

The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at all Levels

By Michael Watkins

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Summary

Dr Alan Gordon

I first saw this book soon after it was first published.

Preface

Transitions are critical times when small differences in your actions can have disproportionate impacts on results.

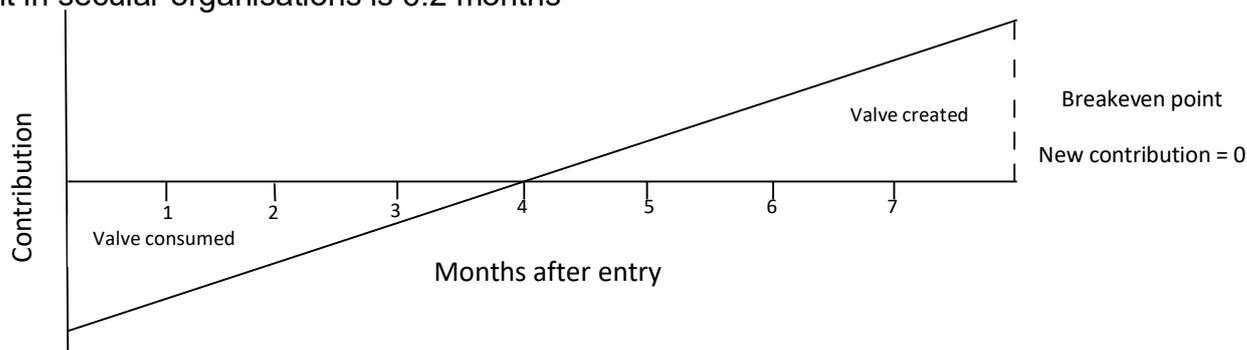
During their first few months. Leaders haven't learned what it takes to succeed in meeting their challenges. Failure to create momentum during this time virtually guarantees an uphill battle for the rest of your tenure. Building credibility and securing some early wins lays a firm foundation for longer-term success.

The approach used in this book is the transition acceleration model. It also considers failure prevention.

Introduction

Your goal during the first 90 days is to arrive as rapidly as you can to breakeven point. The

Breakeven point is the point at which new leaders have contributed as much value to their new organisations as they have consumed from it. The average break-even point in secular organisations is 6.2 months



Transition failures happen when new leaders either misunderstand the essential demands of the situation or lack the skills and flexibility to adapt to them.

There are systematic methods that leaders can employ to both lessen the likelihood of failure and reach the breakeven point more quickly. The key is to match your strategy with the situation.

The overriding goal in a transition is to build momentum by creating vicious cycles that build credibility and by avoiding getting caught in vicious cycles that damage credibility. Too often the new leader's early actions alienate potential supporters, undermine one's credibility and stimulate defensive reactions.

Transitions are a crucible for leadership development. Adaption of a standard framework for accelerating transitions can yield big returns for organisations. The failure cost for new leaders who enter organisations from the outside is high 40-50%. There is lack of familiarity with the organisational structure and the informal networks of communication. Assimilation is difficult when one does not know the corporate culture. One has not yet built up credibility. When there is a long history of hiring from within, senior managers are viewed as outsiders.

Our own idiosyncratic approach to taking charge may or may not serve us well.

Successful strategies

The fundamental goal of this book is to provide new leaders with practical frameworks for diagnosing their situations and developing their own customised transition acceleration plans.

The diagnostic tool used is the STAR model as it addresses the four options of the role:

- Start-up
- Turnaround
- Realignment
- Sustaining-success situation

Chapter 1. Targeting your new approach to your new leadership level

When promoted, let go of your old role and embrace the new one. Recognise the need to think and act differently. In your new role, delegate repetitive tasks. Don't micromanage.

Everyone has an urge to work one level below them. Work where you are not where you were.

Hit the ground running. Start planning what you hope to accomplish by specific milestones.

Assess your vulnerabilities. To do this, assess the kind of problems toward which you naturally gravitate. You feel more confident when you solve problems in those areas.

