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Your First 90 Days: New Job, New Challenges, New Opportunities

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In this month's *Arts Insights*, we examine the most crucial period of time for any new leader: the first 90 days. Whether moving into a leadership role for the first time, transitioning into a new role with greater responsibilities, or making a lateral move into a new industry, there is a critical three-month period during which credibility and trust must be established to assure future success. "Virtuous cycles that ... create momentum and establish an upward spiral of increasing effectiveness" are the objective.¹ The inability to form relationships, build coalitions, and achieve results will inevitably make it much more difficult to create synergies that lead to the achievement of greater goals. In the arts and culture sector, numerous stakeholder groups with diverse and varied expectations, desires, and needs add to the complexity and uncertainty during this precarious time period.

As a new leader, what path should you forge and what guidelines should you follow in order to build credibility, gain acceptance, and develop unity of vision? According to Michael D. Watkins, there are ten distinct steps and tasks to be considered before and during the transition into a new role:

1. **Prepare yourself** – The qualities that have made you successful in the past and gotten you to this point in your career may not be the same skill set, attitude, or capabilities needed for your next position. Take a moment to analyze the past and prepare for the future while trying to objectively assess the prerequisites for your upcoming position. Assuming that you can maintain your previous work style, without considering the dissimilarities and distinctions between your past positions and companies and your new role and organization, may lead to misunderstandings, errors, and ultimate failure.
2. **Accelerate your learning** – You need to quickly determine what makes the new organization tick. This includes synthesizing the mission, vision, values, goals, and strategic plans while simultaneously identifying the motivations of all key individuals who bring the organization's plans to fruition. First, figure out who are your top donors, influential board leaders (past, present, and future), important volunteers, significant corporate sponsors, and main artists; then set dates to connect with each one in person; and finally, focus on what material you need to learn and absorb efficiently and effectively while establishing connectivity to your nexus of future support.
3. **Match your strategy to the situation** – An organization that needs a turnaround after years of stagnation at the top is different from an entrepreneurial venture that has enjoyed recent success. Clarity regarding the organization's current capabilities and potential is imperative before embarking on change management or planning.

¹ Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2013), 7.

4. **Secure early wins** – Your value is dependent upon your “break even” point at the organization. This is the moment at which you shift from being a cost center to a revenue generator. In the arts and culture sector, margins are thin and most organizations are already stretched to their human, financial, and technological limits. Within three months, you must demonstrate your ability to increase income and seek to identify potential cost savings. These early financial wins will signal to supportive stakeholders and skeptic naysayers the value that you bring to the organization in tangible, identifiable, and measurable terms.
5. **Negotiate success** – The most critical relationship in the nonprofit structure is the one between you and your new supervisor. Spend your time getting to know your boss and understanding his or her personal and professional history. You are responsible for managing the organization or department and will need to deliver good and bad news to your boss. The style of delivery and communication of the message can be more important than the content. Additionally, make sure that lines of communication are established to determine short- and long-term goals, assess the resources available internally and externally, and set your mutual expectations. Clarifying your roles and rules in advance will save you time and energy and prevent unpleasant emergency calls.
6. **Achieve alignment** – Once you have analyzed the current strategy, it is necessary to evaluate the internal availability of all the resources, knowledge, and skills needed to achieve the objectives. Perhaps the organization’s best opportunities lie in an area in which the organization has little current expertise. Developing and integrating processes and procedures and creating infrastructure through targeted hiring that best match the desired outcomes are your responsibility as the “organizational architect.”²
7. **Build your team** – If you arrive in a new position and the staff has a long affiliation and history, you will quickly need to “evaluate, align, and mobilize” its members.³ In many organizations, the new leader may need to restructure or realign employees, job descriptions, and positions. Your ability to make excellent human resource judgments and decisions is a determinant in your organization’s future ability to achieve its goals. Should you have the luxury to hire new highly qualified personnel for the organization, then you need to gently assimilate them into the existing staff in order to serve the current needs of the organization while building toward the future. Your human capital remains one of your greatest resources, and planning must be both systematic and strategic.
8. **Consider coalitions** – The more supporters you have, the easier your onboarding and first 90 days will be. Create alliances and associations as quickly and efficiently possible. Begin immediately by engaging key staff and board members in productive discussions and utilizing their knowledge to identify important community members. Your goals will become attainable through your organization’s engagement of its network of individuals who value your mission.
9. **Keep your balance** – In any new position it is especially important to maintain an understanding of what is possible and how it can be achieved. It is often expected that the new leader will arrive and immediately dive in. However, assessing the situation, maintaining objectivity, and having good judgement will be the keys to success. To prevent becoming overwhelmed, take time out for yourself and your private life. In order to lead others you need to remain calm, professional, friendly, and relaxed. Keep in touch with your friends and mentors, enjoy your family, and exercise to maintain your own physical and mental health.

² Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, 11.

³ Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, 11.

- 10. Accelerate everyone** – As you get up to speed, make sure that everyone else is intellectually and emotionally engaged as well. If you want to implement a change, involve as many individuals as possible and educate them as to the potential benefits of your plan. This step may take a bit of time and patience but will ensure that all parties are actively participating, understanding the value of the shift, and maintaining the same pace. Leaving stakeholders in the dust while you march on ahead will inevitably create ill will and put the brakes on the execution of your plans.

Following these ten steps will prepare you, your new organization, and all of its stakeholders for success. By aligning available resources to the correct strategies and attainable goals, you will create a robust organization or department that you will be proud to lead. The first 90 days are a golden opportunity for a new executive to start afresh, learn new skills, create unity, plan, organize, and synergize. In 90 days, you will look back at all that has been accomplished and realize that you have created acceptance, credibility, and trust, which are the foundation of your future success and the organization's upwards trajectory.



*ACG Vice President **Pamela A. Pantos** joined ACG in 2014 after six years as executive director of Opera North (USA). She brought Opera North firmly into the black and set a new standard for artistic excellence. This transformation included creating and executing a robust strategic plan, designing a marketing plan that increased ticket sales annually by 15 percent, and establishing a development initiative that doubled the company's contributed income over a period of three years. Prior to Opera North, Ms. Pantos was finance manager for Merger & Acquisitions (North America) at W.R. Grace. Ms. Pantos was named New Hampshire Outstanding Woman in Business 2014 by the New Hampshire Business Review and was featured by Babson College as one of The Entrepreneurs for ACG in their international multi-media marketing campaign at action.babson.edu. Ms. Pantos is based in ACG's Boston office.*

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