

The First 90 Days

Hitting the ground running as a new executive

By Gail Golden, MBA, Ph.D.

You made it! You landed that high-powered job you've been aiming for. You've got the corner office and the parking spot and the key to the executive washroom. And now you have 90 days to prove to yourself and the people around you that they chose the right person for the job. Yikes!

This reality faces all new executives, whether promoted from within or hired from another company. Those first 90 days are an exciting but daunting time. They can be especially challenging for female leaders, who often don't fit the company's traditional leadership mold. So what can a new woman executive do to make the most of her first three months on the job?

Research by my company, RHR International, has shown that it takes a full year for any new executive to completely integrate into his or her role. The "Honeymoon Phase" (the first three months), is followed by the "Reality Phase" (months four to six), and then the "Adjustment Phase" (months six to one year). Each phase has its own set of challenges and hurdles, but they also share a set of common success factors:

Establish Role Clarity

In order to succeed, you have to understand your role and how it fits into the rest of the organization. In the first 90 days, talk to other leaders about what they need from you and how they want to work with you. Get time with your boss to be sure you understand how he or she sees your role. (Don't be surprised if the role turns out to be somewhat different from what you expected.)

As a woman, you may face unique challenges around role clarity because people have unspoken assumptions about how women should lead. They may expect you to be more cooperative, less competitive or more attentive to people's emotional needs than your male peers. Maintain your radar for those assumptions, and make conscious decisions about whether to conform to them or challenge them.

Develop Relationships

At the same time you're networking to learn about your role, you're beginning to identify and build relationships with your key stakeholders. You'll be establishing your credibility as a leader and developing alignments that will enable you to get things done. You'll also be building your support network and establishing the connections that help you feel you belong.

Building relationships can be especially challenging for women because the more senior you are in an organization, the fewer female peers and role models you're likely to have. Women don't make it to the top without being effective

and comfortable working with men, but nonetheless, it can be lonely being the only woman in the room. Some women deal with this by connecting mainly with women who are lower in the organization. While there's much to be gained by building relationships up and down the ladder, in order to succeed, you need strong relationships at the top too.

Learn the Culture

In the early weeks of a new job, you need to use all of your observational skills to help you learn the written and unwritten rules of the company. Noticing everything from how people dress to whether meetings start on time to the company-specific language will help you feel comfortable and be accepted as part of the group.

Cultural missteps early on can be very damaging to a new female leader's credibility. Coming on too strong in the early days, either from anxiety or a misguided attempt to establish your authority, is a common mistake. And like it or not, dress continues to be a powerful factor in how people perceive female leaders. So take your cue from other senior women leaders, and if there aren't any, be sure to err on the side of conservatism.

Gain Early Wins

Identifying a specific task or objective you can achieve early on establishes your reputation as someone who gets things done. Be sure to choose a goal that matters to the organization and its business objectives.

However, although early wins are important,

a common mistake is to jump to action too quickly, without establishing your presence and building relationships first. These goals have to be pursued simultaneously, not at the expense of each other.

Accelerate Your Learning

You were hired because the company leaders believed you could do the job. But the reality is that you have a lot to learn to get up to full speed in your new role. This learning challenge has been described as "drinking from the fire hose." Approaching this task with curiosity and enthusiasm will facilitate your ability to master what you need to know as quickly as possible.

The challenge here is to balance confidence in your experience and expertise with openness to new learning. Adeptly moving between the roles of teacher and learner is part of the art of succeeding as a new leader.

Know You Can Do This

Just don't try to do it alone. During this time of transition, draw on your personal and professional support network to help you succeed. Seek out feedback and use it. Identify and cultivate support people in your new environment. Take time to reflect and consolidate what you are learning. Before you know it, you'll be well integrated into your new role and helping the next newbie to find her way. ■

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