Ministry Field	Score 1-10
Volunteer morale	
Management of financial risk	
Missional outreach	
Smooth organisational operations	
Research & Development	

Where the score is low is where you are vulnerable. This field needs to be strengthened.

Then score each of these five fields according to each of the following:

- Technical problems: strategies, markets, technologies and processes.
- Political problems: power and politics in the church.
- Cultural problems: values, standards, guiding assumptions,

Are you low in any of these three approaches? If so, there are also areas that need strengthening.

Advisers can help us move beyond our comfort zone. Select a church leader who can assist you in a need area.

Each strength also has its attendant pitfalls. The qualities that made you successful in the past can prove to be your weakness in your new role. Learn to delegate.

Early in your ministries you needed to cultivate good technical advisors. As you are promoted, you will need advisors to help you understand the politics of the church – especially when you plan to implement change.

Watch out for people who want to hold you back.

Chapter 2. Accelerate your learning

Rapid learning about your church reduces your window of vulnerability. It also helps you to make good business decisions later.

There is so much to learn, it is easy to miss important signals.

Figure out the important questions and now you can best answer them.

Understand the history of the church.

Do not make early decisions until you are adequately briefed.

Do not come into the church with “the answer”. What works well in one church fails miserably in another.

Your willingness to listen genuinely increases your credibility and influence.

Managing learning

An actionable insight is knowledge that enables you to make better decisions earlier and to reach the breakeven point sooner.

Effective learning calls for figuring out what you need to learn so you can focus your efforts.

Efficient learning means identifying the best available sources of insight and extracting maximum insight in the shortest possible time.

Therefore begin by defining your learning agenda. What do you most need to learn?

Initially you will ask questions. Later you will hypothesise about what is going on and why. Flesh out and test these hypotheses.

First check the hard data: AGM reports, Board Meeting reports, etc. However, to obtain safe information of your church’s strategy, capabilities, culture and politics, you need to interview the people. Talk to people with different points of view to deepen your insights.

Many new pastors dive in and start talking. This method lacks structure and is time consuming. Your views are generally shaped by the first people with whom you talk.

Structured learning methods are far superior. Interview people who appear to be church leaders of varying ages and interests.

Talk to your predecessor, if possible. If there was a church split, speak to the leaders of both sides. Keep an open mind on all occasions.

The format of the interview is:

- Describe yourself and your approach.

- Discover the other person/couple and their background, family and interests
- Ask the same six questions: This will help you compose and contrast your results.

Record them: writing responses is acceptable.

- What are the biggest challenges the church is facing?
- Why is the church facing these challenges?
- What are the most promising opportunities for growth that we are not yet using?

What would need to happen for the church to achieve the potential of these?

- Opportunities?
- What do our potential attendees want that they are getting from other groups?
- If you were me, what would you focus attention?

Additional insights can be gained apart from the obvious answers:

- What are the prevalent and diverging views?
- Who answers directly and who diverts to tangents?
- Who takes responsibility and who points fingers?
- Who has a broad view of the church and who seems stuck in silos?

Distil your insights and questions. Feed them to your direct reports, eg your ministry staff. This will demonstrate how quickly you have begun to identify their issues. It will also reveal much of the team dynamics and the substance of individual members.

You may compare “slices” of your church with these interviews. They can be horizontal slices (e.g., different ministries and people of the same sex or age) or vertical slices (e.g. people in major leadership positions with grassroots church members).

Focus groups can be used on these questions or on other issues. Analyse at least one critical decision of the past. Who exercised influence at the each stage? Discover the decision making patterns and sources of influence.

Test strategic alignment from the top down. Ask people from the top what the church’s vision and strategies are. Then see how far down into the church’s “hierarchy”. Those beliefs penetrate.

Process analysis. Examine interactions between ministries. Assess the efficiency of the process.

Learning should be the primary focus of your plan for your first 30 days in your ministry.

Use a cyclical learning process: collect information, analyse and distil it, develop hypotheses and test them, thus progressively deepening your understanding of your new church.

Seek out the natural historians. They can fill you in on the history, culture and politics of the church. They are also potential allies and influences.

Learning about Culture

Cultures in churches develop over time and can be deeply rooted.

