

Your First 100 Days as CEO


Eight Must-Avoid Traps

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A decorative header image featuring a brown and tan topographic map pattern with contour lines and small square markers.

In your first 100 days as CEO, you're living life in a fishbowl. Fairly or not, every one of your meetings, speeches, actions, or announcements may be viewed as a metaphorical answer to the questions that are going to be on people's minds:

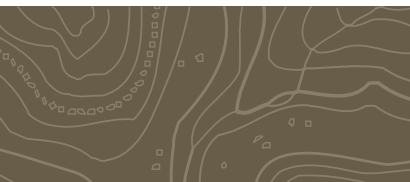
- How will you compare to the previous CEO?
- Now that you're the leader, how is that going to affect me?
- Regardless of what you're saying, what are your real intentions regarding the direction of this organization?

In the minds of your employees, the tone of these questions can vary considerably—from fearful to uncertain to hopeful. But from your experiences in moving up the ladder, you know very well that people watch a new CEO closely for any early indicators of what's to come.

While this is true for any new CEO, the ultimate example would be the recent ascension of Apple CEO Tim Cook. Given that his predecessor was Steve Jobs—the most iconic CEO of our time—Cook arguably faced more dissection in his first 100 days than any other CEO has ever experienced.

How did Cook do? Pretty well, on the whole:

- He led a news conference to announce the launch of the iPhone 4S. While some complained that he's no Steve Jobs as a presenter—a fair statement—the phone became the fastest-selling phone over its launch weekend.
- He had to deal with the death of Jobs, which happened less than two months into his term. He realized he had an impossible act to follow ... and he wisely didn't try to follow it. At launches, he opted to share the numbers and metrics while leaving the product details to others.
- Like Jobs, he sent personal emails to customers in response to some questions and controversies.
- Unlike Jobs—who was by no means a philanthropist—he announced that Apple would match its employees charitable contributions up to a total of \$10,000.



“In your first 100 days as CEO, you’re living life in a fishbowl.”

On the whole, Cook managed to reassure shareholders and employees while making clear that he was going to be his own person—a less charismatic leader than Jobs but also a less mercurial one, more of a Southern gentleman with a sharp analytical eye as opposed to a brash and volatile leader who was obsessed with artistry and design.

Even if your first 100 days as the senior leader of your organization aren’t scrutinized by the media—as they were for Cook as well as Google CEO Larry Page—those first few months represents an incredible window of opportunity for you. Yet often, we see senior leaders who get it wrong. It’s not necessarily a train wreck: It might be a few worrisome missteps or simply any number of missed chances to set the right tone at the top and begin progress toward great results. Whether these mistakes are sins of commission or omission, there are plenty of reasons why talented senior leaders go awry:

- Pressure to justify your selection: When taking on a new role with more responsibility, any professional is eager to prove that the powers that be made the right hiring decision.
- The knowledge that you’ve been hired to get results: Ultimately all CEOs, presidents, or GMs of large divisions are judged by the yardstick of performance. Nothing wrong with that, but it can increase the tendency to leap into action all too quickly.
- The challenge of being an insider or outsider. As noted in a July 2011 issue of the *Economic Times*, there are downsides to being new to the company as the CEO or being a promoted internal candidate. As an outsider, you lack baggage, but face a steeper learning curve and no internal network. As an insider, you have a better understanding of the culture, but may have to overcome biases that exist about you.
- An unprecedented level of scrutiny. When you’re early on in your days running a large organization, every one of your emails, conversations,

“Your choices early on will set the tone for your entire term as the senior leader.”

speeches, and memos is put under a microscope. People will try to figure out if there is some subtext or hidden agenda between the lines. Ultimately, the consequences of your actions—for better or worse—will be amplified far more than at any other time when you are leading.

From your first 100 days, people will infer a great deal about you. Are you going to be a more formal, aloof leader or a more approachable executive? Do you favor a more autocratic or democratic style? How do you prefer to get and receive information from your leadership team and other key audiences? Your choices early on will set the tone for your entire term as the senior leader. Your actions also will say a great deal about what your organization values—for better or worse.

The concept of the first 100 days in office really comes from the world of politics. We often hear people reflect on what any new United States president does in the first several weeks of office. Journalists typically summarize the accomplishments—or lack thereof—of the current resident of the Oval Office after this brief, but revealing period of time. Is there a judicious process for picking a cabinet? What is the main theme of the inaugural address? Is there consistency with the campaign promises? Judging from actions, is the real priority going to be the economy or health care or defense or what? Inevitably, people will analyze any leader's actions and extrapolate accordingly.

