

A photograph of business professionals in a hallway. In the foreground, a man in a dark suit and a woman in a dark pinstriped skirt suit are walking. The man is wearing black loafers, and the woman is wearing black high-heeled pumps. They are walking on a polished wooden floor. In the background, another person is partially visible, holding a folder. The overall atmosphere is professional and business-oriented.

# GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

Onboarding Pitfalls  
and Best Practices  
for Business Leaders

By Randy Hain





Onboarding has been a relevant business topic and on the radar of most HR leaders inside larger organizations since the mid-90's when The First 90 Days by author Michael Watkins was released. Many companies followed his challenge to create helpful onboarding experiences for their new hires, particularly in leadership roles. These experiences varied greatly and had mixed results. Some organizations defined onboarding as 'employee orientation' and others left it to the new leaders to figure out for themselves, providing little or no organizational support.

In my capacity as an executive coach for senior executives, I have long observed how critical the first few months are to a new leader's success. Because of the typically rapid pace of business and an increasing lack of focus on individual leader development, leaders in new roles are often left to navigate the first months on their own without an effective road map for success or a coach to guide them.

**Randy Hain** is a business leader, community servant, award-winning author and national speaker. As the founder and president of Serviam Partners, he has built a vibrant national network built on authenticity and trust. He is a sought-after executive coach and onboarding expert for senior business leaders and consults with companies and business leaders looking to grow their authentic business relationships to improve performance and increase revenue.

# WHAT IS YOUR SITUATION?

YOU HAVE PERFORMED WELL AND RECEIVED A WELL-EARNED PROMOTION TO A MORE SENIOR POSITION IN YOUR COMPANY. MAYBE YOU WERE RECRUITED FROM OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION INTO A LEADERSHIP ROLE. ONCE THE EXCITEMENT WEARS OFF, THE SERIOUS WORK OF GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START IN YOUR NEW JOB WILL REQUIRE YOUR FULL ATTENTION.

## ARE YOU PREPARED?

Taking on a new leadership role and leading a new team or organization is always a challenge...hopefully a positive one. My hope in sharing these obstacles and best practices is that you will avoid the pitfalls which I have seen affect so many leaders over the course of my career and get off to a positive and productive start. You may have landed the opportunity of a lifetime, so investing time and energy on the front end of your new venture should be a priority.

Always remember the importance of self-awareness. Take stock of how you are doing by seeking input from candid people in your circle who will tell you the truth, not what you wish to hear. Be intentional, but also thoughtful in your actions. Balance decisiveness with prudent judgment.

Finally, remember that you deserve to be here. Be confident, be authentic, draw on your past experiences and enthusiastically embrace the challenge placed before you.

**Good luck!**

# 12 OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

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## FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

**Making A Poor First Impression.** Transition can sometimes overwhelm and overload leaders. Keeping attention focused on what's most important, prudent decisions and strong communication can help build positive first impressions.

**Getting Promoted Within The "Family."** Leaders promoted from within an organization are often elevated to a leadership role over former peers. This can be a difficult adjustment period and should be addressed with humility, empathy and a lot of open conversations. Some of your former peers will cheer you and some will be envious. Be grateful to the first group and work diligently to enlist the support of the second group.

**Falling Behind The Learning Curve.** This often occurs when the new leader does not prepare/learn effectively prior to the start date, or in the early days on the job. This leads to a less than adequate understanding of the situation, customers, key business partners, organizational capabilities, or market conditions which can impede an effective transition.

**Taking On Too Much.** Being a new leader can create anxiety about being perceived as a "doer" and lead to taking on too much work, too soon. The overloaded leader is soon drowning and missing deadlines/goals, leading to a poor first impression.

**Failure To Be Curious.** One of the best ways to break down walls and build rapport is to practice insatiable curiosity with your new circle of peers and colleagues. You will learn important information about people and the organization while demonstrating humility and hopefully a genuine interest in others.





IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO ANTICIPATE ALL OF THE ISSUES A NEWLY PROMOTED OR HIRED LEADER MIGHT FACE IN THEIR FIRST FEW MONTHS ON THE JOB. HERE IS A LIST OF POTENTIAL OBSTACLES THAT CAN DERAIL SUCCESS IN A NEW JOB BASED ON MY OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCE:

**Sticking With An Underperforming Team Too Long/Failing To Deliver.** In many cases, new leaders are brought in because of performance issues. When new leaders give the existing team members too many chances, they risk losing credibility in the eyes of the stronger players. Failure to build a high-performing team and deliver results quickly can be difficult for a new leader to recover from. **HELPFUL TIP:** Take the time to see who the best performers are on your team or who is capable of being developed before making significant people moves. Be careful to avoid a scorched earth approach and get rid of everyone without assessing who can contribute in meaningful ways to the team's success.

**Go-it-Alone Syndrome.** A lack of willingness to ask for help and acting like you have all the answers works against the collaboration and teamwork you should be pursuing.