Because cultural habits and norms operate powerfully to reinforce the status quo, it is vital to diagnose problems in the existing culture. Figure out how to begin to address them. These assessments are particularly important if you are coming in from the outside. You can't hope to change your churches' culture if you don't understand it.

Examine the culture on three levels:

- Symbols: logos, styles of dress, distinctive symbols.
- Norms: i.e., shared social rules that guide "right behaviour". What behaviours get encouraged and which scorned?
- Assumptions: ie, often unarticulated beliefs that imdeepin social systems. What truths does everyone take for granted? From the way people interact with each other, are they concerned with individual or group accomplishment? It's the group casual or formal? Is it hard-driving or laid back? Who do these people think can legitimately exercise authority and make decisions? What does it take for you as incoming pastor to earn your stripes? What actions are believed by volunteers to create (or destroy) value?

Identifying after the church culture, decide whether to adapt to or alter that culture, decide whether to adapt to or alter that culture. What cultural characteristics are helping and which are harming performance.

Closing the Loop

Return to this chapter to reassess your learning agenda and create new learning plans.

Chapter 3. Match strategy with situation

There are four broad types of situations: start-up turns around, realignment and sustaining success, this is the STAR model.

Start-ups are church plants. They enter a growth cycle. 11Ms are turnarounds. The church recognises that it is in trouble and needs to be brought back on track. Start-ups and turnarounds involve much resource intensive construction work. Both require that you start making calls early.

Realignments are required when a church is drifting into trouble. The Church needs to be revitalised.

Sustaining- success situations describe a successful church that has just lost its vital pastor. It requires you to take it to a new level. Realignments reinvest the church. Sustaining-success situations reinvent the challenge. In both, you typically have some time before you need to make major calls.

Understanding the History

Start-ups grow and eventually become sustaining-success situations. Church planters move to plant new churches. A pastor who is experienced leading a large church replaces him. Many church leaders in realignments are in denial about the situation: They believe that they are sustaining success.

If prior leaders fail to identify realignment, a full scale turnaround becomes a necessity. Then there is rarely argument about the need to make big changes fast. Turning around a failing church often requires the new pastor to cut it down to a definable core fast and then begin to build it back up. This painful process, if successful, leaves the business in a sustaining-success situation.

Identifying challenges and opportunities

In a turnaround situation, everyone realises that changes need to be made quickly. That group awareness can help you move forward. A little success goes a long way. Participants in a turnaround often know what the problems are, but not what to do about them. Success at transitioning therefore depends on your ability to transform the prevailing church psychology in predictable ways. People in the church are close to despair. It is your job to provide hope! The premium is on rapid diagnosis of the church's situation.

Turnaround leaders are the hunters.

You must move fast and take chances. Often you will have incomplete information and will need to adjust as you learn more.

In realignment and sustaining-success situations, you must understand the culture and politics. The leaders are like farmers. Painstakingly cultivate awareness of the

need for change, by promoting shared diagnosis, influencing opinion leaders and encouraging benchmarking. Time urgency is less extreme. It is more important to understand the organisation, get the strategy right and build support for it, and make some good early calls.

Good managers can succeed in all four of the STARS situations, though no one is equally good at all of them.

Focusing your energy

Learning, versus doing. In turnaround and start ups, the premium is doing. You have to make some early calls without full information. If you spend too much time learning, events will overtake you and create a vicious cycle.

Learning does have importance, especially technical knowledge: services provided projects, technologies and strategies. This is the easiest and fastest type of learning.

In realignments and sustaining success situations, the people consider themselves successful. They may resist change. Early mistakes, especially if they risk traditional strengths, will cost you dearly. Delve deep into organisational culture and politics.

Offense versus defence. Offensive planning is identifying new markets and proposing new strategies. Defensive planning defends existing markets and strategies.

Start-ups are obviously about offense – developing new markets and strategies. Realignments make a mid-course correction that take the church in new directions – while retaining old markets and strategies.

In a turnaround, it is essential to have good defence. Identify strengths and cut them back to a defensible core that can financially support your next moves. Only then can you shift to offense and identify and develop new platforms for growth.

