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Fast Start - Your First 60 Days

Congratulations, you've got the job! But you can forget about a honeymoon. If you're lucky, you've got 60 days to prove you can fit in and perform.

by Cheryl Dahle
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It's barely two weeks into her new job at the advertising giant Foote Cone & Belding, and Molly Buchholz's nerves are fried. Buchholz, a 29-year-old account executive, has just had a dispute with the company's media director, her first with a Foote Cone colleague. Despite the media director's objections, she has advised her client, Lucent Technologies Inc., to turn down a flashy sponsorship deal with a National Hockey League team. She tried to disagree without being disagreeable, but she fears that the colleague is less than

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amused.

"There's been some grumbling," she says. "But if I don't express my opinion around here, I'll just be a puppet."

Though she believes she made the right decision, Buchholz frets over the fallout: Did she come off as pushy? Did she break an unwritten rule? Did she insult someone whose support she'll need down the road? Buchholz was a star performer at her previous gig, with Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, but she feels tentative at her new one. She doesn't yet speak Foote Cone's language. Learning it has been exhausting.

"I spend a lot of time worrying about how I act and react in different situations," she says. "I feel like I'm under a microscope."

So does just about everyone who starts a new job these days. (And these days, people are starting new jobs all of the time.) Not so long ago, a fresh hire could expect a blissful honeymoon period - a little time just for settling in. But now that rapid technological change and bare-fisted competition for market share have quickened the pace of business, the honeymoon is over.

"Companies used to have what they loosely called a 90-day probation period," says Linda Seale, head of the Seale Group, an executive coaching firm whose roster of clients includes such A-list companies as Avon Products, BMG Entertainment, and American Express. "Now they can't spare more than 60 days. At some companies, you're lucky to get even that."

Many organizations are swapping the welcome mat for the revolving door. It's not uncommon for people to be hired and fired within a matter of weeks. The rules are changing: To succeed today, you must fit in, you must perform, and you must do it all on deadline.

The biggest mistake that a new hire can make is to lose a sense of urgency, says Seale, whose background includes a stint as head of human resources for the notoriously high-speed MTV Networks. "Time slides by, and before you know it, you're stuck with whatever impression you may have haphazardly left for others to see," she says.

Seale helped us devise an agenda for your first 60 days in a new work situation. Use it to launch your next job - or to reboot the one you've already got - and keep your career on a fast track.



First 14 days: Get to know four new people.

When you show up for your first day, leave at home this fallacy: Your success depends on your work. "The combination of your performance and your personality determines how you're viewed," says Seale. "Probably 95% of firings are the result of failing to fit into a company's culture. If people don't know you, they can't trust you."

To "fit in," you've got to get out. That means leaving your comfy cubicle and spending time with people who can tell you about the hidden rules of success in your new workplace. Seale suggests that you come up with a strategy before you step into the "meet" market: Seek out the regulars (your teammates, the guy in purchasing whom you'll be calling often), the deal-makers (project leaders, people in-the-know), and the potential mentors. Then start eating. Put aside two days each week to have lunch with those people.

During those lunches, don't slather on the charm. You're there to listen. The point is to find out how your new workplace really works: How do people interact with the boss? Who should you recruit for the projects that you'll be leading? What are the cultural no-nos?

"Just establish an initial connection, so that you can build a relationship," says Seale. "Trust and information will follow naturally."

When Eileen Burke, 37, started as a senior vice president at Fleet Financial Group in early 1997, she made networking her top priority. A veteran of both Banque Paribas and Chemical Bank, she had learned that the most valuable currency in banking is whom you know.

During her first month at Fleet's Media and Communications Group in New York City, Burke called her counterparts in Boston to schedule a series of informal meetings. She returned from her first trip with critical advice from a fellow senior vice president. He told her that the group executive vice president, a busy guy who oversees a department of 40 people, responds to a spoken request more readily when it is accompanied by a concise memo.

"That tip took some of the guesswork out of figuring out how best to communicate with my boss," Burke says. "He's running a large group and just gets barraged with information. The memos help him manage all of it."

Intracompany networking should continue beyond your first two weeks. The goal is to establish a routine and never to fall out of it. Seale recalls the fate of a talented but socially inept employee at Saatchi & Saatchi, where Seale was serving as executive vice president of HR. "It was around the 90-day mark for a wave of new hires, and I was doing informal performance reviews with other senior executives. We drew a blank when this guy's name came up. He hadn't connected with anyone on his team or spent any time building relationships with people. None of us knew him. He had no credibility, and he was fired at the end of his first year."



First 30 days: Have a "How am I doing?" meeting with your boss.

Don't assume that your boss knows what you're doing. Managers usually assume that you're doing what they expect - even if they haven't defined what that is.

"It's not the boss's job to ask what you're working on and how it's going," Seale says. "It's up to you to seek out the boss."