At this point in your career, you've probably seen leaders who really got it right in the early going as well as others who didn't seize the opportunity or who even did themselves and their organizations harm very early on in their leadership term. The goal is to learn from the mistakes and successes of others to make sure you get off to a great start. In our work as executive coaches of senior leaders, we've identified eight must-avoid traps for senior leaders during their first 100 days in office. The real danger here is that these traps are very insidious: They're much more obvious in the rearview mirror than when you're studying the road ahead as a new leader.

The rest of this guide will be devoted to understanding the traps and then providing you with a series of steps you can make to ensure that you don't fall into them.



The Eight Must-Avoid Traps for New Senior Leaders

During the first 100 days, senior leaders fall into these traps for good reasons. Leaders want and need results, and they inevitably are focused, driven, and persistent in getting them. Those traits helped get you to the top. However, the same qualities can work against you once you're in the seat of leadership. Let's review the eight traps to bring this concept to life.

1. Overemphasizing quick decisions and action

All new leaders face a tension here. If you read any business periodical or review some coaching websites, there is sometimes a focus on “quick wins” to build credibility. This is understandable: Most leaders are eager to roll up their sleeves and make things happen when they're new in the job. And an early success definitely builds momentum.

However, we believe that there is often an overemphasis on quick results. One adage that we tell our coaching clients: Slow down to speed up. Taking more time upfront to create a vision and a plan for executing it effectively will lead to better results ... and, perhaps ironically, faster results as well. Some senior leaders act impulsively in their first 100 days, moving ahead with an initiative without securing buy-in. Suddenly, the quick win becomes an early loss ... and you've taken a withdrawal from a “bank account of credibility” that already had a small balance.

A January 2012 blog in the *Harvard Business Review* acknowledged the myth that new CEOs should look outward and move quickly, while asserting that the reality was that these leaders would benefit from a more introspective approach.



2. Proving that you're smarter than everyone on the team

As the senior leader of a substantial organization, you may well be the smartest person in the room during any given meeting. That's not an inherent problem, but it can become one if you use your first 100 days to try to prove to everyone that this is the case.

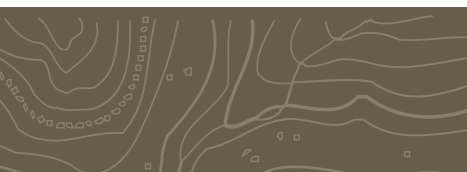
That *HBR* blog offered the example of a health-care executive who decided to give himself a crash course on his leadership team's areas of expertise so he could offer "constructive" advice. How would you imagine that turned out? He thought he knew better; he didn't. He would've been better off adopting the role of a humble, inquisitive learner who knew how to ask questions and learn from the wise counsel of his subject matter experts.

If you're open to it, you can learn a great deal from anyone who is immersed in a subject area all day every day—right down to an assembly line worker or customer-service representative. Remember the Ralph Waldo Emerson quote: "Everyone I meet is in some way my superior in that I learn from him."

3. Not focusing on building relationships with important audiences

We believe that great communication begins with a very deep focus on the wants and needs of your important audiences. Sure, you have your own agenda for what you want to accomplish as CEO ... but why should your customers or employees care about your hopes and dreams? They won't ... unless they see some connection to their own interests.

Great senior leaders forge strong relationships with all of their key audiences, including the board, the leadership team, key customers and vendors, employees, and so on. Yet many new CEOs underestimate how important it is to book the time needed to have real dialogue with those audiences. Without that level of audience focus, your messages likely won't connect with these audiences... and you won't have the support you'll need to turn a vision or strategy into bottom-line results.



With our coaching and consulting clients, the process of learning to look at the world through the lens of the audience is one of the most transformational experiences that they enjoy as leaders. When people begin to see how much of a disconnect there can be between their own agenda and that of, say, their customers or employees, it's a eureka moment.

4. Underestimating people's need to know you


Some leaders enjoy the attention that they receive, while others accept the limelight more reluctantly. Either way, though, we frequently find that leaders underestimate how much their employees are yearning and longing to know them as people.

The average employee spends about as many waking hours at work as with her family. People want to work for a great leader, and that means understanding what the leader stands for and believes in. Your employees don't just look to you for strategy and goals; they want a mission and purpose.

We urge leaders to share stories—both personal and professional—that give people insight into your character. These stories should not be happenstance: They can and should be developed and delivered with a purpose, linking a lesson you've learned to a theme that's relevant to them. This area is one of the biggest developmental needs—and opportunities—for new leaders.

5. Lack of deliberate choices about communication vehicles/styles

We all have our pet favorite ways of communicating. Some of us love emails, while others prefer the phone or a videoconference. Still others do as much as possible with face-to-face communication.



