

**UPDATED +
EXPANDED**



THE FIRST 90 DAYS

**Proven Strategies *for* Getting Up
to Speed *Faster and Smarter***

MICHAEL D. WATKINS

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

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Harvard Business Review Press • Boston, Massachusetts

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To Aidan,

Maeve, and Niall

My beautiful children.

—M. W.

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PREFACE FOR THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

What a difference a decade makes. When I set out to write *The First 90 Days* in 2001, little was out there about getting up to speed in new roles or onboarding new hires (hereafter “leadership transitions”).¹ At the time, I was teaching negotiation and corporate diplomacy at Harvard Business School. Although I had coauthored a modestly successful book on senior executive transitions in 1999—*Right from the Start* with Dan Ciampa—I had been counseled by my colleagues at HBS that it was a risky career move to focus further on the subject.²

While I appreciated their advice, in the end I decided to push forward to write the book. Leadership transitions were just too interesting and ripe for study; it was virtually an untilled field from both intellectual and practical points of view. Also in late 1999, soon after the publication of *Right from the Start*, I had been asked by Johnson & Johnson’s corporate management development group to develop workshops and coaching processes to accelerate the company’s leaders in transition. This work soon evolved into an engaging development partnership, and J&J became a test bed for the development and deployment of my ideas.

The First 90 Days was a distillation of what I had learned during roughly two and a half years of working with hundreds

of leaders at the vice president and director levels in all regions of the world. The book built on some foundational ideas developed in *Right from the Start*; for example the importance of accelerating learning, securing early wins, and creating alliances. However, the ideas had been augmented, tested, modified, and turned into practical frameworks and tools for helping leaders at all levels accelerate their transitions.

It was that distillation—the mix of concepts, tools, cases, and practical advice—that really hit the mark with leaders in transition. I had the wonderful experience of seeing sales of *The First 90 Days*, which was published in November 2003, take off like a rocket. By the summer of 2004, the book was on the *BusinessWeek* best-seller list; it stayed there for fifteen months. This success coincided fortuitously with my departure from Harvard and fueled my decision not to seek another academic position. Instead I cofounded a leadership development company—Genesis Advisers—dedicated to helping companies accelerate everyone taking new roles.

Business books, even highly successful ones, tend to sell strongly for a year or two and then fade. This has not been the case for *The First 90 Days*. I have had the pleasure of seeing the book sell strongly for a decade, having so far sold almost eight hundred thousand copies in English, including seventy-five thousand in 2011. For the past ten years, the book has consistently remained among Harvard Business Review Press's best-sellers. It has also been translated into twenty-seven languages and was the basis for *Leadership Transitions*, Harvard Business Publishing's award-winning e-learning tool.³

Enduring success of this kind has qualified *The First 90 Days* to be labeled a “business classic.” The term “classic” evokes a whiff of mustiness with which I am not entirely comfortable.

Nonetheless, I was honored in 2009 to have the book named one of the 100 best business books of all time after an extensive review by Jack Covert and Todd Sattersten at 800-CEO-READ. That recognition was a mark not only of the importance and staying power of the ideas, but also of the continuing need for every new generation of leaders to learn to make successful transitions.

The success of *The First 90 Days* also fueled and was fueled by a rising wave of interest on the part of companies in talent management, onboarding of new hires, and CEO succession. From the outset, Genesis Advisers' work at J&J focused on both accelerating new hires and speeding up internal promotions; I continue to believe that it is a mistake to focus just on onboarding and not on accelerating all transitions. However, it was interest in onboarding that really propelled the field forward, as the war for talent became ever more fierce, and the high costs of derailment, under-performance, and lack of retention of new hires more evident. So many companies began to adopt First 90 Days ideas to accelerate onboarding of new hires. Beyond the work we have done with our clients at Genesis Advisers, First 90 Days concepts and tools have independently been adapted and implemented by learning and development and human resources professionals in thousands of companies. In 2006 *The Economist* named *The First 90 Days* "the onboarding bible."⁴ More recently, the increasing maturity of the field has been marked by major conferences devoted to the subject of onboarding and transition acceleration.

