

Succeeding in Your First 90 Days on the Job: 10 Steps for Arts and Culture Leaders

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As the saying goes, you only get one chance to make a first impression. The first 90 days in any new role are critical, as they can set the foundation for either success or failure — particularly for those who face high expectations in artistic vision, business model revitalization, or revenue generation. Whether stepping into a leadership position for the first time, moving into a role with greater responsibilities, or making a lateral move into a new industry, this three-month period is essential for building credibility and trust. During this time, it is important to establish relationships, gain a deep understanding of your new organization, and set the groundwork for long-term success by building trust and creating a clear path forward. According to leadership and organizational change consultant Michael D. Watkins, in his book *The First 90 Days*, “Virtuous cycles that...create momentum and establish an upward spiral of increasing effectiveness” are the objective. In this article, we highlight ten steps for any arts and culture professional to consider before and during the transition into a new role.

1. Prepare Yourself

The qualities that contributed to your past successes and helped you reach your current career stage may differ from the skills required in your next role. It’s essential to take time to reflect on your previous experiences and prepare for the future by objectively evaluating the requirements of your upcoming position. Relying on your previous work style without acknowledging the differences between your past roles and organizations and the new team of people with whom you will work could result in misunderstandings, mistakes, and potential setbacks. As you advance in your career, your responsibilities get wider and tasks become more complex, so it is important to consider how best to engage with, communicate, and delegate more to other members on your team.

Tip: Embrace a growth mindset by being open to learning and adapting your approach to align with the expectations and culture of your new environment. Focus on engaging with your team thoughtfully, communicating clearly, and practicing effective delegation to ensure everyone feels empowered and aligned with your goals.

2. Accelerate Your Learning

To thrive in your new role, it's crucial to quickly understand what drives the organization, its board, artistic leadership, and management team. The faster you climb the learning curve, the earlier you can begin to make good business and artistic decisions. The learning agenda should consist of questions about the past, particular issues that impact the present, and possible paths forward into the future. It is also important to clarify the mission, vision, values, goals,

and strategic plans of the organization while also recognizing the motivations of key individuals who help realize these objectives. Start by identifying your top donors, influential board members, vital volunteers, significant corporate sponsors, key artists, and leadership team. Schedule meetings to connect with each of them in person and prioritize what information you need to learn and absorb efficiently. Building these relationships will create a strong foundation for your future support network.

Tip: Prioritize active listening in these early conversations, focusing on understanding the organization's strategic priorities and key players. Ask targeted questions that reveal the motivations and goals of each stakeholder, enabling you to quickly align with the organization's mission and build a strong foundation for informed decision-making.

3. Match Your Strategy to the Situation

You cannot determine what to do if you don't understand the history of the organization and its current situation, so understanding the specific context of your organization is vital. Ultimately, the goal is to learn from the past, live in the present, and address the future in an expeditious way where you gain a few early wins that increase your credibility in the new role. An organization that requires a turnaround after years of stagnation differs significantly from an entrepreneurial venture that has recently achieved visible success. Before initiating any change management or strategic planning efforts, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of the organization's current capabilities and potential. This clarity will guide your approach and help you tailor your strategies to effectively address the unique challenges and opportunities present.

Tip: Take time to assess the organization's current situation by reviewing past successes, challenges, and current capabilities. Engage with team members to gain a well-rounded view, and adapt your strategic approach to the organization's unique needs and stage of development. This understanding will allow you to identify realistic goals and early wins that build credibility and momentum.

4. Secure Early Wins

The wins you secure in the first 90 days can accelerate your future success. There are two key ways to make early wins work for you. The first is about building credibility as soon as possible, and the second is launching early-win projects. You should set high expectations yet be fair, as it is important to hold people accountable without causing demotivation. Consider proactively seeking out cost-saving opportunities and identifying new revenue streams, as achieving these early financial wins will demonstrate your value to both supportive community members and skeptical observers in tangible, measurable ways. Additionally, conducting a risk analysis to anticipate potential issues is valuable, as preventing a problem is often easier than resolving one that has reached a critical stage.

Tip: Identify a few targeted, achievable initiatives that can produce measurable results within your first 90 days, such as cost-saving measures, or launching a small-scale project that demonstrates immediate value.

