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Congratulations on landing your new position. Now the real challenge begins. You're about to be measured not only by what you accomplish in the next three months, but by how you make your mark. Like many newly appointed executives, you probably want to articulate your mission and hit the ground running. But a gung-ho approach usually fails, so don't do it. Consider the example of one executive, who was completely energized by his new job as a senior vice president of a failing division at a major New York bank. Formerly an attorney at a stodgy law firm, the 40-something executive was eager to abandon his firm's bureaucracy and formality to create an ideal work environment at the bank. For the first time in his career, he was totally in charge and ready to build a high-performing team of independent and committed members who would operate autonomously, but with a shared vision. He began his first day by setting an agenda and informing his staff that major changes lay ahead. In the weeks that followed, he reorganized the staff, eliminated three positions and brought in two of his "own people." He also redesigned several systems and engaged a consultant to analyze the team's performance. Finally, he instituted staff meetings at which each senior member was expected to share ideas about future activities.

The vice president was astounded when, at the first meeting, no one spoke up. Each of his staff members sat at the table as if in a stupor. He couldn't figure out why they seemed so unprepared for the exciting opportunities ahead. The reason soon became clear. Rather than create an ideal workplace and collaborative team, he'd operated as an individual contributor, expecting his team to buy in without clear direction.

Soon after, the bank retained an executive coach to improve the department's performance. In team interviews, the vice president discovered that he hadn't accounted for his staff's reaction to a newcomer or to massive, unexplained changes. While they were just as anxious to turn the department around, they saw his leadership as a direct assault on their prior efforts. They believed he was insensitive to their potential contributions, unaware of their experience and unwilling to communicate or share his vision for the group. They described him as a train rushing full-steam ahead without getting the passengers on board.

A Fresh Perspective

The newly hired chief information officer at a major New York investment firm had a different experience. As a newcomer to a recently merged organization, the CIO was recruited to bring a fresh perspective to a sleepy department. Looking around on her first day of work, she observed outdated systems, a poorly organized help desk and several frightened veteran staff members - two of whom had applied for her position. She announced immediately that she wouldn't make any immediate changes in staff or operations. While her statement brought immediate sighs of relief, she realized that she still needed to create trust and commitment before forging ahead.

A series of one-on-one meetings with each staff member led to several team meetings led by selected staffers. The team elicited ideas about where the department needed to go and how it might get there, including thoughts on necessary resources, time frames and assignments. Then, realizing that she'd need corporate support to launch appropriate solutions, she began a campaign to meet business partners, peers and clients throughout the firm. She scheduled a packed weekly agenda of breakfasts, lunches, visits, focus groups and data-gathering during her first three months.

At the end of those 90 days, the CIO had a clear sense of her staff's abilities and personalities and how the company functioned, so she could create several proposals for needed change. While her initial instincts were mostly correct, and having instituted them earlier might have saved time and money, waiting bought her loyalty, which paved the way for achieving her initiatives. By her six-month review, she was credited with turning the department around and rewarded with an increased budget.

Stories like these teach us that making your debut a hit takes effort. While there's no formula for guaranteed success, use these basic rules to effectively manage your first three months in a new position. Consider the Impact

In the first 90 days, colleagues will form their image of you. So early on, when the way you'll be typecast is still within your control, be conscious of how you want to be perceived. Later, it will be more

difficult to change others' opinions. To make the best first impression, try to be seen as one of the players. All things being equal, people prefer working with others with whom they feel a connection. Next, think about what you want to achieve in both content and context. Don't just strive to get things done. Get them done in a way that will gain you the following and impact you want.

"You have a window of opportunity in the first three months," says Ruth Diem, human-resources vice president at Hearst Magazines Inc. in New York. "People are watching you, expecting that you'll make changes. If you move too quickly, you can ruffle important feathers. But if you wait too long, you can disappoint or even lose your opportunity to do some critical things. So timing and knowledge about the culture become critical factors," she says.

Identify company managers who are well-respected and determine their characteristics. Think about the adjectives others use to describe them, and how you'd like to be described. Write down these adjectives, then define behaviors that illustrate these attributes. Uncover success patterns in your organization and model them in your activities.

Balance People With Process

After you've arranged your office and learned how to use the phone, e-mail and computer systems, concentrate on important interpersonal activities. Executives who remember to balance interactions with transactions integrate faster and easier.

Become effective by building relationships, learning about your colleagues' competencies and gathering information about teams and turf. "It's critical to get to know your peers," says Jo Bennet, a vice president at Battalia Winston International, a New York-based executive search firm. "You can't just be the vice president of marketing anymore. You'll be on a team with other vice presidents - of sales, operations, finance - and need to have their cooperation, trust and friendship to achieve your goals," she says. "Make sure you meet these people in the first few weeks with a get-to-know-you meeting. Learn about the opportunities and pitfalls, get them to like you, gain their trust and understand that information is power in the new organization."

