

The first 90 days: A survival guide for HR leaders

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Introduction



Introduction

All new starters are keen to make a good first impression - but when you're taking on a leadership role, the stakes are even higher. You've got more to prove, and often, more to lose.

Of course, if any business function understands the importance of getting off to a strong start, it's HR. As an experienced HR professional, with smooth onboarding and employee engagement part of your remit, you've likely helped hundreds of new hires to hit the ground running in your previous roles.

But now, you are the new starter, ready to make your mark as an HR Leader - and those first few months in the role will be key to laying the foundations of a lasting legacy.

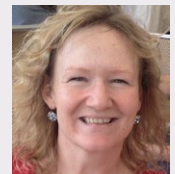
To be more specific, common corporate wisdom suggests it's the first 90 days which can make or break a new leader. During this critical time period, you'll need to build personal credibility, earn the trust of key people around you, and start to create the kind of positive momentum that will ultimately inspire long-term organisational change.

Naturally, you can't expect to reinvent the wheel in just three months, and indeed, there are many in the business world (including Deloitte) who dismiss the 90-day notion as myth - preferring to concentrate on a time period twice as long.

Yet the '90 days mentality' remains a popular way to focus the mind, providing a clear if ambitious time-frame to measure and assess personal and departmental progress.

In this ebook, we'll therefore identify what a successful first season might look like for a new HR Leader - and where to focus your initial efforts in order to survive and thrive in your role...

'It very much depends on the business approach of course, but for me it's about compliance. I suppose I would check for the real fundamentals first. So have we got our rights-to-work? Have we got our gender pay gap reporting? I also like to either listen in to phone calls with customers, or join in with visits to customers to really understand why we do what we do. What are we here for? What do our customers want from us? And how do we offer that to them?



Helen Scares
Human Resources Manager
Solid Solutions Ltd

Chapter One:

Listen, learn and contribute



Chapter One: Listen, learn and contribute

In any new post – but particularly your first at manager level - it's tempting to jump in with both feet and make your presence felt straight away.

But unless you've explicitly been tasked with shaking things up from the start, it's vital that you resist the urge to make sweeping changes.

Global HR Analyst Josh Bersin is among leading industry figures who claim these first few weeks are instead a time to listen, learn and get to know the business you've just joined.

Part of that challenge will be assessing and understanding the current HR practices and processes, the culture of the company and the ways in which people in the business interact.

And, as a HR Leader with a key part to play in strategic discussions, you'll also need to gain a detailed understanding of the corporate structure, the way the business operates and, crucially, how the company makes its money.

Only by understanding the organisation's overriding goals and challenges can you ensure your ultimate HR strategy aligns with the business's direction of travel.

An opportunity you'll never have again...

For an HR Leader, the first few weeks in the role offer an incredibly valuable insight that you'll never be able to fully replicate.

This is your one and only chance to experience life as a freshly hired employee - and your own experience as a new starter will teach you a lot about the HR department you now head up.

Seeing things from an employee's perspective is critical to developing an effective HR strategy that works for the whole business, so aim to spend time with as many people in as many roles as possible.

You may want to take a trip into the field with the sales team, for example, or spend a day on the factory floor – just to see first-hand what elements of the job work well for your employees, and what could potentially be improved.

Developing relationships at the opposite end of the hierarchy will be crucial too. If this is your first HR leadership role, it may be daunting to work so closely with the Chief Executive, but make it a priority to speak to them at length early into your tenure.

Probe them on the core business issues that are causing the most concern, and evaluate how HR can play its part in meeting those challenges.

Of course, it's not all about asking questions – you will be expected to contribute thoughts and ideas right from the off. If your peers are engaged and proactive in their own positions, they'll likely be looking to you for a 'fresh eyes' perspective on the way things are done.

You'll need to proceed with a little caution here. Aim to offer constructive, balanced advice, never overly critical of practice, process or predecessors – whatever the state of the situation you've inherited.

