Starting a New Job – Entry Strategy, Your First 90 Days

Starting a new job can make even the most experienced and confident people a little nervous along with excited. You’ll want to make strategic use of the first 90 days especially to set yourself up for the best success and to acclimate and integrate with your new colleagues, manager, and organization. For working with clients in a diversity of stages in their careers, I’ve called this 30-60-90 day entry strategy.

I think we’ve all seen incredibly experienced and talented people come into an organization with a lot of potential and promise, only to wonder why they may be leaving a short time later or never quite maximizing what they can do and are capable of.

Here are some strategies and advice for getting off to a great start and not getting off on the wrong foot and trying to recover. Human nature is that the people you are working with -- your manager, colleagues, and direct reports (if you are managing a team), customers, partners, and others with whom you’ll work – 360 degrees - will all form initial impressions of you. Your competence, communication, how well you fit into the culture and values, what you can do for them, and how much time and energy they will invest in you and the relationship are being assessed.

The good news is that you can own your performance and can start your new job effectively. Here’s what to do to prepare, noting that you can do your best, then will need to leave the rest. None of us are perfect and there will be some bumps or big potholes along the road, and that’s OK. It’s how you learn from them and show resilience in moving forward.

**Learn the lay of the land.** Do a lot of observing, listening, and learning the first few weeks or so. Of course, speak up and engage when you need to but focus more on gaining a
sense of the landscape, key players, how people really work together and communicate, what truly is valued, how things actually get done.

**Pay attention to how the influencers, wise sages, and important people are – it is not about title.** I believe in treating everyone with respect and appreciating their unique talents and what they bring to the table. Whether someone formally holds the title of Admin or Senior Vice President, you’ll know fairly quickly by observing and talking with people – those who others admire, call on to problem solve, go to for advice. It’s usually easy to tell whose perspective and experiences are valued. More often than not, these folks are generous with sharing what they know and will be happy to informally serve as a resource for someone new if you develop a relationship with them and are gracious.

**Watch out for common missteps.** You can be forgiven for your mea culpas but why spend time digging yourself out of a hole when you can side step mistakes altogether? Some common mistakes I’ve seen others make when starting a new job are:

- Violating company policy without even realizing it
- Misinterpreting how critical something is and missing a crucial deadline
- Debating or being overaggressive vs. discussing a topic in a group meeting
- Challenging a higher up or someone you shouldn’t until you get to know them better
- Upgrading to first class travel or asking for some special treatment when there’s a formal process for them or not part of the culture
- Declining invitations to go out for lunch or after work with a group thus being considered arrogant or standoffish
- Coming in late, not giving money to a certain employee cause (like birthdays), or even wearing something inappropriate
- Using words that are not in synch with the culture or values which make you not part of the community

   Clues on missteps can be found in your company’s Employee Guide or Handbook or just by asking those in the know whom you trust and respect or who will help you.

   **Respect the core values and the culture.** Go beyond the espoused values and culture. Immerse yourself in the organization as best you can. Get to know, listen to, and observe those around you – particularly those in leadership roles and those who are well respected. Watch their actions to see what is truly valued. For deciphering the culture, mostly you will just need to be in it for awhile. Be cognizant of cues such as: how people communicate and disagree; why people get recognized or rewarded; what happens when a deadline is missed or someone fails; how managers treat their employees and how everyone treats customers; how competition, teamwork, consensus are viewed. Who are the keepers of the culture – those who carry the torch for upholding the culture?

   **Pay attention to context.** Listen to what is being said, but also hear what is not being said. Use your instincts and intuition to read between the lines. If this is not a talent of yours, find someone you can trust. Take them aside and ask them to give you their take on something you think has more meaning than on the surface. Ask them to help you figure out what just happened or there is an undercurrent to what was just said.

   **Get to know the communication norms.** How do people communicate both formally and informally, verbally and nonverbally? How does important information get shared? Is your organization an email or voicemail or talk-in-person type of culture?

   **Cultivate key relationships.** Treat every interaction with someone new as a chance to learn about him/her, what he/she does and how that fits into the greater whole of your new
organization. Find out what’s on their minds, especially any past problems they have had with
the person in your job. Get to know HR. This group manages the people ‘processes’ but more
importantly, they can be valuable advocates in your career development and coaching. Build ties
with your manager and core group of colleagues. Take time to get to know their backgrounds,
motivations, their pet peeves.

Get in synch with your manager. For your manager, if he or she has not discussed these
with you, ask for an informal ‘orientation’ and some regular touch base meetings the first few
months to help you get up to speed as quickly as possible. Find out about the important aspects
of your job and set expectations, priorities and objectives together. Let your manager know that
you are eager to learn and appreciate constructive feedback on how you are doing and how you
can improve.

Be clear on performance objectives and what is expected of you. What do you need to
do to succeed in your role, to achieve your goals and objectives, to perform the way that is
expected? Be a key part of that dialogue with your manager.

Use your newness to your advantage. Ask lots of questions and try to soak up like a
sponge. Realize that the first 90 days staring up in your organization is a terrific opportunity to
use your fresh perspective to learn, percolate new ideas, creative solutions, or to share your
different point of view. Choose strategically what you will tackle or engage in but by all means
leverage your new hire status to do what good you can. Also, if you do happen to make some
mistakes early on, acknowledge them quickly and honestly. Say you are sorry you didn’t know
but make sure to learn from the situations. Those you are working with will cut you some slack
for awhile.
Achieve some small wins early on. You don’t have to hit the ball out of the park but do dive into your job and give the extra effort to make progress on your goals and objectives. Outside of your job responsibilities, if there are immediate ways you can contribute and make a difference, whether on a project, a problem, or in a group discussion, etc. do this as much and as often as you can. Creating some concrete wins/accomplishments early on can help to set a vibrant stage for your future.

Help other new people. The best way to keep learning is to teach others. I love the actor, Kevin Spacey’s quote that when you’ve gotten to the Penthouse, you have to send the elevator back down for others and greet them when they get off. Be gracious. Be generous. Be supportive of other new recruits. Walk in their shoes and have empathy for what they are going through having had that recent experience yourself.