One key is imbuing your new colleagues with a vested interest in your success. "Sometimes peers, more than your boss or subordinates, can help you negotiate those formative early months in a new position," says Ms. Bennet. "You need to bond with these people. It's the single most important thing you can do."

Learn the Culture

Exercise caution when making early friendships. Sometimes managers who are in jeopardy will befriend a newcomer as a way of staying in the mainstream. A habit of cautious openness in which you're friendly, but not prematurely intimate, will serve you well until you get a better sense of who's who.

Learn which executives hold power, both evident and hidden. Every organization has a hierarchy, and status can be the language of power. Who has plum assignments, attractive accoutrements and appealing office assignments? In some organizations, administrative staffs reflect their boss's power as well. Getting information that will help you understand the organization's culture and values is a critical first step, says Irene Waxman, human-resources vice president in New York at Sanofi Beaute, a division of the French pharmaceutical company. "It's also important that new employees be introduced to key players as part of their orientation, so they get a well-rounded picture of the place."

Look to your company to facilitate these acquaintances, says Ms. Waxman, who periodically arranges luncheons for new employees at her company to meet the president or CEO. "This not only helps newcomers, but gives chief officers an opportunity to get feedback about what's working and what needs to be improved in the organization," she says.

Observe the obvious and subtle alliances and how others interact around the office, both in meetings and informally. Are doors open or do people make appointments with each other? Is there a lot of emphasis on face time, or do people seem to come and go on their own schedules? How do people communicate: in person or technologically? How are e-mail, memos and voice mail used? In meetings, who seems to command respect and who's overlooked?

In your enthusiasm to show how effective and smart you are, be cautious about recommending changes or delivering critiques. "Sometimes, being right is the booby prize," says Dr. Marcia Greenleaf, a New York psychologist who works with corporate executives. You don't want to be seen as an outsider who only finds fault with well-established people and ideas, she says. Balance initiatives with working within the culture. In certain organizations, you'd be wise to wait and watch before launching major changes, even if you were hired to be an innovator. In others, you'll be expected to move quickly and will be judged by your decisive action, she says.

Line Up Support

If your organization doesn't have a formal plan for integrating new hires, take the lead in getting to know everyone. Align yourself with your new boss. That person hired you for a reason that may not have been made entirely clear in initial meetings. Get to know style, work patterns and preferred ways and timing of communication.

For example, is your new boss a visual or oral communicator? Is a long, written report, short memo or meeting the best way to gain an audience? To find out, simply ask. Then learn to match your boss's rhythms, values and preferences and agree (at least publicly) with the agenda.

Get to know your subordinates by meeting with each of them individually. Uncover their expectations, interest in learning new skills or developing themselves, previous disappointments, career expectations and concerns. What turns them on and off? What are their dreams and desires? What do they expect from you?

Gain buy-in and agreement before proceeding with changes. Group psychology teaches us that during your first three months, group dynamics are forming. Colleagues are polite and cautious when getting to know each other. Next comes norming, in which the group members develop rules and plans for achieving goals. This stage is followed by storming: infighting, bids for power and control, undermining behaviors, disagreements and conflict. Finally, the group begins to perform, operating as a team, understanding the rules and getting on with their roles. By knowing which stage your group is in, you'll better understand how fast and far you can proceed.

Set Small Personal Goals

If you're used to being a heavy contributor, moving slowly will require patience. Lauren Ashwell, now a vice president at Morgan Stanley & Co. in New York, says she had to learn to scale back during her first few months at her previous employer. "Perhaps it was a factor of having been with one company for a long time," she says, "but I found that I was very hard on myself about getting up to speed quickly. I had unrealistic expectations about how fast I would 'settle in,' which I defined as how I acted and felt after 12 years at my previous company. Even though I got good feedback from management during my first weeks on the job, in my own mind, I was underperforming."

Ms. Ashwell says she turned the corner by heeding advice she'd once given to others. "Once I gave myself a reality check, I realized I needed to get a grip. I wasn't a seasoned employee at my new company yet, so I established short-term goals and deliberately tracked the changes I made. This approach gave me a focus and perspective and boosted my confidence during the first months on the new job."

The curtain has opened on your first act. Play to the theater, remembering the acoustics and blind spots. Think of your colleagues, staff and superiors as your audience, and be ready to manage up, down and across. Your actions will often speak louder than your words. Pace yourself when moving forward. Treat others respectfully, develop relationships before attempting to achieve and let others know your plans and progress.

Once acclimated, concentrate on deliverables - what you contribute; measurables - the impact of what you do; and promotables - what gets you noticed. Think about how your new position will broaden your skills and expand your visibility within the company and industry. Your new role might be a long run or a big splash, which can serve as a platform for other opportunities.

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