All communication vehicles have their role and place. However, leaders often “default” to one vehicle—relying too heavily on email, memos, or even face-to-face meetings. Generally, we find that leaders are most effective when using a blend of vehicles to reinforce an important message or theme. It’s important to make “deliberate choices” about how to communicate, asking yourself a few critical questions:


- Is this topic important enough to justify the time and effort needed for a face-to-face meeting?
- Will this message get lost in translation if I expect dozens of managers to read a blast email and know exactly how to take action on it?
- Are there ways I can be creative in being both efficient and effective as a communicator, such as using video recordings or videoconferencing to deal with gaps in time and space?

Making conscious, deliberate choices about how and when to communicate is an important step for a new leader.

6. Overlooking the importance of setting and managing expectations

As a new leader, there is all too much possibility of erroneous assumptions around expectations. Do you really know what your board wants you to focus on from day to day? Do your direct reports truly get what is expected of them? How do you manage expectations if you’re not initially clear on your vision and strategy from day one—which may very well be the case?

In a 2008 article, renowned management experts Michael Porter and two co-authors discussed “seven things that surprise new CEOs.” One was “You are not the boss,” referring to ambiguities and miscommunications that arise between senior leaders and boards. We’ve been asked to do a lot of work recently help-



ing executives with board presentations and change initiatives. A big part of it is learning how to share where you're going and why—and not being afraid to tell people what you don't yet know.

Early on, people may be eager for you to make pronouncements or decisions. You would be wise to create expectations around how and when that will happen. That may well include telling people that you don't plan to make any major decisions in your first several weeks on the job.

7. Losing control of your calendar

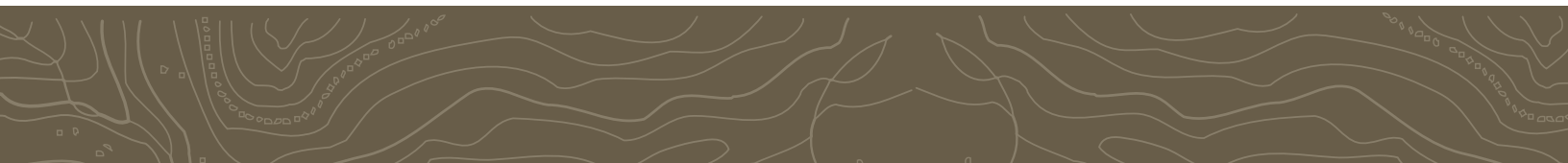
This is a more common theme in our coaching engagements than you might imagine. As a senior leader, you may well receive hundreds of emails each day. Dozens of people will want time on your calendar. You need a triage system; you can't "just say yes" to everything.

Your executive assistant can be part of the problem—and the solution. Be clear about what time should be sacred "white space" on your calendar as well as how much time should be booked—if at all—with your contacts.

Without some planning and discipline in this area, new CEOs often end up floundering as they get buried in messages and stuck in wall-to-wall meetings.

8. Failing to think about how you want to be remembered after your last 100 days

As author Stephen Covey says in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Begin with the end in mind." Many leaders quickly immerse themselves in metrics and meetings. Understandably focusing on the here and now, they don't begin to think about what they would like their legacy to be as leaders.



Alternatively, some leaders focus too much on the legacy of the previous leader. While it's important to understand your predecessor's leadership style and learn from it, you need to be your own person. Maybe your predecessor was a golf course networker who could win over people immediately, and maybe you aren't. But organizations pick leaders for different reasons, and you may be more the style of leader that your organization needs today. Inevitably, the arrival of a new leader with a new style will be good news for some and disappointing news for others. You'll want to be sympathetic to that, but people will have to deal with it.

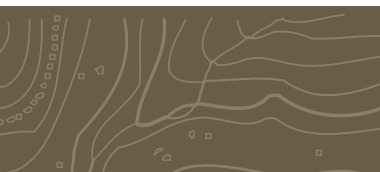
The bigger question for you is this: How do you want to be remembered, ultimately? Obviously, performance will be paramount, but do you hope to be recalled as someone who gave your organization an innovation focus? Someone who created a newfound emphasis on the customer experience? A leader who moved hearts and minds? Any of these would be a big, wonderful goal. But you'll need to accomplish that goal a little at a time, and getting clarity about it now will ensure that your first steps are in the right direction.

Four Steps toward Success during Your First 100 Days

To avoid these eight traps and get your reign as leader off to an outstanding start, here are four steps to take during your first 100 days.

