THE NEW LEADER'S 100 DAY ACTION PLAN

TAKE CHARGE, BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND DELIVER **BETTER RESULTS FASTER**

GEORGE B. BRADT · JAYME A. CHECK · JOHN A. LAWLER

FIFTH EDITION

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THE ONBOARDING PLAYBOOK USED BY SUCCESSFUL LEADERS WORLDWIDE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

with an extremely diverse group of clients. They run the gamut from the multinational to the small, from public company to private, from for-profit to not-for-profit. The executives we work with come from many industries, from almost every discipline imaginable, and from many parts of the world. With every client, we have learned something new. Clients inspire, challenge, and teach us on a daily basis, and for that we are grateful. You can learn more about our list of clients on our website at www.PrimeGenesis.com.

We also thank the readers around the world whose enthusiastic embrace of the ideas in this book has kept us motivated to keep it current. We have the good fortune of truly engaged readers who download tools and interact with us on a daily basis from around the globe. We thank you for buying the book, passing it on, and reaching out to us to share your ideas, praise, constructive criticism, successes, and truly insightful questions.

Abounding gratitude to George's editors at *Forbes* starting with Fred Allen, and our editor at John Wiley & Sons, Richard Narramore. Each of them has nurtured our ideas and gently pushed us to make them better across the years.

And, finally, to our families and loved ones: We deeply appreciate your unending encouragement and support along the way.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Are you a veteran CEO taking the reins of your next organization? Starting a new role as a frontline supervisor? Something in between? Whether you are joining a new organization from the outside, getting promoted from within, leading a turnaround or transformation, or merging teams following an acquisition, *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan* will help you take charge, build your team, set direction, and deliver better results faster than anyone thought possible.

> *"We've found that 40 percent of executives hired at the senior level are pushed out, fail or quit within 18 months. It's expensive in terms of lost revenue. It's expensive in terms of the individual's hiring. It's damaging to morale."*
> Heidrick & Struggles, internal study of 20,000 searches[1]

If, after 100 days, a key stakeholder is asked, "How is that new leader doing?" and the answer is, "The jury is out," what that means is, "The jury is in, and we don't like the answer."

What do these failed leaders not see, know, do, and deliver? In most cases, they dig their own holes by missing one or more crucial steps in their first 100 days, including:

- Inadvertently sending their new colleagues the wrong messages and causing the culture to reject them
- Developing a new strategy but failing to get buy-in and build trust with their new team
- Failing to operationalize their strategy and deliver results
- Being too slow to make changes to the team

- Expending energy on the wrong projects without accomplishing the one or two things that their most important stakeholders expected them to deliver

- Failing to adjust to changing circumstances once they're in the role

It's essential that you are aware of the important steps required to achieve a successful transition. No new leader wants to fail, but it happens at an alarming rate.

As an analogy, imagine you are driving from Ethiopia to Kenya. You get to the border in Moyale. You get out of your car to clear immigration. Once you clear, you get back in the car. You might think you can start the car, put your foot on the gas, and proceed to your final destination. But if you did that, you'd be sure to fail in a major way. Why?

Because the moment you've crossed the border, everything is different. In Ethiopia they drive on the right. In Kenya on the left. So, the first thing you must do is switch sides!

While there's no reason for you to have known that, you should realize that every organization drives on different sides of the road in different ways. If you don't figure out those differences and adjust for them, you're going to crash. This is why you must converge into a new organization and learn its unwritten rules and cultural realities before you pivot and lead it in a new direction.

Meanwhile, if you're operating in a business owned by a private equity firm, pressures can be even more intense. Gone are the days of delivering returns through debt and multiple arbitrages. To deliver competitive returns, you must create meaningful value through operational improvements or integration of accretive acquisitions in line with [Figure 0.1](#).
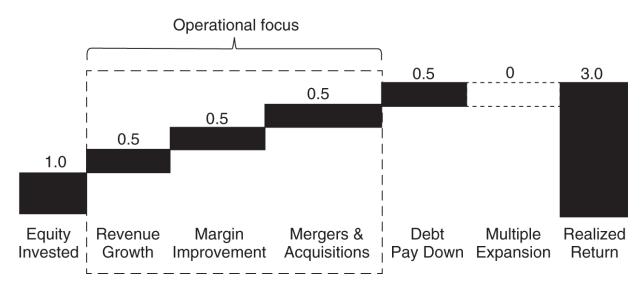
FIGURE 0.1 Private Equity Buildup

Perhaps not surprisingly, executive failure in private equity–owned businesses is even higher than average (almost 50 percent, according to a Bain study).[2] And the impact of that failure is stark and even more costly: Exits in these situations are typically delayed by 2 years, with reduced returns 46 percent of the time and longer hold periods 82 percent of the time.