In sustaining-success situations, play good defence early on. Over time you can gradually take the church to a new level, securing early wins. In turnarounds, get the right transition team in place.

Diagnosing your situation

Your situation is unlikely to be a pure start-up, turnaround, realignment or sustaining-success situation. It may initially appear to be one category, but as you drill down, you will generally discover that you are managing a portfolio, a mixture of STARS situations.

- Diagnose which parts of your new church belongs to each of the four categories. It will enable you to identify the challenges and opportunities of

each category and facilitate your explanation to the Transition Team to why and how you will manage the various pieces differently.

- Diagnosing your Portfolio:

Start Up	Turn around
Realignment	Sustaining Success

Assign the pieces of your new portfolio to the four categories. Explain how the various pieces will be managed.

Rewards

Of the four styles of leadership, turnarounds are the best rewarded and realignments the least. A successful turnaround is visible and easily measured. So too is a successful start up. There is also personal feeling of satisfaction in turnarounds because of the action.

Chapter 4. Secure early wins

Early wins excite and energise people. They enable you to reach the breakeven point earlier.

Avoiding Early Losses

- Failing to focus You cannot hope to achieve results in more than a couple of areas during your transition. So identify promising opportunities and focus relentlessly on translating them into wins.
- Not taking the specific situation into account. Think tactically about what will build momentum best in this specific church.
- Not adjusting for the culture. Be sure that you understand what your church does and does not view as a win, if you come in as an outsider.

- Failing to get wins that matter to the Board. Early wins should energise your direct reports and church volunteers. However it is least to identify what the Board's priorities are and their aim to secure early wins in these areas. It will build credibility and open access to increased resources.
- Letting your means undermine your ends. If you achieve impressive results in a manner that is perceived to be manipulative or inconsistent with the culture, you are setting yourself up for trouble.

The Waves of Change

After an early period of acclimatisation, there is a first wave of change. The pace is slowed to allow for consolidation and deeper learning of the church. Armed with new insight, the new pastor has a deeper, structural wave of change. Again there is a pause. This follows by a final, less-extreme wave focused on fine-tuning to maximise performance. Then you are ready to move on.

There are five stages in each change:

- Learning
- Designing the changes
- Building support
- Implementing the changes
- Observing results = to secure early

The First wave - goal wins and builds momentum

Tailor early initiatives to

- Build personal credibility
- Establish key relationships
- Identify and harvest low-hanging fruit.

The Second wave – This is where the real gains are achieved.

Address more fundamental issues:

- Strategy
- Structure
- Systems
- Skills to reshape the organisation

In start-ups and turnarounds, start the first wave earlier.

Establishing Long-Term Goals

Early wins

Plan early wins so that they both build your credibility and lay a foundation for long term

To do this, ensure early wins:

- Are consistent with your –A- item priorities (see later)
- Introduce the new patterns of behaviour you want to instil into the church.

Focusing on –A- item priorities and behavioural changes

A- item priorities are your business objectives.

Think of your legacy. What do you want people to say about your achievements in this church at the end of your term?

Defining your –A- item priorities

- A- Item priorities should follow naturally from core problems. What are the critical areas that demand attention and what areas offer the greatest contributions to dramatic improvement in performance?
- A- Items priorities should be neither too general or too specific. They should address several levels of specificity.
- A- Items prior items should offer clear direction yet allow the flexibility while you learn more about your situation. Begin with a clear set of goals but adapt them as you move along.
- Address dysfunctional patterns of behaviour. Start by identifying unwanted behaviours. What behaviours will the people in your church consistently display that undermine the potential for high performance?

Problematic behaviour patterns

<u>Lack of</u>	<u>Symptoms</u>
Focus	The group can't clearly define its priorities or it has too many priorities.
Discipline	People exhibit great variation in their levels of performance. They don't understand the negative consequences of this behaviour.
Innovation	The group uses internal benchmarks to measure performance. Improvements in performance are very slow. Staff and volunteers are rewarded for

	maintaining stable performance, not for pushing the envelope.
Teamwork	Team members compete with each other and protect turf rather than working together to achieve collective goals. People are rewarded for creating fiefdoms.
Sense of urgency	Team members ignore the needs of the members of the congregation. Complacency reigns: "We've the best;" "It won't make any difference if I don't respond immediately."