Molly Buchholz, who joined the Lucent account at Foote Cone last February, gave herself a 30-day deadline for checking in with the person who hired her. She kept a running list of things to talk about: Her work style is more aggressive and formal than that of her group - Was that okay? A junior team member on the Lucent account had left Foote Cone - How would that change affect her?

"People who expect others to come to them spend too much time waiting around," says Buchholz. "I want to be more aggressive. I want people to know I'm here."

Buchholz's sit-down with the senior VP in her division allayed her worries about the disagreement over the hockey-sponsorship deal. The whole thing turned out to be a nonissue. "And he made it clear that he wants to hear from me," she says. "He even wanted my feedback on his role."



Many new hires put off checking in with the boss because they're afraid they'll hear unpleasant news. That's about as smart as avoiding the doctor because you think your health is failing, Seale argues: "Your boss wants you to

succeed. Your success makes him look good. Even though the boss is judging your performance, he's not an adversary - he's an ally."



First 45 days: Write your job description.

Forget about asking for a job description, says Seale. That pithy paragraph reflects only what your superiors think your job will be, not what it is.

Once you've spent about a month and a half on the job, you should have a solid sense of your responsibilities. How do they differ from what you were led to expect? Are there new opportunities that you might pursue? Get your questions down on paper, along with a list of your top projects and your most pressing deadlines. Then review them with your boss. The goal: to create a real-world job description that you both agree on.

"In the world of work, it's very foolish to guess," Seale says. "It's hard enough to do really good work and to manage relationships, even when you're on track. Why waste time being off track?"

Elisabeth Hahn offers an example of a job that went off track in part because the initial description of it wasn't specific enough. Hahn, 39, has an impressive background in the art world. For several years, she was vice president and director of the fine-arts print department at Christie's in New York City. In March 1997, she was hired by a large, New York-based brand-management consulting firm. The firm wanted to develop its business in Europe and brought on Hahn to lead the effort. It promised her plenty of training and plenty of time for her to adjust to her new responsibilities.

But once she took the job, Hahn found that little training was available. And instead of being left to do big-picture market analysis, she was asked to dive in and produce business leads.

"I came to realize that the original job definition was wishful thinking on my boss's part - a list of things that he hoped we could achieve, rather than of things he was committed to achieving," Hahn says. After nearly a year, she was finally able to get a clearer job description, but it differed wildly from the strategic-marketing position that she thought she had bargained for. She and the firm chalked up the problem to miscommunication, and she left to become an independent marketing consultant.

Looking back, Hahn wishes that she had pushed harder to learn her boss's expectations. "The lesson for me is that you should never act out of fear," she says. "When I got the offer, I was afraid that if I asked too many questions, people would change their minds about me. I didn't insist on the clear job definition that I really needed. Next time, I won't leave it all up to the company."



First 60 days: Get something done.

Seale cautions against hastily assembling an agenda of easy-to-nail action items. To be sure, you must do enough to signal your potential. But be careful to pick projects that make sense.

One of Seale's clients tried so hard to be a hero to his boss, he proved himself a heel to his subordinates. During his first two months on the job, this midlevel manager at a financial-services company was asked to develop a marketing strategy for his department. The project was too complex to be done in the time allowed, but he pushed to meet the deadline anyway. His staff worked overtime for seven straight weeks. But when he delivered the results, he found that the project did not have the support it needed, despite his boss's approval. The company refused to fund it.

"He tried for a quick hit, and it really backfired on him," Seale says. "His staff was up in arms. They thought he was a tyrant."

Eileen Burke, at Fleet Financial, devised a more flexible 60-day plan before she started work. But a few weeks into her new job, she was asked to help put together a financing deal for an equity firm that was trying to acquire another company. Taking on the project meant putting her own work on hold, but Burke was quick to pitch in.

"I looked at it as a great opportunity to work with people on a highly visible team," she says. "I knew everyone would benefit if I helped them."

Next 60 days: Reboot.

Almost everyone, it seems, falls into one. Sixty days skate by, then 100, and pretty soon, you find yourself in a well-worn rut. To climb out, treat your next

60 days as you would your first 60 days. The same principles that apply to new hires can help veterans to renew and reboot, says Betsy Collard, director of strategic development for the Career Action Center in Cupertino, California.

"You should treat your first 60 days as a blueprint to help you focus on your immediate future," she says. "In the long run, that approach will keep your career healthy." Collard, who has spent the past 18 years providing career-management services at such blue chip high-tech companies as Hewlett-Packard and Sun Microsystems, recommends that you draw up a plan that builds on the 60-day basics: Extend your networking and relationship goals beyond your company to your industry. Let writing your personal job description evolve into writing a plan for your department or team.

"Giving feedback, getting feedback, figuring out your place in the office - it's a continuous process," adds Molly Buchholz. "I'll be working on these things long after my 60 days are up." And that's the point: Whether you're starting a new job or sticking with the job you've got, treat your next 60 days as you would the first 60 days of the rest of your career.

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