

The First 90 Days of a Healthcare Executive

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Introduction

The first 90 days of a healthcare leader's servitude sets the tone for their leadership style, including board engagement, department goals, and staff communications to say the least. A fine balance is required between responding to pressing operational issues and creating and refining long-term strategies.

In this webinar we will address the focal points of the incoming executive and how the approaches differ between an interim leader and a permanent one, and how those approaches set the tone early for strong performance.

The First 90 Days

- Being new to any job is never an easy task. However, when you are a new member of a hospital's C-suite, you are in the middle of a fish bowl with all eyes on you; and, you only get one chance to make a first impression.
- Board members, physicians, senior leadership, staff, community members and, most important of all, patients, will be forming opinions and expectations of you or your role, judging your every move.

So, how do you make the best of it and rise to the challenge to be successful? The first 90 days are critical and will set the stage for long term success.

The First 90 Days

In preparing for this role, what can (or should) you do ahead of time, prior to starting?

- What information should you seek, and who should you consult?
- What experience in your past has prepared you for this role, and how can you draw upon it?
- Do you have a mentor who has been down this road, as well, who you can use as a sounding board?

These are all great questions; and, you will likely have a million more. *Preparation and planning are key to navigating the first 90 days.*

The First 90 Days

- When an organization makes a leadership change (for whatever reason), there are some immediate needs to be addressed regardless of the status (permanent or interim) of the incoming leader.
- In either case, the arrival of a new face in the organization will generate questions (concerns, outright fear...):
 - 1) who is this new person?,
 - 2) what does his or her presence mean to my own role? And,
 - 3) what changes are forthcoming?

The First 90 Days

- All of these are normal, valid, and require a rapid assertion of leadership and development of trust by the new leader. This is especially true if the vacancy was sudden or unexpected.
- Transparency and openness are critical to success during the transition period to minimize organizational fearfulness and, worse, inertia for the institution.
- Most often, there is an operational or strategic reason for the change in leadership, so it is essential to be well prepared and move with confidence in the initial days.

The First 90 Days

The Interim Executive

The First 90 Days - Interim

So, what's first?

- Restoration of trust – right up front – the single most critical thing to be done.

How do you do it??

The First 90 Days - Interim

Refocus on the mission

- Why the change happened (to the degree you know – and can reveal it)?
- What do we (as an organization) need to do to – together- to ensure we keep the institution moving ahead?
- How do we serve those who depend on us?

The First 90 Days - Interim

High visibility

- Have to be everywhere (and seen to be everywhere).
- Need to prioritize your visits (board, physicians, admin team, all staff...).
- Can't do everyone at once, but being out, walking around, being confident, talking to line folks and answering as many questions as possible.
- It is ok to say you don't know something yet.
- Be confident and enthusiastic – but also realistic. You are there to address problems/issues - **AND YOU NEED THEIR HELP.**

The First 90 Days - Interim

- Transparency
 - Tell people what you can,
 - Tell them you will get back to them (and keep that promise) – It all goes to trust and credibility.
- Calming the waters and reduction of fear (transitions are always scary...).
 - These are much the same as above – if you are genuine about responding to people – they will relax and give you the space (and the help) you need.

The First 90 Days - Interim

Fix the immediate fires – That is: what are the 3-5 most important things for the interim to work on?

- financial turnaround (making the tough calls - staffing and other expense issues)
- blown surveys
- quality/safety/compliance holes
- deteriorated relationships with physicians and/or board members
- crumbling community perception or market share

The First 90 Days - Interim

You also need to determine what things are not (or not as) important to focus on during your tenure.

- Long term strategy
- Multi-year implementation projects (e.g. EHR, construction, etc.)
- Mind you, those things that are underway already need to be kept moving...

You will have to be a quick diagnostician – quickly identify issues and log jams.

- You will likely have a good idea from the board/other executives what the big burning platforms are when you first arrive
- Others will become apparent quickly

The First 90 Days - Interim

Heavy lifting and pragmatic work prior to the permanent CEO

- Often, the interim will need to make quick determinations on whether the administrative team members (and other institutional leaders) belong in their positions.
- It is not uncommon to find pent up demand for a “house cleaning.”
- It is usually far easier for the interim to make personnel changes before the permanent executive takes his or her place – often, staff members will come up afterwards and say things like “ it is about time – we’ve been saying “X” needed to go years ago...”
- Better for the interim to be the “bad guy,” as you will be walking away – it doesn’t matter if people are mad at the interim after the fact – as long as what you have done is for the good of the organization. The inbound permanent person will then have a (more) clean slate to work with.

The First 90 Days - Interim

- Remember, you have a limited period of time to effect change.
 - You will have to move swiftly, but not rashly – your mission is to leave the place better than you found it.
 - If you behave as though you are there for the long haul, and not just for a short period, you can accomplish a great deal.

The First 90 Days - Interim

- Every institution has its own ways of doing (or not doing) things.
- An interim is not typically constrained by the “we have always done it that way mindset,” so there is the great opportunity to break through operational inertia.
- If there are easy / quick fixes for some issues, do them. You will gain some quick wins, but more importantly, you will be perceived as someone who can get things done – this is huge for developing trust across the institution.
- And, you can break that inertia so that the permanent executive can then operate with fewer historical restraints.

The First 90 Days - Interim

- Finally, be sure to create a “handoff” document for the incoming permanent person.
 - What you diagnosed
 - What you did about it
 - What you started
 - What you didn’t finish – and what still needs to be done with them
 - Pending issues not yet addressed
- The interim and the permanent person will have different priorities and timelines, but this is an important tool in making sure the second transition proceeds smoothly and efficiently.

