

## Whitepaper

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# The first 90 days

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Guiding *new* HR Executives to establish credibility and impact



*CourageousHR works with HR leaders and Communities to identify their distinctive contribution and then make it, both culturally and operationally, an organisational reality.*

### Contact Details



+ 44 (0) 845 862 1767 or [enquiries@courageoushr.com](mailto:enquiries@courageoushr.com)



[www.courageoushr.com](http://www.courageoushr.com)

## The *new* HR Executive's first 90 days

### The proving ground

New Executives globally, especially those entering senior Human Resources roles, describe the first ninety days on the job as a key period in establishing themselves – what we call the 'proving ground'.

The initial period for a newly hired or promoted Executive is typically a time of high expectations and high uncertainty for both the individual and the organisation. For newly hired employees the promises, commitments and expectations of the selection and recruitment processes starts to be quantified in the behaviour and actions of both the Executive and the organisation. For newly promoted employees; the perception and interpretation of their experiences, relationships and history of their previous role(s) will start to change as they adopt the trappings of their new office.

For the new Executive, the first 90 days is the 'proving ground' to themselves and to others. It is all about balance:

- A *balancing dynamic* between the need to better understand the organisation, their role and their team with the pressure to 'make an impact' and deliver 'value'. There is a degree of leeway as supportive bosses, colleagues and employees are not looking for miracles and mistakes are more easily forgiven.
- Anticipation that the new HR Executive will be working towards setting out a strategic plan for their future whilst *balancing* this with a need to create a tactical plan for the 'here and now'.
- An opportunity to set expectations about what others can expect whilst at the same time demonstrating behaviour regarding their future role
  - Especially around key activities such as strategic processes, performance improvement and defining metrics of success.
- Assess the strength of their new team and begin the process of moulding it into the *balance* of skills and strengths they perceive they need going forward.

### Developing credibility

A common theme in all of these activities is the need for the Executive to build powerful and sustainable relationships within the organisation. For new hires this is critical as it forms the basis of future credibility. For those newly promoted, relationships need to be rebuilt based on newly acquired 'power'.

For the organisation, often there is an anticipation of change. While the organisation will have set out their expectations of the Executive's objectives, there is a recognition that the Executive will want (and expect) to draw upon their own experiences to shape their future role. For colleagues and subordinates of the Executive there is often the added impact of whether their personal roles will be impacted by the new Executive.

## The challenge

Research suggests that new Executives may not be spending their time as effectively as possible and rather than taking the opportunity to understand the organisations drivers, establish their credibility and expectations and begin to set out their future objectives; they tend to get caught up in the operational aspects of the new role.

HR Executives face specific issues in their first 90 days. Unlike many other functions, the HR profession is relatively new and is in a state of rapid development. For new HR Executives, this means they are unable to draw upon a mass of shared knowledge and training to either understand their starting point or define, support and structure their future role.

## The First 90 Days Process



### *Pre Hire Stage*

The *Pre Hire Stage* recognises that both the organisation and the individual come into a new role with expectations of what they find.

#### For the individual

- Expectations are the sum of their experiences during the selection and recruitment processes, previous knowledge and personal research.

#### For the organisation

- Different stakeholders will have different expectations and like the individual, these will be formed by the history of the role and previous role holders, the organisational culture, agreed objectives and related discussions, the history and experiences of each stakeholder and the knowledge gained during the resourcing process.

Many of these expectations will not be verbally expressed, none are 'right or wrong', but all will impact to a lesser or greater degree the first 90 days of the new Executive.

## *First 90 Days Stage*

The priorities of the new Executive in their first 90 days can be summarised as;

- 1) Set up the logistics required to undertake the role
- 2) Understand the organisation, their role and their team to a level that allows them to begin operating effectively
- 3) Establish the foundations of their personal credibility and style, including setting clear expectations of their role and what is important to them
- 4) Begin the process of shaping their team
- 5) Set out and where possible gain agreement to their personal and team objectives going forward

### 1) *Setting up 'base camp'*

The first objective is to ensure the logistics of the new role are understood and put in place.

- This often includes understanding where the Executive is based and their office 'space', what support they have (admin etc), what IT systems they need access to and ensuring they have the knowledge and passwords to use them, being placed on internal directories and so on.

