

INTRODUCTION

HIT THE GROUND SPRINTING!

*Don't Just Hit the Ground Running, but Sprinting,
as the Clock is Ticking from Day One*

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'VE WON. You have begun your first 100 days in a big, new job, one that comes with high expectations and demands that you perform from day one. You may be the CEO of a big corporation in an economic downturn, the director of a school or hospital that needs reinvention, someone on the front lines of your business, or in the government or the military. You may feel yourself alternating between euphoria that this could be just the opportunity to realize an Impossible Future and make a difference you've been waiting for, and fatigue due to the staggering demands of your Day Job.

As executive search consultants, Thomas Neff and James Citrin provocatively ask, "So you're in charge! Now what?"

What do you think about first? How do you seal your leadership and make your mark? Do you have the right people on the team? How do you navigate the political dynamics without stepping on landmines? How do you avoid costly mistakes while moving fast enough to build momentum? And most critically: how do

you balance the transformational change you came here to create with the operational excellence everyone expects from day one?

Welcome to your first 100 days.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING FROM DAY ONE

“The words climbing Mt. Everest, steep learning curve, and disaster management spring to mind when I look back on my first 100 days,” one CEO told me. Another executive described it as, “The sheer avalanche of urgent emails, Zoom calls, meetings, and workload that hurtles towards you is staggering.” “I had a mandate, but I don’t think anything can prepare you for the roller coaster ride of trying to actually bring about change,” said a business unit manager.

One thing is certain: the first 100 days are a time to shape events before they shape you. It is a time to sound the tone that you want to be a great leader, not just a good one. It’s a time to figure out the conflicting demands of your vision and your Day Job. It’s a time to gather and distill information. It’s a time to take your change agenda and get at least a piece of it over the line before the window of opportunity closes.

One thing is certain: you don’t get a warm-up period. As Daniel Vasella, former CEO of Novartis, put it bluntly: “The clock is ticking from day one. You have 100 days to prove yourself, or you will be out the door.”

A MEASURE OF YOUR LEADERSHIP DYNAMISM

The concept of the “first 100 days” as a measure of leadership dynamism was established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When FDR took office in March 1933, the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. Banks were failing. Unemploy-

ment had reached 25%. The nation was paralyzed by fear. FDR understood there would be no honeymoon period. On the eve of his inauguration, he forwent the traditional celebratory balls and instead used that time to handcraft a 100-day action plan. In an unprecedented move, he had his cabinet unceremoniously sworn in the same day he took office.

In his first 100 days, FDR pushed fifteen major bills through Congress, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between government and citizens. “I do not see how any living soul can last physically going the pace that he is going,” said Senator Hiram Johnson at the time. By the end of those 100 days, journalist Walter Lippmann wrote: “We became again an organized nation, confident of our power to provide for our own security and to control our own destiny.”

FDR’s first 100 days established the benchmark. Ever since, new leaders, whether presidents, CEOs, or managers, in government and business, have been measured by what they accomplish in this critical window.

But knowing you’ll be measured against this standard raises an immediate question: What exactly should you focus on in those crucial first days?

THE CENTRAL PARADOX: IMPOSSIBLE FUTURE VS. DAY JOB

Here’s the paradox every new executive faces: You need to do two things simultaneously, and they often seem to be in tension: your Impossible Future and your Day Job.

Your Impossible Future: The transformational change you came here to create. The bold vision that will alter the organization’s trajectory. The game-changing strategy that addresses the real opportunities and threats facing the business, and which makes you a transformational leader rather than just a caretaker.

Your Day Job: This is the operational excellence you are expected to deliver. Meeting quarterly targets. Managing your team effectively. Delivering on the core responsibilities of your role. Maintaining what's working while you transform what isn't. This is all about execution.

Most new executives fail by focusing too much on one at the expense of the other. They become visionaries who can't execute or operators who never lift their heads to see the bigger game. The executives who succeed in their first 100 days master both.

A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE: SATYA NADELLA'S FIRST 100 DAYS AT MICROSOFT

When Satya Nadella became Microsoft's CEO in February 2014, the company was at a crossroads. It had missed mobile and was seen as a dinosaur in the age of cloud computing. Its culture was notoriously competitive and siloed, as Nadella called it, a "know-it-all" rather than a "learn-it-all" culture.

Nadella's Impossible Future was clear: transform Microsoft from a Windows-centric company to a cloud-first, mobile-first platform company. But he also had a Day Job: keep the massive Windows and Office businesses running while managing thousands of employees and meeting Wall Street's expectations.

In his first 100 days, Nadella:

- Articulated a new mission: "Empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more."
- Signaled cultural change by giving every employee a copy of "Nonviolent Communication."
- Made a bold move that shocked the industry: putting Office on the iPad (previously unthinkable).
- Began the strategic pivot to Azure and cloud services.

- Started reshaping the executive team to match the new direction.

He balanced vision with execution. He signaled change while maintaining stability. A decade later, Microsoft's market cap has increased more than 10X under his leadership. That's what a successful first 100 days look like.

