The First 90 Days as a New Leader: Common Mistakes and What Helps

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Why the first 90 days matter disproportionately

Teams and stakeholders form early, lasting impressions of a new leader well before that leader has had time to fully understand the role. Those early impressions, about competence, fairness and intent, are disproportionately hard to change later. This makes the first 90 days worth approaching deliberately rather than simply diving into the work.

The most common mistakes

Trying to prove competence too quickly. New leaders, particularly those promoted from within, often feel pressure to demonstrate they deserve the role by making fast, visible changes. This frequently backfires, either because the changes are based on incomplete understanding, or because the team reads it as a lack of respect for what came before.

Changing everything, or nothing. Overhauling every process signals disrespect for the existing team and their history. Changing nothing signals a lack of judgement or courage. The more effective path is selective: a small number of early, well-chosen changes, communicated with clear reasoning.

Skipping relationship-building for task delivery. Under pressure to show results, new leaders often under-invest in one-to-one relationships early on. This is a mistake; the trust built in the first weeks is what makes later, harder conversations possible.

Not clarifying expectations with their own manager. Many new leaders assume they understand what success looks like in the role, only to discover months later that their manager's expectations were different. This conversation is worth having explicitly and early.

A practical framework for the transition

Listen before acting (weeks 1 to 4). Meet individually with the team and key stakeholders. Ask what is working, what is not, and what they would change if they could. Resist the urge to respond with solutions yet.

Diagnose and align (weeks 4 to 8). Synthesise what you have heard, identify genuine priorities, and align explicitly with your own manager and key stakeholders on what matters most.

Act selectively and visibly (weeks 8 to 12). Choose a small number of early actions that address real, commonly cited issues, and communicate clearly why you chose them. This builds credibility far more effectively than a long list of simultaneous changes.

The underlying principle

New leaders earn trust primarily through demonstrated judgement, not through speed. Slowing

down deliberately in the first weeks, in order to understand before acting, is rarely seen as weakness by a team; it is far more often seen, correctly, as respect.