My own thinking, of course, has also evolved over the past decade, and this has resulted in numerous improvements in this new edition of the book. I have remained deeply engaged in working with leaders in transition, doing research, and translating

my practical experience and findings into better frameworks and tools. Key follow-on publications include:

- *Shaping the Game*, a 2006 Harvard Business Review Press book that looks at how new leaders should apply ideas from the fields of negotiation and influence to make successful transitions.⁵
- *The First 90 Days in Government*, a version of *The First 90 Days* adapted to the public sector and coauthored with Peter Daly, a retired senior Treasury Department official, and Cate Reavis.⁶
- “The Pillars of Executive Onboarding,” an October 2008 *Talent Management* article on the major focal points for onboarding: business orientation, expectations, alignment, cultural adaptation, and political connection.⁷
- *Your Next Move*, a 2009 Harvard Business Press book that highlights the need for leaders in transition to distinguish between the organizational change challenges and the personal adaptive challenges they are confronting. It also takes a deep dive into specific types of transitions such as promotion, leading former peers, onboarding, and international moves.⁸
- “Picking the Right Transition Strategy,” a January 2009 *Harvard Business Review* article that further develops the STARS framework (start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment, and sustaining success) introduced in the first edition of *The First 90 Days* for matching transition strategy to these various types of business situations.⁹

- “How Managers Become Leaders,” a June 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article summarizing the research I did on “the seven seismic shifts” that leaders experience as they make the very challenging transition from a senior functional role to running an entire business.¹⁰

My thinking has also been powerfully informed by my work during the past eight years in developing successive generations of First 90 Days offerings for our clients at Genesis Advisers. Recently this has included a new generation of Acceleration Coaching process, a web-based workshop that includes virtual breakout groups, and a specialized program to help physicians transition from clinical practices and research institutions into commercial environments.

I also have been gratified that *The First 90 Days*, and my subsequent work, have spawned so much interest in the study and practical application of transition acceleration ideas. Much excellent original research and writing has been done.¹¹ And, since imitation truly is the sincerest form of flattery, I have been flattered to see many of my concepts, tools, and terms adopted by other practitioners and consultants—for example, the STARS framework, transition traps, the importance of securing early wins,¹² the idea of “the fuzzy front-end” (referring to the period between getting a job and formally stepping into the role and developed jointly with Dan Ciampa),¹³ and the important distinction between the organizational change challenge and the personal adaptive challenge in assessing the transition risk confronting new leaders.¹⁴

The past ten years have been a wonderful journey, and I have many people to thank for helping to make it happen. Foremost are the two people who had the biggest impact on the early development of my ideas and their application in the real world: my *Right from the Start* coauthor Dan Ciampa and my partner

Shawna Slack. Then there have been my editors and publishers at Harvard Business Review Press, especially Jeff Kehoe, who has been consistently wonderful in encouraging, directing, and refining my work. I also very much appreciate the support of leaders at key Genesis Advisers client companies who have been willing to take the leap and invest in our work, notably Becky Atkeison and her colleagues at FedEx and Inaki Bastarrika, Ron Bossert,Carolynn Cameron, Michael Ehret, Ted Nguyen, and Doug Soo Hoo at Johnson & Johnson. Finally, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the staff at Genesis Advisers for all their hard work, and especially to Kerry Brunelle for her support in editing the manuscript.

**THE
FIRST
90
DAYS**

Introduction:

The First 90 Days

The president of the United States gets 100 days to prove himself; you get 90. The actions you take during your first few months in a new role will largely determine whether you succeed or fail.

Failure in a new assignment can spell the end of a promising career. But making a successful transition is about more than just avoiding failure. When leaders derail, their problems can almost always be traced to vicious cycles that developed in the first few months on the job. And for every leader who fails outright, there are many others who survive but do not realize their full potential. As a result, they lose opportunities to advance their careers and help their organizations thrive.

Why are transitions critical? When I surveyed more than thirteen hundred senior HR leaders, almost 90 percent agreed that “transitions into new roles are the most challenging times in the professional lives of leaders.”¹ And nearly three-quarters agreed that “success or failure during the first few months is a strong predictor of overall success or failure in the job.” So even though a bad transition does not necessarily doom you to failure, it makes success a lot less likely.

