

Winning the First 90 Days

The beginning of each new year signals massive turnover throughout the C-suite. The first 90 days in a new role aren't a grace period—they're a pressure test. Get it wrong, and your ability to execute could be DOA.

By Nathan Owen Rosenberg

Every January, the corporate world experiences a quiet but powerful reset. New strategies come online, operating plans activate, and leadership transitions accelerate across the Fortune 500. This past year was no exception. In fact, it signaled an escalation: 222 CEOs exited their roles in January 2025 alone—the highest number ever recorded for that month.

It is a reminder of a truth most executives understand instinctively but rarely articulate out loud: a notable portion of C-suite transitions cluster at the start of the year, coinciding with fiscal-year resets and planning cycles.

Which means that for many leaders reading this issue right now, the clock has already started. The first 90 days are underway—

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Time for Action

In January 2025, 222 CEOs exited their roles—the highest number ever recorded that month—underscoring how a significant portion of C-suite transitions cluster at the start of the year, coinciding with fiscal-year resets and planning cycles.

or about to be. And while the view from the outside can make a new appointment look ceremonial, anyone who has ever accepted a C-suite role at the turn of the year knows that the opening stretch is not ceremonial at all. It is a narrow, high-pressure window where the smallest decisions shape the entire execution arc of the year ahead.

This is the paradox new leaders confront: the first 90 days feel like a fresh beginning, but in practice they function more like a loaded spring. The organization is watching, waiting, interpreting. Teams are calibrating their pace to yours before you realize it's happening. Investors and boards expect early signals of direction and discipline. And inside the enterprise, people look for evidence not only of what you will prioritize—but how quickly you can convert strategic intent into tangible motion.

Plans do not fail in Q3. They fail here, in this compressed early-year stretch when leaders move too fast, or too slowly, or simply out of sequence. This is where execution gains momentum—or quietly loses it, sometimes before the leader even realizes the drift has begun.

When Leaders Move Too Soon, Too Fast, or Out of Sequence

The early days of leadership come with enormous symbolic weight. Everyone watches every move—employees, investors, media, customers, even competitors—and all are trying to decipher what the new leader stands for, how they will lead, and what comes next. The risk is not just reputational; it is operational. The wrong signal at the wrong time redirects organizational energy, distracts teams, and disrupts execution.

The most extreme example in recent memory comes from Elon Musk's first

"CEOs should start with their mission and values. If an issue relates directly to their mission, it is incumbent to have a position."

—Bill George
Senior Fellow at
Harvard Business
School & former CEO
and Chair, Medtronic

days at X (formerly Twitter), when actions triggered headlines before he even stepped through the door: firing top executives, setting ultimatums, floating product overhauls, and using social media to amplify the chaos. The problem was not that Musk moved quickly—speed can be an asset in many situations—but that he scrambled the organization before establishing context or a coherent direction. The choreography was off. Sequence matters more than speed in the first 90 days because the organization is still calibrating to the new leadership. When sequence is mishandled, teams default to confusion rather than momentum.

This is the execution implication many leaders overlook. The first days of a transition should be spent evaluating the landscape, absorbing the organizational cadence, and understanding where velocity will come from. Disruption before understanding creates noise where signal is required.

Early Insight Before Early Action

Research from Gallup reinforces a point that is still widely misunderstood: early insight—accurate, objective, unvarnished—is far more important in the first 90 days than early action. Gallup notes that leaders must “seek accurate, objective, performance-related insights” early in their transitions, because without grounding decisions in truth, the first priorities become guesses.

And once the first 90 days drift, the entire year drifts with them.

This is because execution is cumulative. Small misreads compound. Hidden cultural dynamics reveal themselves slowly, and often too late. Leaders who assume they understand the organization before they actually do begin making well-intended but poorly timed moves—reorganizing teams, redirecting capital, signaling strategic

pivots—that have the unintended effect of slowing down everyone around them. Leaders are often unaware of this drag because early enthusiasm can mask early misalignment.

The corrective is simple but demanding: listen longer than feels comfortable. Meet widely and deeply. Ask questions that invite candor. And look for inconsistencies between what people say publicly and what they confide privately. The strength of your early execution depends on the strength of your early insight.

Clarity Is an Execution Tool, Not a Talking Point

Much has been written about the importance of mission and values in leadership, but Bill George—former Medtronic CEO and long-time executive educator—offers a reframing that is especially relevant for new leaders in the first 90 days: mission and values are not merely cultural artifacts but decision filters. Without them, the first months become reactive and disjointed. With them, leaders can triangulate quickly, narrowing the wide ambiguity of early leadership into a handful of aligned priorities.

For executives stepping into a new role, anchoring early decisions in mission and values is not philosophical—it is operational. The first 90 days demand a small set of non-negotiable priorities that serve as execution guardrails long before strategy documents take full shape. The alternative is survival mode—reacting to noise, chasing fires, pleasing factions. That path rarely leads to momentum.

Clarity is not a memo or a slide deck; it is a pattern of behavior. It is how you choose which fires not to chase. It is visible in what you prioritize when everything feels urgent. And in the first 90 days, people are not listening for the perfect articulation of a vision—they are watching for consistency.

The First Communication Mistake Most New Leaders Make

Bob Chapek's troubled transition at Disney is now a case study in how a leader's silence—or perceived silence—can erode trust. Chapek waited too long to speak publicly during a period of internal and external pressure. By the time he did speak, the vacuum had filled itself, and he spent much of his tenure recovering ground he could have claimed earlier.

