

The CEO in Transition: The 100-Day Cycle and Other Survival Patterns

By James E. Lukaszewski

Recently, I found myself sitting in a corporate boardroom helping a large company and its newly named, soon-to-be CEO revise its strategic plan (something of an oxymoron, actually). The discussion turned to doing a five-year plan. After about an hour of fruitless and confused facilitated discussion by the vice president of strategic planning, I raised the question of how long the last three CEOs had lasted. The average was 23 months. That's not unusual these days.

I suggested to the recently elected CEO that it might be better to develop a new strategic approach that more closely matched his probable tenure – about 30 months. After a more or less stunned silence they agreed that this approach might avoid establishing overly optimistic goals and objectives. The meeting quickly got down to business.

Based on that experience, here is a memo I offer to all incoming CEOs.

TO: Our New CEO

RE: Your First 100 Days (and the next 800 days after that)

There are important, urgent things you must do immediately to assure your success as CEO. Focusing on these actions will help you move through the first few months and speed your mental transition to chief executive (you aren't there yet . . . it takes a little time . . . you won't "get it" down cold until you've had the job about 300 days . . . you'll see).

Your perspective will change. Your problems will be different. Just how successful you will be will be determined by how much energy you can apply in your first 100 days. It will take about nine 100-day periods before you know things are truly moving in the direction you expect, or that you will survive, perhaps for another 900 days. By that time, you will have had the job longer than any of your recent predecessors, if that matters to you.

Before we get to those important actions, there are some interesting realities, some of which you are already experiencing. These are the expectations and realities that flow – with you – from your first day as CEO:

1. **People want action from day one.** They expect you to walk in the door and begin making changes, making things happen.
2. **People expect change even though they fear it.** Everyone is well aware of the tension during transition. Tension increases apprehension. Employees cannot understand why the people at the top of the mountain can't work everything out. They actually believe there is a plan. You can't take the time to worry about this now because the clock is ticking on your own performance and on the future.
3. **Change is continuous.** From your perspective and strategic view, the organization will change significantly about every 100 days during your first three years, even if everything goes smoothly. The first 600 days present your principal opportunity to have an impact on corporate culture. Corporate culture can only be modified through significant fundamental change within the organization as a whole. Old habits never die; they need to be removed.
4. **Cultures are modified with positive, forward pressure applied constantly:** The recipe for culture modification has four crucial ingredients:
 - A strong, positive leader (a visionary).

- Verbally driven management styles.
 - Goals everyone can understand, accept, and achieve.
 - Constant positive direction, clarification, and validation.
5. **Nothing you learned prior to taking over will seem to be of great value . . .** because it cannot be. You haven't yet really begun to know the organization. Being totally in charge is totally different. No one will understand this but you. It will be lonely.

Now, let's talk about the **success behaviors** you'll need from the beginning. During the period covering days zero-to-100, you must be prepared to:

Act fast: Implement a time-lined program of action the day you begin. If that is impossible, set incremental goals and guidelines that achieve rapid situation assessment and the elements of a "move-forward" timeline within 72-to-96 hours of becoming CEO.

This approach will:

Test those who could be your key advisors and future leaders.

Beat the bureaucracy that's probably the reason for past non-progress and is the repository of the "good old days."

Scare the nesters who think they have finally found a place to retire.

Subvert the "could haves", "would haves" and "should haves" that torpedo progress and your success.

Communicate immediately: Plan a daily one-page newsletter or plainspoken e-mail or voice mail written by you. Winston Churchill did this throughout both World Wars I and II. He called them "Minutes." Why not think about starting a "Minute" of your own? Churchill also wrote special orders called "Action This Day." You might want to institute a similar approach for things you need done now.

Your "Minute" is a daily early morning 150 to 300 word message stressing three major topic areas: productivity, performance, and items of interest. The first two sections are factual and relate to operational goals and objectives. The last section is your direct communications link to everyone in the organization. It's talking directly each day to each employee about things that are on your mind and theirs.

Caution: If you start this, your people will like it a lot and hope that you continue it. Its purpose is clear: it is anti-rumor, anti-corporate politics, anti-counterrevolution within the organization; it is pro-progress, pro-organizational objective setting; it is pro-success, pro-personal recognition – yours and theirs – and says:

We will talk.

We will tell the truth.

I will listen.

What I do is your business too.

There will always be a sense of candor between us.

We will continuously recognize achievement and achievers.

Every question will be answered.

Walk: The land of the chief executive is full of wanna-be CEOs, who dwell most of the time in their own silos. Get out and talk to the real people who punch clocks and move the product. Eat, talk, and work with employees. This means dozens to hundreds of employees seeing you, talking to you, understanding your goals and objectives directly and asking questions of you.

It sends powerful messages to supervisors and managers that they too must communicate accurately, effectively, promptly, verbally, and in real time. When employees have an opportunity to speak with you directly about concerns, issues, or fears, it's very much like the commander visiting his troops in the field. It's a chance to personify your leadership and vision, to rally and motivate.

Shake their hands; be with them. You are going to have to change some jobs and take other jobs away. Better make it as pleasant and quick as possible. Enemies accumulate.

Talk and act in real time: Do companywide live teleconferences, which allow employees and managers to hear from you, directly and in real time, and to ask questions and hear you provide on-the-spot answers. Recognize individual performance, achievement, passion and enthusiasm through brief handwritten notes. When it comes to recognition, e-mail is very unsatisfactory and perhaps even insulting. Take the time to write little notes to people. They will tell their moms, remember forever, and will almost never become your enemy.

Repeat yourself: More than half of the people in your organization aren't listening at any given time. The distracted and the disengaged need to be told perhaps as many as ten times before they begin to realize that you really do require them to change.

Teach and live by the ingredients of leadership:

Be and stay positive: Avoid the use of negative language.

Be constructive: Insist on useful, positive suggestions rather than criticism, questions, and complaints.

Be prompt: Do it now, ask it now, fix it now, challenge it now, and change it now.

Be outcome focused: Work in the future rather than in the past. Everyone owns the past in ways that cannot be overcome. As Stephen Covey would say, plan with the end in mind. You'll move forward with twice the velocity and half the politics.

Be reflective: If you must examine the past, look only for those lessons that will usefully inform future actions.

Be pragmatic: Move the organization toward those things that can actually happen. Dreamy, foggy, unintelligible goals are as detrimental as turgid, impersonal, mindless mission, vision, and values approaches. Do what people can understand, then stretch their imagination.

Be relentlessly committed to positive incremental personal and organizational improvement, every single day. Increments accumulate and form a solid foundation for luck and success.

If your tenure is typical, you'll spend the first 300 days finding out what you can actually accomplish. You'll spend the second 300 days doing as much as you can to get things done. The third 300 days you'll spend trying to survive (the immortality syndrome) and establishing your legacy (a method for keeping your successors from changing what you've done).

Keep in mind the most important reality of all (taught to me by a CEO many years ago): "The company is still run everyday by the people who show up to do their jobs."

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