FIRST PRINCIPLES FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

So, what made Nadella's approach work? After coaching hundreds of executives through similar transitions, I've distilled the patterns that separate success from struggle into seven First Principles. These go beyond tactics or tasks. They are the enduring truths that guide successful leadership transitions:

1. **Get clear on your going-in mandate with the board or boss.** What is the job they have hired you to do: starting, scaling, or reinventing the businesses?
2. **Have a story ready for day one.** Here's where we came from, here's where we're going, here's how we'll get there.
3. **Remember, it's WHO, not HOW.** Solve the team problem first, and the team will handle all the other problems.
4. **Embrace reality and deal with it.** Get the team to face what is true about the business rather than what they want to be true.
5. **Declare an Impossible Future that gets everyone excited.** People need a sense of purpose greater than just solving problems.
6. **You are as powerful as you are in alignment.** The secret to creating real change is creating alignment with supporters, opposers, and neutrals.
7. **Secure early wins that build personal credibility, political capital, and momentum.** What can you do right now with existing readiness, authority, and resources?

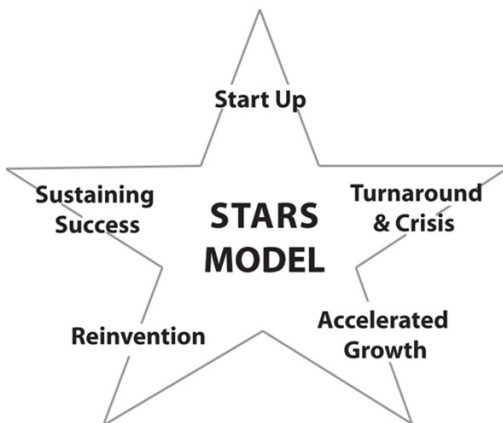
These principles work whether you are Satya Nadella transforming Microsoft or a division president turning around a struggling business unit. They apply whether you are walking into a start-up or sustaining success in an established organization. Master these principles, and you will have the foundation for thriving in your first 100 days, as well as establishing the trajectory for your entire tenure.

These First Principles are the red thread running through this entire book. Each chapter will help you understand and execute one or more of these principles in the context of your specific situation. Return to them often. They will keep you focused on what matters most.

ASSESS YOUR SITUATION: THE STARS MODEL

The First Principles are universal, but how you apply them depends entirely on the situation you're walking into. The approach that works in a start-up will fail in a turnaround. What sustains success will fall flat in a reinvention scenario. It's important to assess your situation before you begin your first 100 days.

DIAGRAM I.1 USE THE STARS MODEL TO DIAGNOSE YOUR SITUATION



START-UP: You're building something new with a great idea, but you don't have enough staff, customers, or cash. Your strategy must focus on targeting high-growth markets, developing a compelling value proposition, and becoming relentless about sales and customer acquisition.

TURNAROUND: The business model has run out of gas. You're losing money, customers are defecting, and something needs to change urgently. Your strategy must stabilize the situation immediately: face reality, stop the bleeding, make tough people decisions, and rebuild confidence among key stakeholders.

ACCELERATED GROWTH: You've weathered the early stages and sales are growing rapidly, but you lack the leadership talent and business processes to sustain it. Your strategy must focus on building a team of A-players and creating the infrastructure to scale.

REINVENTION: You've achieved critical mass, but your core product is being commoditized and margins are shrinking. Competitors are eating your lunch. Your strategy must focus on innovation: developing game-changing products, services, or business models before it's too late.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS: You're running a successful organization that works well, but complacency is the enemy. Your strategy must maintain excellence while continuing to innovate and uphold the values that made the organization great in the first place.

Once you've diagnosed your situation using the STARS Model, you'll need a practical framework for execution. That's where this book differs from typical leadership guides.

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DIFFERENT

This book is not just a checklist of onboarding tasks. You won't find generic advice about "listening and learning" or "building relationships" without the context of what you're actually trying to accomplish. Instead, it will give you a coaching framework for leaders who want to be great, not just good. Leaders who came here to make a difference, not just manage what already exists. Leaders who understand that the first 100 days are when you establish the trajectory for your entire tenure.

You'll learn how to:

- Balance transformational change with operational excellence.
- Master the political chessboard without becoming a politician.
- Build a team of A-players who can execute your vision.
- Manage your time so you're focused on what makes a difference, not just what feels urgent.
- Get feedback and adjust course before small problems become career-limiting mistakes.
- Create catalytic breakthrough projects that build momentum.
- Navigate crisis and complexity with confidence.

The world has changed dramatically since the first edition of this book. Today's executives face challenges that barely existed 15 years ago: constant digital connectivity, hybrid work dynamics, stakeholder complexity, the pace of technological change, and the pressure to perform in an always-on culture.

But the fundamental challenge remains the same: How do you use your first 100 days to establish yourself as a transformational

leader while delivering operational excellence? How do you make your mark before the organization makes its judgment about you?

That's what this book will teach you.

AN INVITATION

Your first 100 days are simultaneously one of the most exciting and most daunting experiences of your career. You have tremendous opportunities ahead of you. You also face real risks. As the ancient Chinese text, the I Ching says, there is often “difficulty in the beginning.”

But here's what I know after coaching executives through this transition: the leaders who succeed aren't necessarily smarter or more talented than those who struggle. They're the ones who have a clear framework for thinking about their first 100 days and the discipline to execute against it.

This book will give you that framework. Let's begin.