Whether you are operating in a major corporation, a smaller start-up, or a midsize business, delivering value is not getting any easier, particularly where transformation and speed are musts. Failure rates are high—in addition to the 40 percent failure rate for leaders entering a new role, 83 percent of acquisitions fail to produce expected returns,[3] and only 26 percent of transformations are deemed very or completely successful.[4] But, this won't happen to you. Not if you let us help you.

Our fundamental, underlying concept is that onboarding is a crucible of leadership and that:

Leadership is about inspiring, enabling, and empowering others to do their absolute best together to realize a meaningful and rewarding shared purpose.

The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu expressed this particularly well more than 2,500 years ago:

> *The great leader speaks little. He never speaks carelessly. He works without self-interest and leaves no trace. When all is finished, the people say, "We did it ourselves."*[5]

With that in mind, *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan* is a practical playbook complete with the tools, action plans, timelines, and key milestones you need to reach along the way to accelerate your own and your team's success in your first 100 days and beyond.

Our insights are gleaned from our own leadership experiences and from the work of our firm, PrimeGenesis, whose sole mission is to help executives and teams deliver better results faster during critical transitions. Across all of our clients, the 100-Day Action Plan approach has reduced the failure rate for new leaders from the industry average of 40 percent to less than 10 percent. Our top 10 executive onboarding clients have deployed us more than 180 times.

Since 2003, leaders and teams in public multinationals, such as American Express and Johnson & Johnson; in midsize entities owned by private equity firms, such as MacAndrews & Forbes, Clayton, Dubilier & Rice, and Cerberus; and in not-for-profit organizations, such as the Red Cross, have implemented the 100-Day Action Plan. They have deployed it across a wide range of functions and complex transitions, including executive onboarding, turnarounds, reorganizations, transformations, and integrating leadership teams during acquisitions.

Over the years, we have noticed that many new leaders show up for a new role happy and smiling but without a plan. Neither they nor their organizations have thought things through in advance. On their first day, they are welcomed by such confidence-building remarks as: "Oh, you're here … we'd better find you an office."

Ouch!

Some enlightened organizations have a better process in place. They put people in charge of preparing for leaders' transitions. Imagine the difference when a new leader is escorted to an office that is fully set up for them, complete with computer, passwords, phones, files, information, and a 30-day schedule of orientation and assimilation meetings.

Better … but still not good enough.

Even if the company has set everything up for you, if you have waited until your first day on the job to start, you are already behind with the odds stacked against you. Paradoxically, the best way to accelerate a complex pivot like going into a new role is to pause long enough to think through a plan before you start, put it in place early, and then get a head start on implementing it.

As the leader, you must align all stakeholders around a shared purpose and set of objectives, set a compelling direction, build a cohesive leadership team, and create a culture that enables excellent execution.

As it turns out, these are some of the most difficult tasks faced by leaders entering complex situations, made even more challenging when compounded by the need for speed.
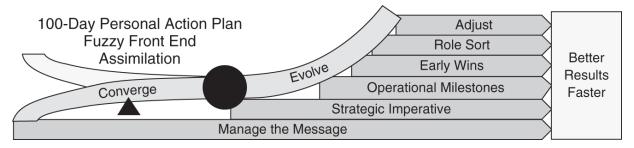
FIGURE 0.2 Converge and Evolve

Having a process and set of tools can help you use your first 100 days to meet these challenges and propel you down the path to success (Figure 0.2).

The four main ideas are:

1. **Get a head start.** Day One is a critical pivot point for people moving into new roles or merging teams. In both situations, you can accelerate progress by hitting the ground running. Preparation in the days and weeks leading up to Day One breeds confidence, and a little early momentum goes a long way.

2. **Manage the message.** Everything communicates. People read things into everything you say and do and don't say and don't do. You're far better off choosing and guiding *what* others see and hear and *when* they see and hear it rather than leaving things up to chance or letting others make those choices for you. Start this process with your best current thinking on a headline message before Day One and adjust steadfastly as you go along.

3. **Set direction. Build the team.** The first 100 days are the best time to put in place the basic building blocks of a cohesive, high-performing team. You will fail if you try to create the organization's imperative yourself without the support and buy-in of your team. As team

leader, your own success is inextricably linked to the success of the team as a whole.

4. **Sustain momentum. Deliver results.** Although the first 100 days are a sprint to jump-start communication, team building, and core practices, it's all for naught if you then sit back and watch things happen. You must evolve your leadership, practices, and culture to keep fueling the fires you sparked and deliver ongoing results.

These four ideas are built on the frameworks of highly effective teams and organizations and flow through the book. It's helpful to explain them up front. First, the headlines:

- High-performing teams and organizations are built of people, plans, and practices aligned around a shared purpose.

- Tactical capacity bridges the gap between strategy and execution, ensuring that a good strategy doesn't fail because of bad execution.