The lesson for new CXOs is simple: in the first 90 days, silence is not neutrality; it is a vacuum. Execution slows when people cannot tell whether the leader's intentions match the organization's realities. Establishing a clear, visible leadership cadence early on is essential to prevent the entire enterprise from stalling.

Communication is not about volume or theatrics. It is about timing, signal clarity, and consistency. Leaders should speak early enough to establish direction but not so early





Beat the Clock

The early weeks into a new CXO's tenure sets the tempo. A single poorly timed move can ripple for months, proving that execution is about timing as much as action.

that they speak before they truly understand the landscape. It is a delicate balance but a necessary one.

The Governance Window: Boards Can Accelerate or Stall Early Execution

Many boards underestimate the degree to which their early interactions with new leaders influence execution in the first 90 days. The transition period is when trust is built—or weakened. It is also when new leaders depend heavily on the board to establish a stable environment, remove distractions, and provide honest feedback.

Too often, boards assume their role is passive early on, stepping back to “let the leader lead.” But when governance is uncoordinated or unclear, the execution engine sputters before it ever truly starts. Boards often do their greatest harm in these moments—not through malice or incompetence, but through benign neglect.

Boards that treat the first 90 days as an active governance window create velocity. Boards that treat it as a waiting period create drift.

This does not mean smothering a new leader with oversight. It means providing context, clarifying expectations, aligning

on priorities, and ensuring that the organization does not unintentionally sabotage the leader's early execution rhythm through miscommunication or political maneuvering.

If execution begins with clarity, then the board's first job is to help the leader establish it.

Why Leaders Lose Momentum: The Transition Patterns That Repeat

Human capital expert Jim Reid notes that early leadership transitions fail for a familiar set of reasons: leaders either move too fast, too slow, or misread the cultural

environment. His observation underscores a broader truth: the early rhythm a leader sets becomes the organization's rhythm, for better or worse.

Leaders who overshoot—changing too much too early—send teams into frantic motion without direction. Leaders who undershoot appear hesitant, creating a vacuum for others to fill. Leaders who misread the culture often make technically sound decisions that the organization experiences as jarring or hostile.

These are not character flaws; they are execution flaws.

Momentum in the first 90 days is fragile. A misstep in week three can take three months to correct. A poorly timed reorganization can derail an entire transformation. Execution is relational before it becomes operational.

The Nuclear Power Example: When Early Moves Go Wrong

One former GE nuclear leader famously tried to demonstrate urgency by demanding that teams “get out of bed earlier and get out there,” pushing for speed before establishing trust. His intention—to signal action and performance—backfired. Teams felt attacked rather than inspired. The move damaged credibility before he had time to build it.

When a leader forces teams into motion without first establishing trust and alignment, early execution becomes chaotic rather than catalytic. The first 90 days demand precision—small, confidence-building moves that lay the foundation for larger actions.

This is the paradox few leaders appreciate: the fastest way to accelerate execution is to slow down long enough to understand the people you are asking to execute.

The Most Common Unforced Errors (And Their Execution Consequences)

Every unforced error in the first 90 days has an outsized impact on execution. Leaders who speak too soon, move too quickly, or act without context create early drag. Leaders who avoid necessary decisions in the name of caution create their own form of drag. Leaders who misunderstand the organization's culture introduce friction



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Nathan Owen Rosenberg is a founder of Insigniam and a partner at Elixirr. In over thirty-five years in consulting and sixteen years of leading transformational seminars, he has worked with more than 85,000 people. Prior to co-founding Insigniam, Mr. Rosenberg founded two other successful enterprises and served as chief executive of four corporations. As a young man, he served as an officer and aviator in the United States Navy, executive support officer to the Secretary of Defense, and national security advisor to the U.S. Senate Majority Leader. Mr. Rosenberg has been on the Boy Scouts of America's Executive Board of Directors for over fifteen years and is a trustee of the Committee for Economic Development and the Falcon Foundation. Among his honors are the Joint Service Commendation Medal from the Secretary of Defense and the Silver Beaver, Silver Antelope, and Silver Buffalo awards from the Boy Scouts of America. He holds a B.S. in Management from the United States Air Force Academy and completed master's course work in Legislative Affairs at George Washington University.

that reverberates through teams and slows delivery. These errors fall into patterns:

- Ignoring early listening equals misaligned execution
- Overconfidence in the strategy leads to premature moves
- Underestimating political dynamics that create unseen resistance
- Mistimed reorganizations leading to execution breakdowns
- Silence or ambiguity, as teams stall while waiting for direction

None of these are fatal in isolation. But together, they take the wind out of a strategy before it leaves the harbor.

A New Mandate for New Leaders

The first 90 days of leadership determine far more than a leader's reputation. They determine whether the strategy gains momentum or loses it. They determine whether teams move with clarity or wait for permission. They shape whether the organization experiences the year as a decisive shift or as another cycle of aspiration without follow-through.

Leaders who succeed in this window are not the ones who make the biggest, boldest moves—they are the ones who sequence their moves with discipline and intent. They listen early, clarify priorities, set expectations, achieve small wins that build confidence, and align the board and organization around a coherent cadence.

In a world where so many strategies lose steam before the spring planning cycle is even complete, the first 90 days have become the most leveraged period of a leader's tenure.

Use them wisely. The rest of the year depends on it. **IQ**

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