1. Conduct an intensive 90-day “Listening Tour”

When writing *Motivate Like a CEO*, Suzanne Bates interviewed financial services executive Ellyn McColgan, who was at Fidelity Investments at the time. Wherever she's landed through her career, McColgan has made a regular practice of conducting a 90-day “listening tour” whenever assuming a new leadership role. She listens to every constituency who has a stake in the business, including clients, employees, vendors, and so on.



The goal is to “tap the collective wisdom” and refrain from rushing to judgment or action when you’re new in the job. Put aside your preconceived notions and ask questions. Ask more to clarify. Find out how things were done in the past: There probably were some good practices in place as well as things that need tweaking or overhauling. Eventually, patterns and themes will emerge, and you’ll incorporate them into a strategy.

Who are the important individuals or groups who should be included in your 90-day “listening tour”? List them below:

- #1: _____
- #2: _____
- #3: _____
- #4: _____
- #5: _____
- #6: _____
- #7: _____
- #8: _____
- #9: _____
- #10: _____

2. Create and conduct an organization-wide communication survey to create a feedback loop

You won't be able to get direct input from all employees during your listening tour. And no matter how much you encourage candor from people in face-to-face dialogue, people—especially employees—may filter their comments because they want your approval or fear your reaction to bad news.

A great solution for these issues is an organization- or department-wide survey. You can ask people many questions that will shed light on how people are really feeling about communication:

- How are people currently getting information?
- How would they prefer to get information?
- How valuable do they find the company's current communication vehicles to be?
- How could communication be improved at your organization?
- Do these perceptions vary considerably based on the level of the employee?

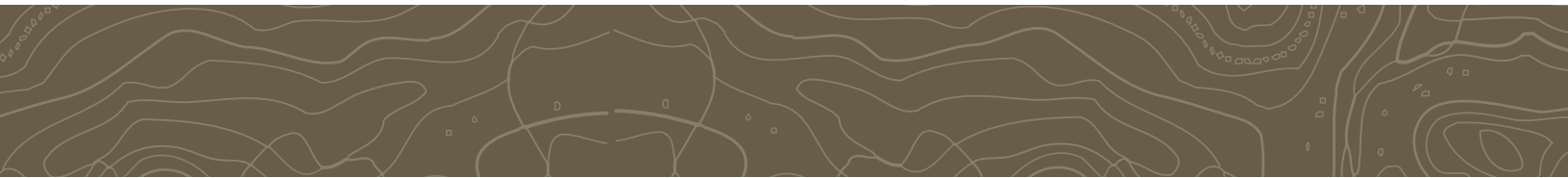
This process creates a true feedback loop: You're disseminating information, reviewing the feedback, and then making adjustments before you share more information. In March 2012, we conducted such a survey for one of our clients. We found that the news was better than we could have expected, but we also saw opportunities to improve communication and increase employee engagement. The survey analysis led to a workshop geared on developing audience-focused messages as well as how and when to deliver them.

Let's get you started on creating your own survey:

What are all the ways in which your employees currently receive information, formally or informally?

#1: _____

#2: _____



#3: _____

#4: _____

#5: _____

#6: _____

#7: _____

#8: _____

#9: _____

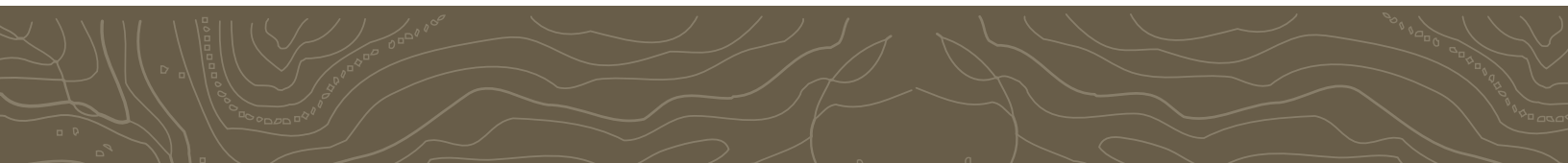
#10: _____

You would ask people to rate each way by frequency: Most Often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely. These numbers could be compared to how often they would prefer to get that information. That's just the beginning, but I can tell you that such a survey will end up telling you a story about what's really happening at your company.

3. Conduct a Strategic Communication Analysis

Another useful exercise is to use a tool to determine where there are gaps or bottlenecks that might keep your important messages as a leader from having a powerful impact as they cascade down through your senior leaders, middle managers and, finally, your individual contributors.