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The good news on transitions is that they give you a chance to start afresh and make needed changes in an organization. But transitions are also periods of acute vulnerability, because you lack established working relationships and a detailed understanding of your new role. You're managing under a microscope, subject to a high degree of scrutiny as people around you strive to figure out who you are and what you represent as a leader. Opinions of your effectiveness begin to form surprisingly quickly, and, once formed, they're very hard to change. If you're successful in building credibility and securing early wins, the momentum likely will propel you through the rest of your tenure. But if you dig yourself into a hole early on, you will face an uphill battle from that point forward.

Building Your Career Transition Competence

A long career at a single company (or even two or three companies) is increasingly a thing of the past. Leaders experience many transitions, so the ability to transition quickly and effectively into a new role has become a critical skill. In a study of 580 leaders conducted jointly by Genesis Advisers, *Harvard Business Review*, and the International Institute of Management Development (hereafter the Genesis/HBR/IMD study), respondents reported an average of 18.2 years of professional work experience.² The typical leader had been promoted 4.1 times, moved between business functions (such as from sales to marketing) 1.8 times, joined a new company 3.5 times, moved between business units in the same company 1.9 times, and moved geographically 2.2 times. This totals 13.5 major transitions per leader, or one every 1.3 years. As you will learn later, some of these transitions likely happened in parallel. But the implications are clear: every successful career is a series of successful assignments, and every successful assignment is launched with a successful transition.

Beyond these easily identified milestones, leaders also experience many hidden transitions. These transitions occur when there are substantial changes in leaders' roles and responsibilities without corresponding changes in titles. These are common occurrences, often the result of organizational shifts due to rapid growth, restructuring, and acquisition. Hidden transitions can be particularly perilous, because leaders do not always recognize them or give them the attention they deserve. The most dangerous transition can be the one you don't recognize is happening.

Leaders also are impacted by the transitions of many others around them. Each year about a quarter of the managers in a typical *Fortune* 500 company changes jobs.³ And each leader transition materially impacts the performance of roughly a dozen other people—bosses, peers, direct reports, and other stakeholders.⁴ So even if you aren't personally in transition, you likely are having the transitions of others inflicted on you. To see this, think about the other people in your immediate neighborhood who also are in their first 90 days. The number likely will surprise you.

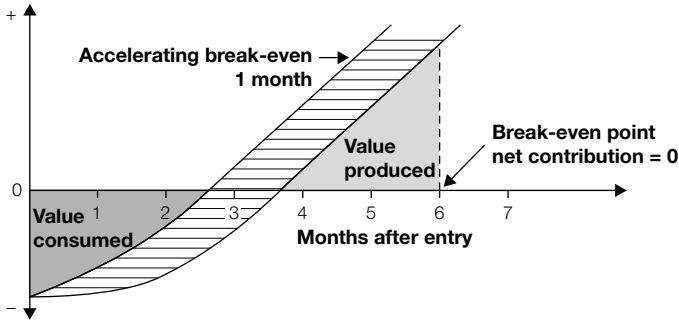
The problem is that even though a lot has been written and discussed about how to be a more effective leader in general, little research and writing addresses how to successfully accelerate through leadership and career transitions. People still go through these all-important career crucibles with little preparation and no reliable knowledge or tools to help them. That's what this book is designed to give you.

Reaching the Break-Even Point

Your goal in every transition is to get as rapidly as possible to the *break-even point*. This is the point at which you have contributed as much value to your new organization as you have consumed from it. As shown in figure I-1, new leaders are net consumers of

FIGURE 1-1

The break-even point



value early on; as they learn and begin to take action, they begin to create value. From the break-even point onward, they are (one hopes) net contributors of value to their organizations.

When more than two hundred company CEOs and presidents were asked for their best estimates of the time it takes a typical midlevel leader who has been promoted or hired from the outside to reach the break-even point, the average of their responses was 6.2 months.⁵ Of course, there can be a great deal of variation in the time it takes to reach the break-even point. If you have inherited a disaster—the classic *burning platform*—you may be creating value from the moment your appointment is announced. If you have been hired from the outside into a very successful organization, it may take a year or more for you to be a net value contributor. However, even though the time varies (and I explore in depth the challenges of different types of transitions), the goal is the same: to get there as quickly and effectively as possible.