Securing early wins

Your earliest actions will have a disproportionate influence on how you are perceived.

What are the best ways to get across the persona that you desire to present?

Focus on removing minor but persistent irritants in your new church. These include long meetings.

Once opinion about you has begun to harden, it is difficult to change people's perception.

- Effective leaders press people to make realistic commitments and then hold them to those promises.
- They are approachable, but in a way that preserves your authority.
- They are decisive but defer decisions that require more information.
- They make things happen, but avoid pushing people to the point of burnout.
- Effective leaders make tough calls but do it in ways that others perceive as fair.

Leveraging "Teachable Moments"

Early actions often get transformed into stories, which can define you as hero or villain. Demonstrate that every person in the church is important to you.

A teachable moment can simply be a penetrating question that crystallises your group's understanding of some key problem.

Securing Tangible results

The best candidates for securing early results are problems that you can tackle reasonably

Quickly with modest expenditure that will yield visible gains.

Identify 3 – 3 key areas, at most, where you will seek to achieve rapid improvement. Build a promising portfolio of early wins so that big successes will balance some disappointments. The focus is relentlessly on getting results.

- Keep your long term goals in mind. Seek to ensure that your early wins serve your –A- item priorities.
- Identify a few promising focal points. Focal points are areas or strategies where improvement can dramatically strengthen the church's overall performance.
- Concentrate on the most promising focal points. Early improvement will win freedom to pursue more extensive changes.
- Elevate change agents. Promote people who have insight, drive and initiative to advance your agenda. This sends a message through the church.
- Launch pilot projects to introduce new behaviours and target focal points. Successful early projects set your overall plan in motion. Your early pilot projects should also serve as how you want the church to function in the future.

Pilot Project Checklist

- What is the right mix of people?
- Who has the credibility, management skills and creativity to lead the project?
- What are achievable goals?
- What are achievable deadlines?
- What training do you need to provide in team problem solving and decision making.
- What other resources are necessary for success?
- How will you hold the team accountable?
- How will you reward success?

Avoid Predictable Surprises

There are general problem areas: inadequate information, inadequate resources, working out of your field of skills, lack of internal communication.

To identify specific areas:

- External environment. Could trends in public opinion, government action or economic conditions precipitate problems?

- Customers, markets, competitors and strategy. Could your competitors pose major challenges?
- Internal capabilities. Are there problems with your church's processes, skills and capabilities that could precipitate a crisis? (e.g.: an unexpected loss of key personnel)
- Organisational politics. Are you in danger of unwittingly stepping on a political landmine? E.g., certain people are "untouchable;" a key leader is subtly undermining you.)

Leading Change

There are two approaches to leading change.

1. Planned change. In this approach, there are four planks:
 - Awareness. A critical mass of people is aware of the need for change.
 - Diagnosis. You know what needs to be changed and why.
 - Visions. You have a compelling vision and a solid strategy.
 - Plan. You have the expertise to put together a detailed plan.
 - Support. You have a sufficiently powerful coalition to support implementation.
2. The collective learning process.
Expose key people to new ways of operating and thinking. Decide which parts of the change process will be best addressed through planning and which through collective learning.

Changing culture

Change culture is difficult but well-ingrained bad habits need to be changed.

It is unwise to attempt to blow up the existing culture and start again. There are limits to the change people can cope with at one time. Organisation culture has virtues as well as faults.

The key is to identify both the good and bad elements of existing culture. Elevate and praise the good elements even as you seek to change the bad.

Matching strategy to situation

In a turnaround, you face the combination of time pressure and the need to identify and secure the defensible core of the organisation rapidly. To change culture, you can bring in new people from the outside and set up project teams for performance – improving initiatives.

Realignments need slow and cautious change processes.

The summary of this significant book is incomplete.