- Six building blocks underpin a team's tactical capacity: culture-shaping communication, burning imperative, milestone management, early wins, role sort, and then ongoing evolution.

People, Plans, Practices

Organization and team performance are based on aligning people, plans, and practices around a shared purpose. This involves getting strong people in the right roles with the right direction, resources, authority, and accountability; clarity around the strategies and action steps included in plans; and practices in place that enable people to work

together in a systematic and effective way. The heart of this is a clearly understood, meaningful, and rewarding shared purpose.

Tactical Capacity

Tactical capacity is a team's ability to work under difficult, changing conditions and to translate strategies into tactical actions decisively, rapidly, and effectively. It is the essential bridge between strategy and execution ([Figure 0.3](#)).

In contrast to other work groups that move slowly, with lots of direction and most decision-making coming from the leader, high-performing teams with strong tactical capacity empower each member, communicate effectively with the team and leader to create critical solutions to the inevitable problems that arise on an ongoing basis and to implement them quickly.

The objective is high-quality responsiveness; it takes cohesive teamwork to make it happen. High-performing teams build on strategy and plans with strong people and practices to implement ever-evolving and acutely responsive actions that work.
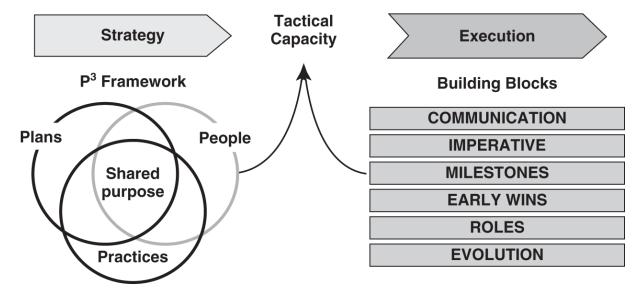
FIGURE 0.3 Tactical Capacity

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

—Attributed to Charles Darwin

You probably have seen this yourself. You may have been on teams with members who operate in disconnected silos, incapable of acting without specific direction from above. They may know the strategy. They may have the resources they need, but any variation or change paralyzes them.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) actually had run the drill on a major hurricane in New Orleans months before Katrina hit. But the plan collapsed with the first puff of wind because no one could react flexibly and insightfully to a situation that was different from what they had expected.

In contrast, a great example of tactical capacity at work was the way the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) team members came together during the Apollo 13 crisis. Right from "Houston, we've had a problem," the team reacted flexibly and fluidly to a dramatic and unwelcome new reality—a crippling explosion en route, in space.

The team went beyond its standard operating procedures and what its equipment was "designed to do" to exploring what it "could do." Through tight, on-the-fly collaboration, the team did in minutes what normally took hours, in hours what normally took days, and in days what normally took months. The tactical capacity building blocks were critical to getting the crew home safely:

1. The culture had been strong. But everyone's *communication* reinforced the message that "failure is not an option" throughout the rescue mission.

2. The team's mission changed from "go to the moon to collect rocks" to the one *burning imperative* of "get these men home alive." This was galvanizing enough (as a burning imperative must always be) to transcend all petty issues and focus everyone's efforts.

3. The team's *milestones* were clear: Turn the ship around, preserve enough energy to allow a reentry, fix the carbon monoxide problem, survive the earth's atmosphere, and so on.

4. The carbon monoxide fix allowed the astronauts to stay alive and was the *early win* that made the team believe it could do the rest of the things that would get the crew back to Earth safely. It gave everyone confidence.

5. Everyone was working with the same end in mind, but they were working in different and essential *roles*. One group figured out how to turn the spaceship around. Another group fixed the oxygen problem. Another dealt with the reentry calculations, and the spare crew did whatever it took to complete the mission.

6. Once the immediate issue and burning imperative had been resolved, NASA embedded rigorous practices to minimize risks and maximize performance as a step in the *evolution* of standard operating procedure going forward.

Even though you're unlikely to jump into a situation exactly like the Apollo 13 breakdown, in today's environment almost all leadership transitions are "hot landings," where you must hit the ground running to have a chance of success.

The 100-Day Action Plan

The 100-Day Action Plan, as detailed in the chapters in this book, outlines a process for leaders to converge into an

organization and then evolve the organization with a co-created and shared burning imperative that will lead to better results faster.

Get a Head Start

1. Position yourself for success. Get the job. Make sure it is right for you. Avoid common land mines.

2. Leverage the fuzzy front end. The job starts when you accept the offer.

Manage the Message

3. Take control of day one. Make a powerful first impression. Confirm your entry message.

4. Evolve the culture. Leverage diversity.

5. Manage communication, especially digitally with your remote team.

Set Direction, and Build the Team

6. Pivot to strategy. Co-create the burning imperative by Day 30.

7. Drive operational accountability. Embed milestone management by Day 45.

8. Select early wins by Day 60 to deliver within 6 months.

9. Build a high-performing team. Realign, acquire, enable, mentor by Day 70.

Sustain Momentum, and Deliver Results

10. Advance and adjust your own leadership, practices, team, and culture by Day 100.

Culture

In many respects, leadership is an exercise in building a culture. However you define it, culture is the glue that holds organizations together.