'I think a lot of people want to try and do everything they can in the first 90 days. That can be a mistake - you need to be realistic and focused. Getting an understanding of how the business is working and who reports to who is an obvious first step. A lot of businesses are matrixed now and that can cause confusion. So not only who reports to who, but who manages who? Who looks after key things such as appraisals and who are the main decision makers?'

Sean Flanagan
Managing Director
Riverwell Ltd

Chapter Two:

Secure quick wins



Chapter Two: Secure quick wins

For all the listening and learning you'll be doing in your first few weeks as HR Leader, it's only natural that you'll want to achieve some notable successes too.

At the end of the fabled 90-day period, you'll want to feel like you've made some kind of tangible difference to your new organisation – and you'll want your superiors to notice the positive change too.

So, as you learn about the business and its current practices, it's advisable to weigh up where the 'quick wins' might lie. Where can you make a significant difference, without too much disruption or meeting with too much resistance?

Quick wins early in your tenure are key to demonstrating your credibility, and help to buy you the time you need to achieve bigger victories in future.

Indeed, in research carried out by Corporate Executive Board's (CEB) Learning and Development Roundtable, it was found that the highest performing new leaders across a wide range of industries all had one thing in common – the achievement of a significant success in those vital early months.

Where to look for your first success

It won't take long to get a sense of the pain points in your HR department, and in most cases, efficiency and productivity will probably top the list.

A quick win could be as simple as identifying and eliminating unproductive meetings, to win back some much needed time for your team.

You may also be able to introduce new ways of working surprisingly quickly. Modern cloud collaboration tools such as Slack are simple to set up and intuitive to use, while task management tools like Trello will help your teams stay on top of a famously challenging admin workload.

In the longer term, you'll likely be looking at systems and processes to drive efficiency improvements, but as a starting point, these apps can be invaluable – helping you get a quick win on the board, while showcasing your intention to automate the department further.

The quick-win paradox – why it's vital not to push too hard

The very same CEB research that saw new leaders rated an average 20% higher by their bosses if they had secured a quick early win, also had some illuminating findings about the poor performers.

Consistent traits among the strugglers included focusing too much on details, reacting negatively to criticism, intimidating others, jumping to conclusions and micromanaging.

It's not much of a leap to suggest that these characteristics could quite easily be the hallmarks of a new starter desperate to get that much-vaunted quick win under their belt.

Clearly, chasing the quick win can be dangerous if not carried out correctly, so be sure not to fall into the trap of pushing too hard too soon.

An early defeat could be a killer blow for your credibility, but will happen if you don't make a good assessment of the situation, or fail to factor your new company's culture into your proposed solution.

Indeed, they might be called quick wins, but they should always be the result of very careful consideration.



Chapter Three:

Develop the HR strategy



Chapter Three: Develop the HR strategy

You've picked the right battles and emerged from your first couple of months with some quick wins safely tucked under your belt. In doing so, you've set your stall out, gained credibility and earned the trust you'll need in order to implement your long-term vision.

So far, so good. But, by the time your first 90 days is up, you should already be making strides towards that longer term goal, sharing your HR strategy with key stakeholders and clearly identifying, through a more detailed plan, exactly how you're going to deliver it.

Your superiors will expect you to come out of your honeymoon period with a strategic 'people plan' as precise and measurable as possible.

Crucially, your HR strategy should be aligned with the overall company business plan identified over your first few weeks. It should focus on the outcomes that need to be achieved for the business, and show how the HR operation needs to evolve in order to support and drive the business's key outcomes.

Does your HR department have the right processes, systems, people and technology to deliver what is required? These are the critical components of any successful HR operation, and you'll need to demonstrate how you plan to put them all in place.

The questions that will help you develop your HR strategy

Fundamentally, the key question behind your HR strategy is 'Does the business have the internal capability to achieve its goals?'

Where the answer is no, this could be due to a failure of essential systems, processes or simply a product of unrealistic aims - but more often than not, the weakness is in the workforce.

Whether that weakness lies in a lack of skill and talent, or in poor motivation and engagement, it's a challenge your HR strategy needs to address.

