The new executive's first 100 days—Richard Greenberg

"The successful executives are those who are able to make the transitions." – David Nadler

"Leaders, regardless of their level, are most vulnerable in their first few months in a new position. They lack detailed knowledge of the challenges they will face and what it will take to succeed in meeting them. And, they have not yet developed a network of relationships to sustain them."
– Michael Michael Watkins in his latest book *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*

"Any new executive who says he is not scared on the first day of his job is lying." –Jonathan Schwartz who took over as executive of Sun Microsystems when founder Scott McNealey stepped down after 22 years

Based on multiple research sources, and my personal executive coaching experience, the following will improve an executive's chances of success in the vital period between accepting a new promotion and 100 days on the job:

- Seize the day (take advantage of getting insights into how the company is perceived)
- Get to know your (new) peers
- Share your values and your personal stories (since stakeholders look for important signals immediately)
- Find a confidant

As soon as he resumed the reins at Dell, Michael Dell declared a two-month "amnesty" to encourage people to discuss problems and deal with them quickly, without fear of being fired or demoted. (*The New York Times*, September 9, 2007)

When she became executive of PepsiCo, one of Indra Nooyi's first priorities was a trip to India, where she spoke widely of Pepsi's initiatives to improve the water used to make Pepsi and the environment, as well as her own fond memories of growing up in the country. One of her many themes: "This is a company with a soul." Indian media praised her and soda sales improved. (*BusinessWeek*, May 31, 2007)

Hewlett-Packard's newly hired leadership laid out a 100-day road map to make deliveries of personal computers to stores reliable again, helping make H-P the world's leader of PC sales again. (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2007)

The *Detroit Free Press* reported on the down-to-earth management style of Ford's new executive, Alan Mulally. Here are some highlights:

- Since succeeding Chairman Bill Ford as executive Mulally has been a relentless student of the company and the auto industry.
- Ford employees report he has been in action mode, zeroing in on troubled areas.
- He's trying to change the way everybody works at Ford, to make it more collegial, more effective and more fun.
- He has put in time on the floor of a dealership as a salesman, closing deals on four vehicles.
- Wherever he goes, he asks the right questions, carefully listens to the answers and wraps "sharp assessments and demands with so much positive energy and personality that the edges don't seem to cut."
- He preaches and practices a direct management style: Develop a sound plan. Play your position. Be open and honest. Work together. Have fun. "The most important thing is we pull together as a team," Mulalley said. "We're going to get really clear about leadership. We're going to help each other."

Frank Blake, new chief executive of Home Depot, worked to distance his management style from his ousted predecessor. Examples of his symbolic acts include:

- Abolished daily free catered lunches for top management
- Resurrected an old company icon, the Inverted Pyramid, that puts customers and employees above the chief executive ("It's not about me," Mr. Blake told investors and analysts)
- Cut his own pay
- Put an activist investor on the board

In their book, *You're in Charge, Now What?*, Neff and Citrin point out that the first 100 days is essentially a honeymoon period. It's a time when executives are expected to make changes and bring a fresh outlook to the position. It is also a time for establishing a sturdy foundation for the future. They set forth 8 simple rules for the first 100 days agenda:

1. **Listen** – ask as many questions as you can
2. **Resist the savior syndrome** – now is not the time to be bold
3. **Keep it simple** – provide a few key priorities to establish focus
4. **Hit pause** – wait a moment before answering every question and get back to those whose answers you did not have
5. **Look for quick wins** – find a few flaws to fix fast
6. **Spell it out** – use management meetings in the beginning to establish expectations and set the tone
7. **Don't dis your predecessor** – no more explanation necessary
8. **Give feedback** – take what you learn and communicate back to the company

Dan Ciampa and Harvard Business Professor Michael D. Watkins, in their book *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* offer some heady warnings for executives so that they start off on the right foot. Among their recommendations – avoid being isolated: It is critical to establish relationships and seek out key sources of information. The idea of locking one's self in a room to make a decision or figure out a problem is a sure fire way to maintain distance from colleagues. And that distance can hurt a new executive's connection to their team around them.

Adding to this perspective, Michael Watkins in his latest book *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels* makes the point that "leaders, regardless of their level, are most vulnerable in their first few months in a new position. They lack detailed knowledge of the challenges they will face and what it will take to succeed in meeting them. And, they have not yet developed a network of relationships to sustain them." Watkins created the STARS framework, which stands for startup, turnaround, realignment and sustaining success and developed it as a way to help new leaders navigate their new situations and transition appropriately.

Watkins argues that the thorniest challenge is learning the culture and politics of an organization. Becoming trapped in these pitfalls can really affect one's credibility. As Watkins points out "I advise new leaders to spend some time learning about culture and politics, even if they think they have been brought in explicitly to change them."

Jonathan Schwartz took over as executive of Sun Microsystems when founder Scott McNealey stepped down after 22 years. He was interviewed in The Chronicle about early tenure. Some of his answers are illuminating. When Schwartz was asked what was the toughest part, the new executive said that "physical endurance probably ranks at the top of the list (laughs). We are a global company that serves some very important customers, all of whom would like to sit down with me and talk about the future of computing. That requires a lot of energy and stamina."

Schwartz's response to the question of how it felt dealing with other executives, customers and investors for the first time was that "It was terrifying. Here is the guy who established a reputation and created the company that we are today, and (to)have him throw the keys to me and say, "I'll talk to you in six months. Call me if you need me." was pretty daunting. We have a perch in the industry, we have a presence and a reputation which I don't want to just uphold, I'd also like to amplify. Any new executive who says he is not scared on the first day of his job is lying."

The executive position, with its pitfalls and do's and don'ts is also a landscape for surprises. In fact, Michael E. Porter, Jay W. Lorsch and Nitin Nohria of Harvard's Graduate School of Business Administration have identified seven surprises new leaders should expect (and the warning signs to tell whether an adjustment needs to be made):

- **Surprise #1: You Can't Run the Company**
  - Warning Sign: Involvement in too many meetings and too many tactical discussions
- **Surprise #2: Giving Orders is Very Costly**
  - Warning Sign: Employees are too eager to seek out your advice before they act
- **Surprise #3: It's Hard to Know What's Really Going On**
  - Warning Sign: You learn about things after the fact
- **Surprise #4: You are Always Sending a Message**
  - Warning Sign: Colleagues around you act in ways that seem like they are trying to determine your likes and dislikes
- **Surprise #6: Pleasing Shareholders is Not the Goal**
  - Warning Sign: Executives and board members judge actions in relation to impact on stock price
- **Surprise #7: You are Still Only Human**
  - Warning Sign: You give interviews about you, not about the company