary judgment. You must have a clear idea of the combination of knowledge and judgment you need from key people.

One way to assess judgment is to work with a person for an extended period of time and observe whether he or she is able to:

1. **Make sound predictions.**
2. **Develop good strategies for avoiding problems.**

Both abilities draw on an individual's mental models, or ways of identifying the essential dynamics of situations and translating them into effective action. That's what expert judgment is all about.