**Failure To Chart A New Course/Develop A Winning Strategy.** Often, bold new ideas and a different strategy are needed sooner rather than later. Instead of delaying the needed changes too long, gather data and input from key stakeholders and boldly move forward if the circumstances merit this approach. **REMEMBER:** new leaders are rarely placed in their positions to preserve the status quo.

**Being Blinded By The Spotlight.** All eyes are on you in the new position (or at least it sometimes feel that way). Don't let the glare of real or perceived attention detract from focusing on the fundamentals and establishing yourself in the new role.

**Becoming Isolated.** The failure to quickly build relationships with new teammates and establishing connections with key stakeholders can derail a leader as they look to exert influence or rally support for their ideas/projects down the road.

**Failure To Acclimate To The New Culture.** A new leader must be willing to adapt to the new territory, learn new approaches and embrace fresh strategies to remain effective. Learn how decisions are made and how to get things done. Understand the "unwritten" rules of the organization and how to avoid the political traps.

**Swinging For The Fences vs. Achieving Small Wins.** Often, a new leader desires to make a big splash and establish their reputation. This path is risky. Instead, go for small attainable wins in the first few weeks before attempting bolder moves.

# 12 BEST PRACTICES

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## FOR GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

**Identify and Cultivate Relationships with Key Stakeholders.** Who has the most impact on your business and areas of responsibility? Develop a stakeholder map with the help of HR and your boss. Be intentional about getting to know these key stakeholders early on and build collaborative partnerships. Know who your internal/external customers are and how to serve them best. You will struggle later if this key step is overlooked.

**Establish Clear And Candid Communication With Your New Boss.** Within days of beginning your new role, establish expectations, goals and preferred communication with your new boss. Can you both agree on what your success in the first year looks like? It is best to get on the same page quickly and cultivate candid rapport to maximize your likelihood of success. Also, be sure to ask for specific feedback on how you are doing.

**Partner with Human Resources.** Don't ignore this vital resource and the tools at their disposal as you evaluate your team. Rely on them early in the process and build a strong partnership moving forward. HR is not the enemy. They are the keepers of important data you will require to be successful.

**Set Goals.** Within days of beginning your new role, establish expectations, goals and preferred communication with your new boss. Can you both agree on what your success in the first year looks like? It is best to get on the same page quickly and cultivate candid rapport to maximize your likelihood of success. Also, be sure to ask for specific feedback on how you are doing.

**Be Humble and Ask for Help.** The dumb questions are the ones we never ask. Everyone has likely been in your shoes; so don't let pride prevent you from asking for help. It will demonstrate humility and endear you quickly to your team and peers if you avoid acting like you know everything on the first day.

**Build Broad Relationships.** Don't just cultivate your new boss and peers, but branch out and get to know leaders in all areas of the organization. Your effectiveness in the future may be impacted (positively or negatively) by your ability to draw on resources and relationships across the organization. Two coffees or lunches a week with new colleagues is a productive goal in your first three months, which will bear fruit down the road.

**Listen, Listen, Listen.** Be a great listener before offering your insights on the challenges of the organization or better ways to get things done. Listen carefully to people who know more than you, offer insight when appropriate and always be seen as someone who values good counsel.

OK, YOU ARE IN THE NEW JOB AND HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE POTENTIAL DERAILERS TO YOUR SUCCESS. WHAT ARE PROVEN WAYS TO EFFECTIVELY MANAGE YOUR ONBOARDING AND GET OFF TO A GOOD START? HERE ARE TWELVE BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER:

**Cultivate Candor.** Many companies struggle with the idea of candid conversations. Ambiguity, political correctness and the absence of candor can be a drag on a company's culture and negatively impact business results. Candor should be modeled, encouraged, never punished and always delivered with professionalism. Show your team and peers how to do it!

**Assess Your Team.** Partner with HR to understand the talent you have inherited and the performance gaps on your team. Get input from peers and your boss. Don't delay this critical exercise or you will negatively impact your long-term effectiveness.

**Wisely Manage Expectations.** The old maxim "under promise and over deliver" is applicable to the early months in a new leadership position. Don't create unrealistic expectations. Wait until you have truly assessed the organization and the capabilities of your team before making bold public commitments.


### **Be Authentic.**

We must challenge the fear that somehow being real is a bad thing. It may be uncomfortable, but practicing transparency, engaging in honest and open dialogue, and always placing your principles and ethics before advancing your career will bring you greater success in every aspect of your life.

### **Make The Most Of The Moment!**

All eyes are on a new leader. There is a window of opportunity to seize in the first 90 days when a new leader commands a heightened degree of attention. Be prudent and thoughtful, but make your mark and don't feel bound to emulate the approach of your predecessor (unless of course, that approach was working well!).





“ TRANSITIONS ARE PERIODS OF OPPORTUNITY, A CHANCE TO START AFRESH AND TO MAKE NEEDED CHANGES IN AN ORGANIZATION. BUT THEY ARE ALSO PERIODS OF ACUTE VULNERABILITY, BECAUSE YOU LACK ESTABLISHED WORKING RELATIONSHIPS AND A DETAILED UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR NEW ROLE. ”

– Michael Watkins, The First 90 Days (HBS Press)



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