This book focuses on pivotal events such as joining a new organization, leading a turnaround, or merging teams as opportunities to accelerate culture change and results. These transitions are about creating and bridging gaps: between leaders and their new teams, between aspirational states and current realities.

You must understand and intentionally nurture culture throughout your onboarding, especially when you:

- Prepare for interviews (to answer cultural fit questions)
- Complete your due diligence (to mitigate organizational, role, and personal land mines)
- Choose your onboarding approach (by crossing the business's need for change with the culture's readiness for change and your own risk profile)
- Converge into the organizational culture
- Evolve the organization's culture

Cultural elements are particularly critical to get right in a post-merger integration. Too little effort is paid to culture during integrations, 70 percent of those surveyed in the 2009 Post Merger Integration Conference acknowledged, with 92 percent claiming that greater cultural understanding would have substantially benefited mergers. And respondents assigned blame for cultural difficulties to "poor leadership of the integration effort" as opposed to "wrong choice of target" by a factor of five to one![6] The message: Culture is critical, integration is where the rubber meets the road, and leadership matters when combining cultures.

Communication—It Starts with Listening

The other thread that runs through this book is communication. Because everything communicates, guidance on communication belongs in every step and every chapter.

One idea that jars some people is the recommendation to craft the going-in headline message before Day One. Leaders wonder how they can do that before they've completed their listening tour. You will have learned a fair amount about the organization, its priorities, and its people during your interview and due diligence stages. If you know enough to have been offered and accepted the job, you know enough to craft an initial message. Take your best current thinking, craft a hypothetical message, and use that to direct your future learning.

With that as background, here are the steps of the 100-Day Action Plan and the chapters of this book.
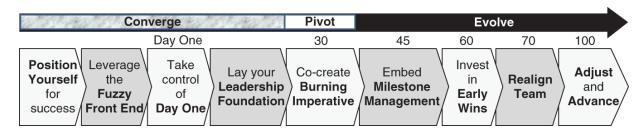

FIGURE 0.4 The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan

Chapter 1: Position Yourself for Success: Get the Job. Make Sure It Is Right for You. Avoid Common Land Mines.

Leadership is personal. The greater the congruence between your own preferences across behaviors, relationships, attitudes, values, and environment and the new culture you enter or create, the stronger those connections and your organizing concept will be. Note that while you're converging, resist sharing your ideas until you've earned that right. Let your headline message guide your questions, communicating what you care about without you ever saying it.

Great leaders live their messages—not because they can but because they must. "Here I stand, I can do no other."[7] Knowing your own strengths and cultural preferences will help you better create career options that are a true fit for you, will allow you to do a better job positioning yourself in interviews (selling before you buy), and will help you do a thorough due diligence to mitigate risks.

Along the way, be sure to take into account evolving changes in sensibilities to work–life balance, health and well-being, relationships, diversity, equity and inclusion, and the challenges of leading teams and building culture in remote and virtual environments.

Chapter 2: The Job Starts When You Accept the Offer: Leverage the Fuzzy Front End.

At this point you've made the choice—but you haven't started yet. There's a temptation to take a deep breath and relax. Don't do that. What you do next, what you do before Day One, can make all the difference. So choose the right approach for your situation, draft a plan, and get a head start.

Context

	Ready to change	Not ready to change
Strong need to change	Converge and Evolve Quickly	Shock
Less need to change now	Assimilate	Converge and Evolve Slowly

Culture

FIGURE 0.5 ACES

Figure 0.5 shows a few dimensions to choosing the right approach.

First, the approach is different if you're joining a new company, getting promoted or transferred from within, running a private equity–owned business, crossing international boundaries, or merging teams. Second, the business context and the culture's readiness for change will inform your choice around whether to assimilate in slowly, converge and evolve, or shock the organization with sudden changes.

Armed with the choice about your overall approach and what you'll need to do differently as a leader in this situation, you're ready to create a 100-day plan targeting the most important stakeholders up, across, and down—both inside the organization and out, laying out your best current thinking around your message, what you're going to do between now and Day One, on Day One, and over your first 100 days and beyond. These efforts include prestart conversations to jump-start your important relationships and learning, as well as focus on various aspects of your personal setup.

MasterCard's Ajay Banga managed his fuzzy front end and early days particularly well. He leveraged the time after he had been announced as CEO but before he started by casually, but pointedly, interacting with key stakeholders with a simple introduction: "Hi, I'm Ajay. Tell me about yourself."[8]