

# Coaching Today



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# On the bookshelf: What you're reading



## The first 90 days: proven strategies for getting up to speed faster and smarter

Michael D Watkins

Harvard Business School Publishing 2013

Hb £20.00

ISBN: 978-1422188613

If you are involved in coaching executives then it's almost certain that at some time you will have been asked to help them with a 'transition'. It has been said that 'transitions' - essentially, stepping into new roles, whether as a promotion or through 'onboarding' - are the most challenging events in any executive's career. You will possibly even have helped them create a plan for the first 100 days/three months without necessarily realising who it was that, probably, first coined the phrase and, certainly, laid the intellectual foundations for these plans.

Back in the late 1990s Michael Watkins, then a Harvard Business School teacher, noticed that there was very little known about this tough stage in the executive's life, let alone how to make the transition relatively painless and, indeed, to best effect. At that time, some firms gave their new executives a considerable degree of latitude - not expecting results for some time, fixing performance bonuses for the first year, and so on. Others were less tolerant, especially if the appointment was politically sensitive, expecting very visible results within days or weeks at most.

Against the advice of his peers, Watkins set about researching executive transitions. Then,

in 1999, he was engaged by Johnson & Johnson to develop and deliver a programme for newly appointed senior managers that would enable them to accelerate their transition phase. Over the next couple of years he ran this programme for several hundred such people and documented his findings of what worked, what did not, what the variables were between different executives and so on.

The first edition of *The First 90 Days* appeared in November 2003. By summer 2004, it had reached the *Business Week* bestseller list and remained there for 15 months. Over the next decade, its balance of examples, deductions, tools and practical tips have proven themselves to executives all over the world. In that time, sales have reached 800,000 English copies, and 27 translations.

The tenth Anniversary edition has just been published, and it is every bit as good as its predecessor. Watkins' approach focuses on 10 key areas: upfront mental preparation; a systematic approach to learning about the environment in which the executive is operating; devising an effective strategy; building in some early wins; gaining consensus with key stakeholders (especially their boss) for the 90 day plan; aligning the organisation's structure to achieve the plan; systematic changes to the team; identifying and building coalitions, internally and externally; striking the right work/life balance; and, finally, investing in the development of everyone around them. The book takes each of these themes and expands them very comprehensively.

If you are used to working in a highly reactive fashion, you may find this approach a bit too structured and some of the exercises a little prescriptive. In the past, I have used the first edition as a reference source, dipped into it on occasions, recommended it to some clients and worked through it systematically with others. The most effective use has definitely been with

clients who have an intellectual bent - we've agreed on a couple of chapters to begin with and they have gone off to do their homework. At our next session, we reflect on these, develop our own materials based on those set out in the book, and agree how and when they will be put into place. Then we agree which two chapters we will focus on next, and so on.

*The First 90 Days* provides a rich source of material for any executive coach and, of course, any uncoached executive. I highly recommend it.

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