This book provides a blueprint for dramatically condensing the time it takes you to reach the break-even point, regardless of your

level in your organization. In fact, independent research has shown that you can reduce the time by as much as 40 percent through rigorous application of the principles described in this book.⁶

Avoiding Transition Traps

Like most leaders, you've probably learned to make transitions in the school of hard knocks—trying things, making mistakes, and ultimately winning through. In the process, you've developed approaches that have worked for you . . . at least until now. But what works well in some situations doesn't work in others, and you may not figure that out until it's too late. That's why it is crucial to follow a comprehensive framework for making transitions, one that distills the experience of many leaders facing a diverse range of situations.

Consider, for example, the following list of common traps, developed through interviews with experienced leaders and supplemented by responses to questions in the Genesis/HBR/IMD study. As you look at the list, think about your own experience.

Sticking with what you know. You believe you will be successful in the new role by doing the same things you did in your previous role, only more so. You fail to see that success in the new role requires you to stop doing some things and to embrace new competencies.

Falling prey to the “action imperative.” You feel as if you need to take action, and you try too hard, too early to put your own stamp on the organization. You are too busy to learn, and you make bad decisions and catalyze resistance to your initiatives.

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Setting unrealistic expectations. You don't negotiate your mandate or establish clear, achievable objectives. You may perform well but still fail to meet the expectations of your boss and other key stakeholders.

Attempting to do too much. You rush off in all directions, launching multiple initiatives in the hope that some will pay off. People become confused, and no critical mass of resources gets focused on key initiatives.

Coming in with “the” answer. You come in with your mind made up, or you reach conclusions too quickly about “the” problems and “the” solutions. You alienate people who could help you understand what's going on, and you squander opportunities to develop support for good solutions.

Engaging in the wrong type of learning. You spend too much time focused on learning about the technical part of the business and not enough about the cultural and political dimensions of your new role. You don't build the cultural insight, relationships, and information conduits you need if you're to understand what is really going on.

Neglecting horizontal relationships. You spend too much time focused on vertical relationships—up to the boss and down to direct reports—and not enough on peers and other stakeholders. You don't fully understand what it will take to succeed, and you miss early opportunities to build supportive alliances.

Have you fallen into any of these traps in the past? Have you seen others do so? Now think about your new role. Are you in danger of making any of these mistakes? To help avoid derailment and get to the break-even point faster, keep these in mind as you take on your new role.

Creating Momentum

Each of these traps enmeshes its victims in a *vicious cycle* (see figure I-2). By failing to learn the right things in the right ways at the outset, for example, you can make bad initial decisions that damage your credibility. Then, because people don't trust your judgment, it can become still more difficult to learn what you need to know. You consume energy compensating for early miscalculations, and the downward spiral takes hold.

But your objective is not only to avoid vicious cycles; you need to create *virtuous cycles* that help you create momentum and establish an upward spiral of increasing effectiveness (see figure I-3).

FIGURE I-2

The vicious cycle of transitions

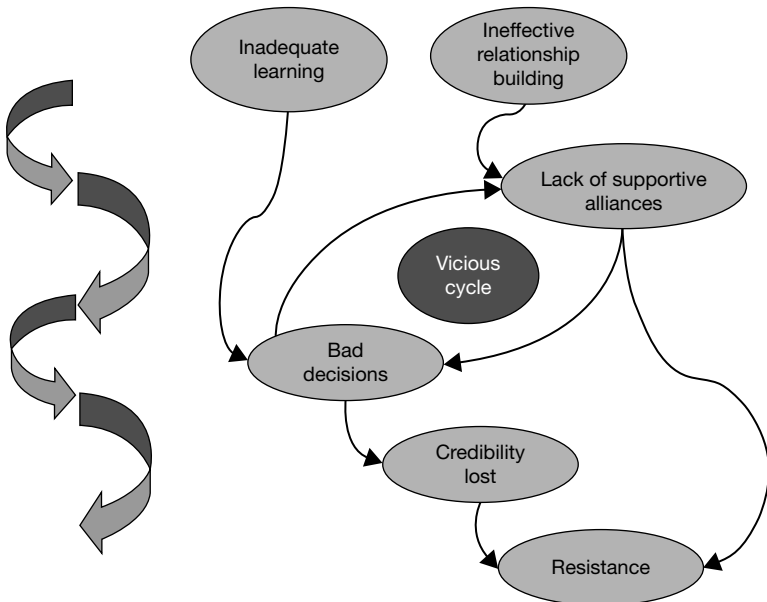
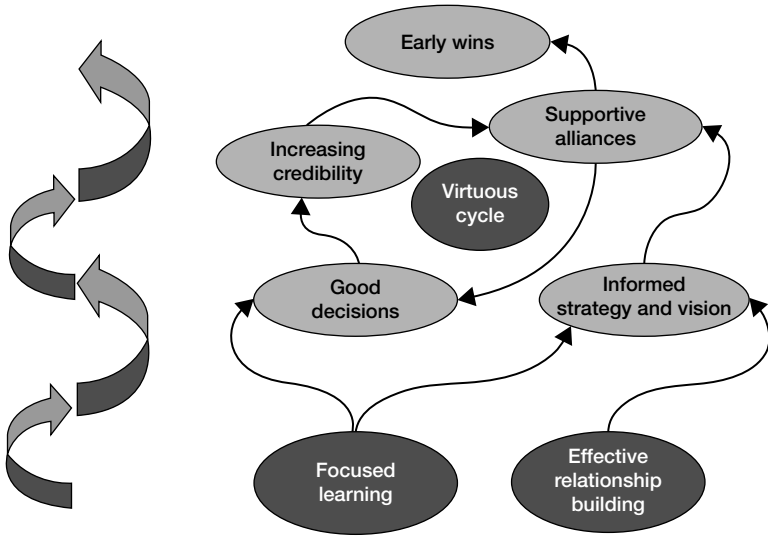