The First 90 Days - Interim

- Finally – the planned transition arrives
 - If possible – overlap a couple of days (but only a couple of days) to make sure everything is handed off – then get out of the way.
 - On the day the new permanent person arrives – vacate the office – the new person needs to be in charge immediately (and seen to be so).
 - It can do significant harm to the inbound permanent executive if there is confusion over who makes a particular decision while both are in the building.

The First 90 Days

The Permanent Executive

The first 90 days - Permanent

Was there an Interim in the role or any other transitional plan in place?

If so, take advantage of it

- Look at it as a “head-start” to forming your own opinions and identifying immediate needs.
- Use it to instill confidence that there is a “plan” for the transition.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Do you have a mentor or peer you can go to for advice?

If so, take advantage of that, too

- Although each organization and situation is different, having an objective outside perspective from another person who has gone down this road before can help avoid any “land mines” you do not see.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Similar to interim leader, the new leader must establish:

- Visibility - Be seen!
- Spend no more than half of your time in your office during your first two months; the more time spent out of the office, the better.
- Spend a disproportionate amount of time rounding with frontline staff.
 - They are the organization's experts on customer service issues, systems problems and broken brand promises that prevent customers from achieving the confidence they deserve to have in your organization's services.
 - It will allow you to put "your hand on the pulse" of employee engagement.

The first 90 days - Permanent

“Fly solo”

- Have the leader over an area tour you at 30,000 feet; then, leave the baggage of the existing reporting relationships at home –
- You only have one chance to meet and get to know people for the first time, and it will change the dynamics of the conversations.
- Be careful, though, not to usurp the existing chain of command.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Transparency

- Hold as many employee communications sessions as practical – all shifts.
 - Make it the highest priority.
- State expectations in a calm, warm and reassuring way.
 - Be clear to the values you hold most sacred; leave no doubt in anyone's mind who you are and what you stand for.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Trust – It is a two-way street

- Just as yours are of them, employee expectations of you are high; they will have some apprehension regarding how well you will fulfill your role.
- Employee feedback can often guide you in the priorities you set.

Confidence (that the new leader knows what he or she is doing)

- Acknowledge and address fear:
 - Of change
 - Of uncertainty

The first 90 days - Permanent

A Strategic Focus

- Evaluate/Assess what the priorities have been?

Assuming you understand the current strategic plan of the organization (if you do not, then it would be unlikely you would have been chosen for this leadership position) conduct your own informal audit on how effectively it is being executed.

The first 90 days - Permanent RELATIONSHIPS

- With employees
- Medical staff
 - Meet them on their turf (their office, surgery lounge, etc.) one-on-one.
 - Assess, but be careful of making promises until you have all of the information
- Board
 - Establish ground rules and clear direction.
 - Chain of command, communications and authority
 - If not in policy, put into policy
 - Opinions may differ during meetings, but once a decision is made and the meeting is over, the decision is “owned” by all the board.

The first 90 days - Permanent

RELATIONSHIPS

Donors

- If the Foundation has a separate board, work with the Executive Director on a similar relationship.

External community

- Again, get out of the office!

The first 90 days - Permanent

Assess trends and ask for supporting information

Budgets

- How is the organization performing, and is there a need for any immediate action?

Other outcomes (quality, employee engagement, growth, operations, etc.).

- Stoplight reports are great, but knowing “why” gives you a proper perspective.

Use both data and intuition

- Your eyes have seen a lot by this point in your career; but, substantiate opinion with fact whenever possible.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Long term strategy

- Familiarize yourself with the multi-year high-capital projects (e.g. EHR, construction, etc.) already underway.
 - Again, projects that are underway already need to be kept moving; but, they may still need some scrutiny.

Organizational structure

- Get your relationships solidified, if possible, before making significant changes to personnel.
 - You may want to hold off on significant changes until you have had the opportunity to think through them, vet them properly and weigh the political impact (again, the importance of ground rules with the board and relationships with the medical staff), unless other pressing circumstances dictate.

The first 90 days - Permanent

Are any immediate “tweaks” necessary, or can you be deliberate in making long-term changes?

By the end of your first 90 days, formally review the current strategic plan of the organization.

Based on the feedback you have received from employees and other performance metrics you uncovered:

- Use it as an opportunity to review and respond to what you've learned during the 90 days.
- Use the environmental assessment to give you a lay of the land for the needs of your community and how your organization is responding to them.

The First 90 Days

- The impact of either an interim or permanent leader on the group dynamics in the C-suite can also be different.
- While impacts can be lasting for either, decisions of an interim may be viewed as “quick fixes” or “low-hanging fruit,” while those of the permanent leader are often viewed as more deliberate, as the decision-maker will be around to live with the consequences of the decisions.
- Learning the lay of the land during the first 90-days will be critical to getting the right amount of information, vetting the business proposition and political climate, gaining buy-in and monitoring results.
- Again, an interim leader’s timeframe is abbreviated as compared that of a permanent leader; however, success or failure does not come necessarily from the decision itself, but rather the buy-in and support, or lack thereof, of the decision-maker by others.
- The relational and cultural foundation, otherwise known as trust, laid during the first 90 days will dictate the outcome.

The First 90 Days

As a new leader, you will never get your first 90 days back...

Make them count!

The First 90 Days

Questions?

Contact Us!

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