

CEO SURVIVAL: THE FIRST 100 DAYS (PLUS 1148 MORE)

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). When the discussion turned to doing a five-year plan, I raised the question of how long the last three CEOs had lasted. The average was 23 months. In fact, as a consultant, I had outlasted them all. I suggested to the recently elected CEO that it might be wise to develop a new strategic approach that more closely matched his probable tenure rather than to revise the current plan by establishing an optimistic set of principles and ideas that wouldn't pass the straight-face test, no matter how sincerely they were developed. The meeting immediately got down to business. This is the memo I sent to him following that meeting.

TO: Our New CEO

RE: Your First 100 Days, 13.32 Weeks, 2400 Hours, 144,000 Minutes, 8,640,000 Seconds (and the next 1148 days after that)

There are important, urgent *Executive Actions* you need to take 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 have the job... you'll see).

Your perspective will change. Your problems will be different. Just how successful you will be, in my judgment, will be determined 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 survived longer than any of your 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. ***Your Time is Short.*** The typical career span of a CEO in the United States and Canada is 41 months, according to an average of calculations by several of the United States' most reputable placement agencies. 41 months = 3.42 years (or 3 5/12 years); 10.25 quarters; 178.27 weeks; 1250 days; 30,000 hours; 1,796,991.62 minutes; 107,819,497 seconds. It seems like a lot, but time simply flies when you're the Chief Executive.

2. ***The Resistance is Formidable.*** The prime directive of all cultures is to preserve and defend yesterday by detecting and preventing any signs of tomorrow from surviving. When there are doubts about our direction, hesitation or timidity, yesterday will win, every time.
3. ***People Expect Action from Day One.*** They expect, hope and fear that when you walk in the door you'll begin making changes and making things happen.
4. ***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.
5. ***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. Change will occur more easily at first. Later, change gets harder and harder. 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.
6. ***Cultures are Modified in Only One Way.*** Changing cultures is hard and takes time. I usually think in terms of forty quarters of time with persistence to start significant culture change progress. 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 direction, clarification, validation and repetition.
7. ***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.
8. ***Speed Beats Smart Every Time.*** The search for perfection before acting will kill any initiative that gets underway. You're going to make mistakes in the early days; make them as soon as you can. Wherever possible, make next week's mistakes this week, it will be better than if you waited.

Each day you wait to make a decision or take an action, someone learns how to better defeat you.
9. ***Change Often Causes Bad News For Many.*** One thing we know about bad news is that it ripens badly, and begins to smell rather quickly. Get the garbage out as quickly as you can so you can deal with the true aftermath.
10. ***Silence is a Toxic Strategy.*** Failure to communicate quickly, compassionately and continuously will be create a vacuum that will be filled by anyone that has a passing thought. It is your destiny that's being defined whenever you permit people to guess, speculate, or hypothesize.

Control your own destiny, or someone else will shape it for you.

Now, let's talk about the **success behaviors** you'll need from the beginning. You must be prepared to:

 1. ***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-of’s, would-of’s and should-of’s that torpedo progress and your success.
2. **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, “<Name>’s 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 be no “b.s.” between us.
- We will continuously recognize achievement and achievers.
- Every question will be answered.

3. **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 who 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, and be memorable. All are concepts to get you to tomorrow.

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.

4. **Manage the self-appointed:** The greatest disasters will be the result of the work of those who think they know you best and who try to help you most. After all, because they know you so well, they are the only ones who can shoot you down – and they will. They might not mean to ... but they will. It can be death by question or by negative interpretation. Stay focused on your goals, communicate, and you will manage the self-appointed, self-anointed.
5. **Be the boss:** Eight out of 10 decisions you make will disappoint, anger or offend

some individual or group. Welcome to life at the top. Be satisfied with the good things you will get to do and accomplish. They are going to be spectacular. Stay focused. Be positive. Lead verbally.

6. **Talk and act in real time:** Do company-wide 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.
7. **Managers will manage:** Bureaucrats will try to count, measure and restore the past. They are the last to know that the goals have changed. They figure it out when they find out. Then, they mindlessly manage without new direction and new orders to follow.
8. **Leadership is primarily a verbal skill:** Your job is to go out to the horizon, look over the edge, then come back and tell us all where we're going and show us how to get there in 150 words or less. The bean counters can't do this, the price-cutters and slick marketers can't do this, neither can the management consultants...only you can do it by telling and showing us.
9. **The world moves at verbal speed:** your verbal speed. No matter how much is written, no matter how flashy the slides shows and PowerPoints, the organization will move forward at about 150 words per minute (the verbal speed of English-speaking cultures). Plans not verbalized, taught and retaught will fail.
10. **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 10 times before they begin to realize that you really do require them to change.

11. **Constantly talk about what you expect:** Use examples, use incentives, recognition and repetition.
12. **Build followership:** The most powerful way you build the followers you need is to recognize people personally, publicly and frequently.

There are some important external actions you need to orchestrate early on as well:

 1. **Get local help:** Find a peer, fellow CEO or senior level counselor of whom you can ask those embarrassing and sometimes silly questions all new CEOs have. If it's a consultant, keep their work separate from other agency-like things you will do in sales, marketing and merchandising. Find someone who can keep his or her mouth shut and who will be completely loyal to you.
 2. **Be visible in the community and the countryside:** Even though you may be uncomfortable with a reasonably high profile, **this is expected of you.** These times are opportunities to share your vision, draw your employees toward the goals you've selected, and to build a base of support for those times when things won't go well – and there surely will be some of those. The most powerful agent of change is you. You are the chief strategist, cheerleader and score keeper.
 3. **Change expectations:** Exercise the discipline of the strategist. Effective strategies are time-sensitive, brief, stated positively, understandable and clearly achievable. If you can combine your goals with your strategies, your odds of success go up dramatically. Two of the best models are:

- **Jack Welch** rebuilt GE with: Be #1 in your category, or #2 going for #1, or be preparing an exit strategy for leaving GE.
- **FedEx** – Absolutely, positively overnight.

Teach and live the ingredients of leadership:

1. **Be and stay positive:** Avoid the use of negative language which causes mostly bad news. Remember how badly bad news ripens.
2. **Be constructive:** Insist on useful, positive suggestions rather than mindless, negative criticism, questions and complaints.
3. **Be prompt:** Speed beats smart on the quest for perfection every time. There is simply no evidence that speeding up decision-making causes any more errors than decisions that are delayed by timidity, hesitation, or the search for the perfect solution. Do it now, ask it now, fix it now, challenge it now and change it now.
4. **Be outcome focused:** Work toward tomorrow rather than yesterday. Everyone owns the past in ways that cannot be overcome. As Stephen Covey would say, plan with the end in mind and you'll move forward with twice the velocity.
5. **Be reflective:** If you must examine the past, look only for those lessons that will usefully inform future actions and decisions.
6. **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.

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

Build new leaders who can move the organization where you need it to go because however good you are, the company is still run every day by the people who show up to do their jobs, each mostly wanting to go home on time.

You'll find me available 24/7 by fax, phone, e-mail, or texting.

With respect, admiration, hopefulness and warm regards,

James E. Lukaszewski, *ABC, Fellow IABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, BEPS Emeritus*

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