FIGURE 1-3

The virtuous cycle of transitions



Good initial decisions founded on the right kind of learning, for example, bolster your personal credibility. As people come to trust your judgment, your ability to learn accelerates, and you equip yourself to make sound calls on tougher issues.

Your overriding goal in getting up to speed and taking charge is to generate momentum by creating virtuous cycles, and to avoid getting caught in vicious cycles that damage your credibility. Leadership ultimately is about influence and leverage. You are, after all, only one person. To be successful, you need to mobilize the energy of many others in your organization. If you do the right things, then your vision, your expertise, and your drive can propel you forward and serve as seed crystals. If you don't, you can end up caught in negative feedback loops from which it may be difficult or impossible to escape.

Understanding the Fundamental Principles

The root causes of transition failure always lie in a pernicious interaction between the new role, with its opportunities and pitfalls, and the individual, with his strengths and vulnerabilities. Failure is never only about the flaws of the new leader. Indeed, all the failed leaders I studied had achieved significant successes in the past. Nor is it only about a no-win situation in which not even a superhuman leader could have carried the day. The business situations facing leaders who derail are no tougher than those in which others succeed brilliantly. Transition failures happen because new leaders either misunderstand the essential demands of the situation or lack the skill and flexibility to adapt to them.

The good news is that there are systematic methods you can employ to both lessen the likelihood of failure and reach the break-even point faster. The specific business situations that confront transitioning leaders vary. But specific types of transition situations, such as start-ups and turnarounds, share certain features and imperatives. Further, there are fundamental principles—for example, securing early wins—that underpin success in all transitions at all levels. The key, then, is to match your strategy to the situation.

More than a decade's worth of research and practice has shown that you can dramatically accelerate your transition into your new role. Do the right things—the essential transition tasks listed next—and you will rapidly create momentum that will propel you to even greater successes.

- **Prepare yourself.** This means making a mental break from your old job and preparing to take charge in the new one. Perhaps the biggest pitfall you face is assuming that what has made you successful to this point will

continue to do so. The dangers of sticking with what you know, working extremely hard at doing it, and failing miserably are very real.

- **Accelerate your learning.** You need to climb the learning curve as fast as you can in your new organization. This means understanding its markets, products, technologies, systems, and structures, as well as its culture and politics. Learning about a new organization can feel like drinking from a fire hose. You must be systematic and focused about deciding what you need to learn and how you will learn it most efficiently.
- **Match your strategy to the situation.** Different types of situations require you to make significant adjustments in how you plan for and execute your transition. Start-ups, for instance—of a new product, process, plant, or business—present challenges quite different from those you would face while turning around a product, process, or plant in serious trouble. A clear diagnosis of the situation is an essential prerequisite for developing your action plan.
- **Secure early wins.** Early wins build your credibility and create momentum. They create virtuous cycles that leverage the energy you put into the organization to create a pervasive sense that good things are happening. In the first few weeks, you need to identify opportunities to build personal credibility. In the first 90 days, you need to identify ways to create value and improve business results that will help you get to the break-even point more rapidly.
- **Negotiate success.** Because no other single relationship is more important, you need to figure out how to build a

productive working relationship with your new boss (or bosses) and manage her expectations. This means carefully planning for a series of critical conversations about the situation, expectations, working style, resources, and your personal development. Crucially, it means developing and gaining consensus on your 90-day plan.

