# Throw Away "The First 90 Days"!

Since I have lived most of my life in the Midwest, I typically moderate strong feelings I might have on any topic.  In fact, I usually just get so mad that I ALMOST SAY SOMETHING!  However, in this case, it's time someone stood up to **The First 90 Days**, by Michael Watkins.

When I suggest that you throw away the book, what I really mean is that you either read and apply the whole thing, or throw it away.  Since my experience tells me that most leaders who try to apply the concepts in the book do so selectively and with disastrous effects, I still think throwing it away is the best course of action.  I will leave that to you to decide for yourself.

Let me explain by telling the story of Joe, a new VP of client services at a large advertising communications firm.  As he entered this new role, the President of the firm informed Joe that there were productivity problems in the Account Services department, which was accustomed to a "country club" atmosphere.  Joe was directed to "kick butt and take names later" as he established himself as the new sheriff in town.  So, that's exactly what he did, wanting to please his new boss and to have a large impact in his first 90 days.  He had read the book, you see.

Joe had been applying this strategy for about two weeks when I received a phone call from the VP of Human Resources.  She knew that many of the folks in Joe's department already had their resumes on the street and were looking to bail as quickly as possible.  I called Joe and set up a meeting within the next couple of days to discuss the situation.

When we met, Joe basically said he was just doing what he was told to do.  He had accepted the President's assessment of the situation without gathering his own data and had not made any attempt to get to know people before he started criticizing their work and making changes.  In his mind, having read the **The First 90 Days**, he did not have much time to make a huge impact.

Fast forward to earlier this year when Diane, an individual I had coached in the past, accepted a new position at a competitor that offered a two-level promotion.  Before she began her new role, we sat down to discuss how she should approach her team as she came on board, and I suggested this strategy:

- Gather as much information as possible about the team and the situation, the challenges and opportunities.  You could do some of this in advance, but the bulk of it by meeting individually with team members and learning about them, establishing rapport.
- Begin to develop relationships with team members and your boss, listen to them and how they perceive things.  Learn what they want you to accomplish in the role, what they need from you and hope you can provide.
- Then, work on building interconnections and coalitions with key stakeholders within the organization.  Begin to create a vision and strategy, based on what you are hearing, and start to enroll others in the approach you intend to take.
- Finally, after thoroughly listening and using others' input and perspective to inform your strategy, begin to implement the plan and look for early wins.  Continue to work at enrolling and actively involving key stakeholders as you roll it out.

I knew it was a great strategy. I had seen it work impeccably recently at another client organization when a new CEO took the reins, and I shared this success story with Diane. When we parted that day and she headed off to her new role, I was convinced that she would get off to a terrific start. I suggested that she take the first four to six months to work on the first three bullets, and then begin to look for early wins in the implementation.

Unfortunately, she also spent time talking with a few people from her previous employer. Having read **The First 90 Days**, to a person, they recommended that she dive in quickly, size up the situation in the first week or two, and then begin to implement large-scale changes. She thought to herself, "Okay, I've got to do something big here in the first three months, but I'm not sure what that should be." The weight of their suggestions obliterated my ideas, and she dove into the deep end—or perhaps, went off the deep end. After about three weeks of this approach, her new boss confronted her and asked pointblank what happened to the person he had seen during the interviewing process. She had so insulted people by ignoring what had been accomplished up to this point and pushing to affect changes with no input that her new boss was now second-guessing his hiring decision.

In fairness to Watkins, his book does suggest things like "accelerate your learning," "build your team," "create coalitions," and "match strategy to situation," but these chapters do not focus enough on the importance of simply spending time with people and listening. In the mind of those who have used this book to affect change from a new position, the compelling chapters are those that prod you to "promote yourself," "expedite everyone," and "secure early wins." It seems that most people, like Diane's well-intentioned friends and former coworkers, become fixated on the "early wins" chapter. Watkins's recipe for success quickly becomes a concoction for disaster.

**The answer.** So, what should effective leaders do in situations where they step into a new role with a group that needs to quickly reach a higher level of performance? First, recognize that no matter how negative the perception is of a team's functioning, they are trying to be successful and are proud of their accomplishments. The true story in any situation usually includes layers of complexity that you can only discover and appreciate by meeting with people and listening deeply to them. Withhold your judgment, ask insightful questions, and take good notes. Be encouraging as you observe them, keep your mind open, and do not share your early conjectures. Appreciate the obstacles they have overcome to get to their present level of effectiveness. Do not say anything negative about their former bosses or the decisions that led them to where they are.

As much as possible, follow the four bulleted suggestions I gave Diane. If you start telling yourself what a waste of time all this listening is, keep in mind that you will need an engaged team behind you when you roll out your changes. The best way to do that is to ask their perspective, use their ideas in developing the new direction, bring in a healthy dose of your own thoughts to shape the strategy, and give each team member an important role in implementation. Ignore your inner voice, and perhaps your boss's voice, about driving change quickly.

The good news is that it is never too late to do the right thing. After rough beginnings, both Joe and Diane circled back to their teams, asked good questions, listened deeply to the answers, and used the information to build a new strategy. This time, they had the team on board, and they took the right amount of time, about 180 days, to do it.

I think they both decided to throw away their copy of Watkins's book.