### 2) *'Getting your bearings'*

In order to begin operating effectively, a new Executive needs to gain enough knowledge of the following;

- The organisation, in particular it's;
  - Strategic and tactical objectives (written and unwritten)
  - People, stakeholders and the formal and informal power structures
  - Culture, language, heritage and ways of doing things
  - Customers, products, market and regulatory environments
- Their role, in particular;
  - The stated objectives
  - Expectations (especially unwritten)
  - Avai resources (people, budgets etc.)
  - History
  - Immediate actions
- Their team. In particular;
  - The level of skills and knowledge
  - Their drivers, ways of working and history
  - Their reputation
  - The expectations of the team members

This process is usually undertaken through the process of meeting the various stakeholders during the 90 day period.

### 3) 'Making your mark'

Personal credibility and style is critical in all roles but never more so than in senior jobs.

- Credibility is the quality of being believable or trustworthy and is the foundation of an Executive's professional relationship with an organisation.
- It is hard to win and easy to lose, is based on the perception of the recipient, is contextual and while independent of formal power relationships and organisation structure; it is initially based on them.

The first 90 days can set the foundations (positively or negatively) for the Executive's future career in the organisation.

- As an Executive is not normally expected to start delivering immediately (and therefore cannot create opportunities for increasing their credibility), they need to both use their stakeholder meetings to reinforce their previous experiences in past roles and where possible, make quick and visible changes.

As important as communicating their credentials, new Executives need to use their first 90 days to establish their personal style and image. While individuals may logically believe that they will only judge the new Executive once they have 'settled in', research shows very clearly that first impressions count e.g. dress sense, demeanour, language used, style of interacting and a range of other 'personal' aspects.

Finally, the first 90 days is an opportunity to clarify the new role and set out clearly the behaviours, objectives and activities that they will expect and be involved in.

### 4) 'Creating One Team'

Having set out to understand their team, the Executive can then begin the process of shaping it to allocate responsibilities, identify strengths, reduce weaknesses, and understand who might be committed to their vision (and those who may not). This objective is driven in part by the Executive's vision and the willingness of the team to engage with it.

### 5) 'Shaping the future'

The last objective of the new Executive is to set out, and where possible gain agreement to, their personal and team objectives going forward.

The organisation expects and often demands that new Executives define their ongoing role and objectives.

- While stakeholders will seek to influence that role and objectives (and this influence will be less direct the more senior the Executive), the new Leader, especially one coming from outside the organisation, will bring their experiences and beliefs to their new role.

The first 90 day period is therefore an ideal opportunity to understand the existing situation; to define existing organisational and team strengths and weaknesses; to engage with stakeholders about the potential future state; and begin to build a plan to bridge that gap.

The level and degree in completing this 'Plan' will depend on many factors – the size of the potential change, the level of internal agreement, the resources available and so on – but the new Executive should be aware that the expectation of the organisation will increase as time passes.

The creation of the Plan based on the gap analysis of the first 90 days, will be an iterative process – building on the information obtained by the Executive from before their joining date and adapted through the stakeholder meetings.

## The HR Executive

HR Executives often face further issues in their first 90 days.

Unlike many other functions, the HR Profession is relatively new and is in a state of rapid development. This means that there are unclear expectations in the wider business community as to what HR can and should do and few established metrics as to what defines ‘success’.

In addition, economic and societal conditions have forced business leaders to recognise that ‘people’ i.e. employees, can be critical competitive advantages but again, there is little common acceptance as to how employee performance can (or should) link to organisational strategy.

- For new HR Executives, this means they are unable to draw upon a mass of shared knowledge and training to either understand their starting point or define, support and structure their future role.

This lack of common language, expectations and success measures means that new HR Executives therefore often have added complexities when beginning their new role. These can be summarised as follows;

- The reputation of the HR function will often be ‘mixed to poor’
- The role and objectives of the HR function will often be unclear to both HR and the business
- The skill levels of individuals within the function will be mixed and difficult to assess
- There is often an expectation by both the business and the Executive that their role is to ‘transform HR’, typically (but not always) through cutting costs and ‘adding value’. A common problem however is defining what ‘adding value’ actually means and what behaviours are associated with ‘value’.

## Summary

The first 90 days for any new Executive, whether recruited or promoted, is a key opportunity to understand the organisation, to establish the foundations for their credibility, to begin to shape their team and set out their future objectives.

HR Executives face additional hurdles in that a lack of universally agreed metrics means that time must be spent on defining what ‘good’ and ‘success’ look like.

### About CourageousHR

*At CourageousHR we work with HR Professionals like you to help you create innovative people solutions and courageously apply them. We help you to bridge the gap between academic vision and consulting rhetoric to guide and inspire you and your HR Community to move from being 'followers' to leaders.*

*Our passion and thinking comes from our experiences, research and a belief that ‘tomorrow doesn’t have to be the same as today’. Our reach is global and we happily work with clients throughout the world and across a wide range of industries*