- **Achieve alignment.** The higher you rise in an organization, the more you must play the role of organizational architect. This means figuring out whether the organization's strategic direction is sound, bringing its structure into alignment with its strategy, and developing the processes and skill bases necessary to realize your strategic intent.
- **Build your team.** If you are inheriting a team, you need to evaluate, align, and mobilize its members. You likely also need to restructure it to better meet the demands of the situation. Your willingness to make tough early personnel calls and your capacity to select the right people for the right positions are among the most important drivers of success during your transition and beyond. You need to be both systematic and strategic in approaching the team-building challenge.
- **Create coalitions.** Your success depends on your ability to influence people outside your direct line of control. Supportive alliances, both internal and external, are necessary if you are to achieve your goals. You therefore should start right away to identify those whose support is essential for your success, and to figure out how to line them up on your side.

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- **Keep your balance.** In the personal and professional tumult of a transition, you must work hard to maintain your equilibrium and preserve your ability to make good judgments. The risks of losing perspective, becoming isolated, and making bad calls are ever present during transitions. There is much you can do to accelerate your personal transition and to gain more control over your work environment. The right advice-and-counsel network is an indispensable resource.
- **Accelerate everyone.** Finally, you need to help all those in your organization—direct reports, bosses, and peers—accelerate their own transitions. The fact that you're in transition means they are too. The quicker you can get your new direct reports up to speed, the more you will help your own performance. Beyond that, the potential benefits to the organization of systematically accelerating everyone's transitions are vast.

The chapters that follow offer instructive stories and actionable guidelines and tools for succeeding in each of these ten tasks. You will learn how to diagnose your situation and create action plans tailored to your needs, regardless of your level in the organization or the business situation you face. In the process you will build a 90-day plan that will accelerate you into your new role.

Assessing Transition Risk

The first step is to diagnose the types of transitions you're going through. Whether you're preparing to interview for a new position or have taken a new role, this is the starting point for applying the fundamental principles. Promotion and onboarding into new companies are the most frequent shifts.

However, most leaders taking new roles experience multiple transitions in parallel—for example, joining a new company and moving to a new location, or being promoted and moving from a functional to a cross-functional role. In fact, participants in the executive programs we studied reported on average experiencing 2.2 major shifts (such as getting a promotion, joining a new company, moving between business units, moving geographically) the last time they took new roles.⁷

This complexity adds to the transition challenge—and the risk of derailing—and it means it is critical for you to understand the types of transitions you’re experiencing and to identify which shifts you are finding most challenging. A simple way to do this is to complete the Transition Risk Assessment in table I-1.

Mapping Out Your First 90 Days

Your transition begins the moment you learn you are being considered for a new job (see figure I-4 for key transition milestones). When it ends depends very much on the situation you face. No matter what kind of transition you’re making, by roughly the three-month mark key people in the organization—your bosses, peers, and direct reports—typically expect you to be getting some traction.

Thus, you should use the 90-day period as a planning horizon. Doing so will help you confront the need to operate in a compressed time frame. If you’re lucky, you may get some lead time between learning you’re being considered and actually sitting in the chair. Use that time to begin educating yourself about your organization.