5. Negotiate Success

The most vital relationship within an arts and culture organization is the one between you and your new supervisor, and that will exist in different contexts in the nonprofit, university, and government sectors. Invest time in understanding both their personal and professional histories, and engage with them to align on the vision for achieving organizational or departmental goals. As you take on these new responsibilities, you will need to communicate both positive and challenging updates. Often, how you deliver these messages is as important as the content itself. Establishing clear lines of communication to define short- and long-term goals, assess internal and external resources, and set mutual expectations will help you work in sync. By clarifying roles and responsibilities upfront, you'll save time, conserve energy, and reduce the likelihood of unexpected issues down the line.

Tip: Schedule regular check-ins with your supervisor to review progress and adjust priorities. Create a list of must-dos and items to avoid based on financial, cultural, legal, or political factors. These conversations will help maintain alignment, build trust, and ensure early success for the organization.

6. Achieve Alignment

Assessing the availability of internal resources, knowledge, and skills is essential to meeting your objectives. Identify areas where the organization could grow through added expertise, and as the organizational or departmental architect, focus on developing and integrating processes that support this growth. Build the necessary infrastructure by targeting new employees and resources that will align with your organization's strategic and community impact goals. Equipping your team with the right skills and resources will accelerate progress toward achieving the organization's objectives.

Tip: Conduct a thorough skills assessment within your team to identify gaps and areas for improvement. Use this information to inform your hiring strategy and professional development initiatives, ensuring alignment with the organization's objectives, and engage outside expertise, if needed.

7. Build Your Team

When stepping into a new role, especially in an organization with a long-established team, it's crucial to quickly evaluate, align, and mobilize your team members. You may need to restructure or adjust roles and job descriptions to better align with the organization's objectives. Assess who to retain, who to develop, who might thrive in a different role, and who may need to be replaced. Those changes per se may not happen in the first 90 days, but it is

important to assess and prioritize succession planning. If hiring new, highly qualified personnel, integrate them thoughtfully to maintain team cohesion. By strategically managing your human capital, you'll meet the organization's current needs while laying the groundwork for future growth. Remember, your team is one of your greatest assets, so plan with care and intention.

Tip: Foster an inclusive environment by encouraging open communication and collaboration while also assessing team strengths and areas for growth. Regularly solicit feedback to understand who might need development, who could thrive in new roles, and where strategic hires or changes might be needed.

8. Create Alliances

Part of your 90-day plan should involve identifying whom you need to influence, who is likely to support you, and who could be persuaded to become a supporter. Cultivating a strong base of allies will make your onboarding smoother and more effective. Prioritize forming alliances and building relationships quickly and efficiently by engaging key staff and board members in meaningful discussions. Leverage their insights to identify important community stakeholders. As your organization actively engages a network of individuals committed to its mission, your goals will become even more achievable.

Tip: Map out your key stakeholders and their interests in your organization. Use this map to prioritize outreach efforts and establish connections that will strengthen your support base.

9. Manage Yourself

You cannot effectively manage others without first managing yourself. In any new position, it is essential to stay clear on what is achievable and how to reach those goals. While it is tempting for new leaders to dive in immediately, taking time to assess the landscape, stay objective, and apply sound judgment in an incremental way will be key to your success. To avoid burnout, prioritize time for yourself and your personal life. Leading others requires you to remain calm, professional, friendly, and composed. Stay connected with friends and mentors, enjoy quality time with family, and make exercise a priority to support your physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

Tip: Schedule regular “self-care” time in your calendar, treating it as non-negotiable. Whether it's exercise, a hobby, or downtime with loved ones, this practice will help you recharge and maintain perspective.

10. Accelerate Everyone

As you settle into your new role, it is crucial to ensure that your team is intellectually and emotionally engaged. To implement change effectively, involve as many individuals as possible and educate them on the benefits of your initiatives. While this process may take time and patience, it fosters active participation, builds understanding, and helps align everyone at a

unified pace. Moving forward without engaging others can lead to resentment and ultimately hinder the success of your plans.

Tip: Create opportunities for dialogue and feedback, such as workshops or brainstorming sessions, to encourage collaboration and make everyone feel valued in the process.

Conclusion

Being patient with yourself and others will be very important. Many arts and culture organizations have limited resources, high expectations, and a sense of urgency, so it can be extremely difficult to balance what appears to be complementary but sometimes competing priorities. By following these ten steps, you will equip yourself, your new organization, and all its stakeholders for success. Aligning available resources with the right strategies and achievable goals will help you build a robust organization or department that you can take pride in leading. The first 90 days present a unique opportunity for a new executive to begin anew, acquire new skills, foster unity, and drive effective planning and organization. As you reach the end of this period, you will reflect on your accomplishments and recognize that you have established acceptance, credibility, and trust — the essential pillars for your future success and the organization's upward trajectory.

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