Once you've identified the unique capabilities required to drive improved performance, you need to consider whether you'll train existing teams or hire those capabilities afresh. If you want to bring new talent in, can the business even attract the right calibre of people?

Consider too, whether the business even has the right structure in place to scale up while remaining agile? Or does the organisation need to restructure before it can grow?

As for your current star performers, are they sufficiently recognised and rewarded to stay along for the ride?

Measuring success

A key part of any HR strategy is knowing what success will look like for your business. How will you monitor and measure the specific impact of your strategy, and quantify an uplift in HR performance?

Always, your strategy should come with a commitment to measuring real, tangible outcomes right across the business - be that a percentage reduction in employee churn, reduced cost to hire or increased productivity levels due to better employee engagement.

Without tying your strategy to clear goals and KPIs, your impact as HR Leader will be difficult to judge.

'It's about going back to basics - getting to know the people that you've got in the business and the key trends, such as retention. I'd be asking questions such as, 'Why are we losing people out of the business? What is our absence rate? What are our costs associated with recruitment? What are our costs associated with holding on to the people we've got? What training are we doing?' Then I'd be looking at the simple metrics that you can get out of your HR system.'

Sean Flanagan
Managing Director
Riverwell Ltd

Summary



Summary:

Your first 90 days as an HR Leader will go a long way to shaping your success (or failure) in the role, but there's no immediate rush to make your mark.

Rather, these first few months should be paced out properly, ensuring your ultimate HR strategy is built on a full and detailed understanding of your new business, its people and its goals.

Only by listening, learning and building relationships with key people will you be able to spot areas for improvement, articulate them to the powers that be, and understand who to influence in order to make the changes you need.

Power up the trust battery

The importance of building trust and credibility in your first 90 days can't be overstated. Establishing good relationships (while proving your credentials with some carefully chosen quick wins) will be key to gaining the support you need to make a difference.

So, above all, consider your first few months an opportunity to charge up the 'trust battery'.

The trust battery concept (believed to originate from the leaders at Shopify) suggests that every time you work with someone, trust is either gained or lost. The battery is charged up, or loses power.

When the battery is fully charged, things get done smoothly and quickly - when the trust battery is low, things become increasingly difficult.

As a new HR leader, the trust battery between you and all your new colleagues starts out around 50%. Build up the battery reserves over your first 90 days (and beyond), and it might just be enough to power you to long-term success in the role.

The bottom line - what 90-day success looks like...

However you tackle the first few months in your new HR leadership role, these are the key outcomes you need to achieve.

1 Authority: You've earned credibility and are now respected by others. Your opinion is valued and actively sought out.

2 Acceptance: You are embraced by the business, deemed to fit in well - and feel a personal sense of belonging.

3 Alignment: You understand the business's goals - and your own aims and actions are in perfect alignment with those objectives.

4 Achievement: You're producing tangible, measurable results. Through quick wins and a clear strategy, the business can see you're making a difference.

Achieve these 'four A' outcomes, and you'll emerge from your first 90 days as a HR Leader with top marks.

My priority when entering a new job at manager level is building a partnership with the stakeholders. Getting close to the leadership team on an individual basis and understanding what's causing them pain - then helping with those pain points. But it's also getting to know as many of the staff as possible. So walking the walk, visiting lots of sites, just spending time working in different offices - you then get to hear who does the tea rounds, and who's having a baby. I think that kind of thing makes people more likely to call you when they need you.'



Helen Scares
Human Resources Manager
Solid Solutions Ltd

All-in-one HR software for the growing business

Natural HR is a cloud-based HR software company for growing businesses with 100+ employees. Our comprehensive suite includes your core HR database, self-service, recruitment, performance management, time and attendance, expenses, reporting and analytics. Natural HR also comes with customisable workflows to help you automate and streamline processes, such as onboarding and offboarding.

Unlike most cloud vendors who leave it to you to learn their software, we believe you deserve more. For us, it's more than just providing you with technology. We are passionate about ensuring you get the most out of our solution. Our friendly and approachable customer success team is dedicated to helping you get set-up quickly with ongoing training and technical support throughout your Natural HR journey.

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