

## ESSENTIAL MISTAKES FOR OSH MANAGERS TO AVOID

By Chet Brandon

**So, you finally got that OSH leadership position you have worked so hard for; you made it to a manager's role. But we work in a 21st century business environment, so the hard work is not over yet. Michael Watkins is the author of *The First 90 Days*, a guide used by executives to succeed in a new role.**

**Watkins frames the modern world** with this statement: "The President of the United States gets 100 days to prove himself; you get 90." The prevailing philosophy in business today is that to thrive, organizations must be disruptive and agile. This often translates to failing fast and moving forward until success is found. This puts pressure on OSH professionals in new positions. The transition into a new leadership role is a period of great opportunity, but can also make one vulnerable. Simply put, you must acclimate and contribute quickly in a new role to succeed.

Critical mistakes are often made by new OSH managers in two areas: not understanding the organization they are now a part of or not being perceived as creating enough value in time to be considered successful in the role. If you fail to build momentum it becomes a steep uphill climb. This article shares methods and concepts that will help OSH professionals make the most of the opportunities that come with new leadership positions. Watkins's book outlines useful methods to ensure success for a professional in a new position. Like much OSH work, approaching the task with a sound strategy is critical to obtaining the desired outcome.

To ensure success, OSH professionals must quickly address two vulnerabilities: 1) lack of established working relationships with other leaders, subordinates and colleagues and 2) an incomplete understanding of your new role. Begin by quickly learning about your new role and how you will be successful at it.

Let's start with methods to learn about your new leadership role and identify its main challenge, understanding. Ask questions such as:

- What needs to be done?
- Why does it need to be done?
- When does it need to be done?
- Who does it?
- How does it need to happen?
- How does one know when it is done?

The answers to these questions can provide a deeper understanding of the

organization's expectations for your role, and help identify opportunities for success, specific failures to avoid and resources available. Ask how the organization gets things done. Is it a hands-on culture or is accomplishing work primarily through consultants or others the preferred method? As you begin to answer these questions, you learn how information flows through the organization and how to tap into that flow. To answer these questions about the nature of your new role, you must actively engage in observations, conversations and documentation reviews.

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Observe the vocabulary used by the organization and use it as soon as you understand the terms. Learn the processes (equipment and procedures) in place that create the key output (product or service) of the organization. Carefully observe and understand the work methods used to create these outputs. While observing how the organization works, look for problem areas to improve on. Seek to understand the culture of the organization. Carefully identify the symbols, norms and basic assumptions of the group and understand what effect these have on your leadership accountability. Determine how to leverage the existing culture to enable your success and what aspects of it must be carefully avoided to reduce drag on your accomplishments during the first 90 days.

However, observation alone is not enough. You must communicate with those you are to lead, collaborate with or work for, and ask questions of su-

pervisors, coworkers, stakeholders and subordinates. If it is a union site, speak with the union officers about their perspective and point of alignment to your goals. Seek out the critics to form a complete picture. When speaking with other members of the organization, ask questions about the past, present and future. Be humble, courteous and an active learner in these conversations.

Another important source of information in the OSH field is documentation. Carefully review items such as:

- strategic plans;
- policies and programs;
- incident investigations;
- environmental permits;
- past audits;
- continuous improvement projects relevant to OSH;
- reports to shareholders;
- past citations and notices of violation;
- performance reviews and development plans;
- highly applicable regulations that are new to you.

In these reviews, determine what is working well, and identify opportunities for quick wins and potential threats. Move quickly to neutralize or minimize threats and take action on opportunities. Taking time to understand the information in these documents and the reasons they exist will help you learn more about the organization.

Through observations, conversations and document reviews, you are searching for a deeper understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, successes and challenges of the organization. You will use this knowledge to develop your immediate (within 30 days) and intermediate (within 90 days) goals and necessary actions to achieve them. These short-term plans for new leaders are known as 30/60/90 day plans. With these activities and goals, you will create positive momentum in your role by reducing the time between the organization's initial investment in you as a new leader and the

breakeven point at which you begin to deliver value back to the team.

Your supervisor is another critical participant in your success during the first 90 days. S/he hired you, is responsible for you and has staked part of his/her credibility on your ability. S/he wants you to succeed and you need this person's help to do so. Start by understanding what is important to your supervisor. Carefully explore his/her expectations of you and include him/her in your 30/60/90 day plan. Discuss the meaning of the information obtained from your observations, conversations and document reviews. Learn how your supervisor sees the organization and its challenges. Meet frequently to provide progress updates on your plans and receive direction on your activities.

Watkins identifies 10 key actions a new leader should take to ensure success in a new role:

- 1) Promote yourself in your new role.
- 2) Accelerate your learning.
- 3) Match your strategy to the situation.
- 4) Secure early wins that the organization values.
- 5) Negotiate success with your supervisor.

- 6) Achieve alignment with the organization.
- 7) Build your team.
- 8) Create coalitions with other stakeholders.
- 9) Keep your balance.
- 10) Expedite everyone.

As a new leader, failure to adequately manage any of these 10 tasks would be a critical error. Most of these tasks can be accomplished by the process of understanding your new role. These are the actions by which you utilize the information you have learned to craft a winning strategy. For example, keeping your balance is a critical self-discipline skill. Failing to do this can result in losing perspective and becoming isolated, which can lead to bad decisions. During these transitions you are not only entering a new work environment, but your family is also entering a new situation with another set of challenges. Overinvesting in work and failing to manage your family's adjustment can destabilize a critical sup-

port structure in your career. The advice frequently offered by executive leaders is "don't get over the tips of your skis." In other words, don't get out of balance and fall over. Sustain your energy, maintain discipline to execute in a controlled manner and keep perspective about what it takes to succeed.

Diligently applying these tools and techniques ensures success in the most critical period of a new role. Keeping a sharp focus on the 90-day window for momentum building with quick wins and communicating them frequently with your supervisor demonstrates that you are a capable leader ready for the current challenge and perhaps more. **PSJ**

### References

Watkins, M.D. (2013). *The first 90 days: Proven strategies for getting up to speed faster and smarter*. Watertown, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

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