No matter how much preparation time you get, start planning what you hope to accomplish by specific milestones. Even a few

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TABLE I-1

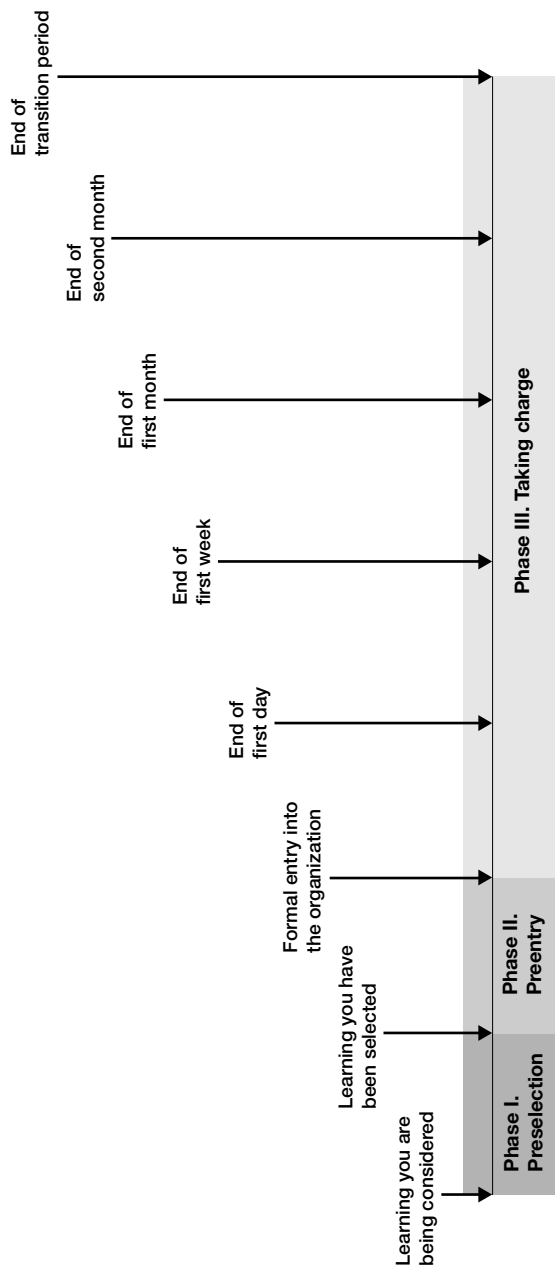
Transition Risk Assessment

To transition effectively, first identify the risks you face as you move into your new role using the Transition Risk Assessment. Start by checking off the types of transitions you are experiencing using the middle column. Then, for each item you checked, assess how challenging you are finding that particular shift on a 1–10 scale, where 1 means very easy and 10 means very difficult. Total the numbers in the right-hand column to get your Transition Risk Index (up to 100). The index gives you a sense of the magnitude of the challenge and the specific dimensions of your overall transition on which you most need to focus.

Type of transition	Check each that applies	Assess relative difficulty for you (1–10)
Moving to a new industry or profession		
Joining a new company		
Moving to a new unit or group in the same company		
Being promoted to a higher level		
Leading former peers (assuming you have been promoted)		
Moving from one function to another (e.g., sales to marketing)		
Taking on a cross-functional leadership role for the first time		
Moving geographically		
Entering a new national or ethnic culture		
Having to do two jobs at the same time (finishing old role while starting new one)		
Taking on a newly created role (as opposed to an existing role)		
Entering an organization in which major change already is going on		
Sum the numbers in the right-most column to calculate your Transition Risk Index		

FIGURE I-4

Key transition milestones



hours of preentry planning can go a long way. Begin by thinking about your first day in the new job. What do you want to do by the end of that day? Then move to the first week. Then focus on the end of the first month, the second month, and finally the three-month mark. These plans will be sketchy, but the simple act of beginning to plan will help clear your head.

Hitting the Ground Running

This book is for new leaders at all levels, from first-time managers to CEOs. The fundamental principles of effective transition acceleration hold up well across all levels. Every new leader needs to quickly become familiar with the new organization, secure early wins, and build supportive coalitions. That's why this book provides guidelines for translating principles into plans tailored to your own situation. As you continue through it, you should read actively, making notes about the applicability of specific points to your situation, as well as thinking about how the advice should be customized to your situation.

Acceleration Checklist

Lists like this one appear at the end of each chapter to help you crystallize the key lessons and apply them to your situation—both to prepare for interviews when you're being considered for a new role and to speed your transition once you are in it.

1. What will it take for you to reach the break-even point more quickly?
2. What are some traps you might encounter, and how can you avoid them?

3. What can you do to create virtuous cycles and build momentum in your new role?
4. What types of transitions are you experiencing? Which are you finding most challenging, and why?
5. What are the key elements and milestones in your 90-day plan?