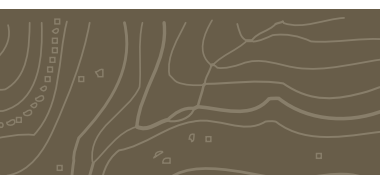
What formal vehicles are currently in place to make sure that communication cascades all the way from those who create the vision and strategy to those who need to execute on it? We've created a diagnostic matrix that our coaches use



to capture the communication vehicles and plot them against the audiences that need to hear them. Under the eye of an expert, the gaps and bottlenecks jump out and can be addressed—a key step in ensuring that big ideas translate to results instead of fizzling out somewhere in the chain of command.

Let's say we want to analyze how you're communicating with customer-facing teams at your organization, such as your customer-service representatives, order processors, or field sales representatives. To keep it simple, let's focus on just two groups who have regular communication with customers or clients. In the table below, list the two groups in the top row. Then, in the left-hand column, list the vehicles of formal communication (e.g., surveys, meetings, letters) that they currently use to reach them. Lastly, put an 'X' in the box if that particular group uses the specific vehicle in the corresponding row:

	Group:	Group:
Vehicle:		
Vehicle:		
Vehicle:		
Vehicle:		
Vehicle:		



If you go through this process for every group that “touches” the customer, you’ll start to gather some insights. For example, you may be startled to find that many of your customer-facing groups are really not getting frequent messages from your senior leaders. And yet they are expected to make the vision become a reality.

Going through a more comprehensive version of this exercise with the help of a consultant is like reviewing an x-ray with the help of a physician. In your early days as the senior leader, you may see some symptoms of problems. However, you sometimes need tools to find the root causes of those symptoms and prescribe a remedy.


4. Create a Communication Plan

As the *Economic Times* article noted, “The first 100 days are rarely about micro-granular goals—most use the period to get the big picture right—the big goals, challenges, key people and leadership team.”

With this in mind, you’ll want to create a communication plan toward the end of your first 100 days. It will pull together everything you’ve learned through your listening tour, surveys, and strategic communication analysis.

The core of your communication plan will be a Big Idea—a message of 25 words or less that combines a proposal, its outcomes, and its benefits. The benefits may vary depending on your audience, but the Big Idea will energize people about a future state—for themselves, not just the organization.

Elsewhere on our website at www.bates-communications.com, you can read our comprehensive guide on how to develop Big Ideas. Therefore, I won’t go into detail on that here. However, suffice it to say that a Big Idea takes hard work, but it also should start to emerge from all of the themes you’ll be hearing as you absorb, question, and learn during your first 100 days. Through the first three activities, you’ll no longer have to speculate about what the needs and concerns



of your important audiences are—you'll have ample firsthand information. The Big Idea will need to address those concerns.

If you've followed this four-step process, you'll have a strong grasp on what all of your important stakeholders are thinking as well as how effectively and efficiently communication is reaching everyone in your organization. Ideally, you'll be able to make corrections and improvements to your communication protocols in those first 100 days. Then, when you roll out a message containing a Big Idea, you can be much more confident that your vision will be heard by all.

In the process, you'll also be addressing your biggest need of all—setting a positive tone for what we hope to be a long and successful stint as a senior leader. By using this process, you can avoid the eight traps and let it be known that you're a leader who listens, analyzes, learns, reacts, connects, and inspires.

Final Thoughts

When Abraham Lincoln delivered his first inaugural address, he had become the leader of a country that was divided over the issue of slavery. Yet, in the face of one of the most dramatic conflicts in our nation's history, he urged his listeners to not hurry to “a step you would never take deliberately.” He reminded them that “Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time.”

This remains good advice for today's incoming senior leaders who hope to circumvent the many traps of the first 100 days. Choose the first roads carefully, as they'll largely determine your destination. Tap the collective wisdom. Use tools to make objective assessments. Take the time you need to make the right calls. Slow down to speed up.

Executive Coaching in Communications

An executive's ability to communicate during the first 100 days in the C-Suite is critical to success. At Bates, we like to say our executive coaches are the leaders behind the leaders, partnering with executives to develop exceptional level of skill, capability, and confidence. We help executives enhance performance through consistent, efficient communications with employees, teams, clients, boards, shareholders and influencers.

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Scott Weighart has spent over two decades helping adult learners reach their full professional potential, whether through books, articles, workshops, classes, one-on-one coaching, or integrated learning systems. He joined Bates Communications in August 2011 as the firm's first-ever Director of Learning and Development, where he creates innovative tools to assist individuals as they work toward mastering powerful communication.

Although he has worked intermittently in education as well as the private sector over the years, one constant has been his focus on designing and delivering creative, innovative curricula that make learning engaging and memorable for audiences. He is the author of three textbooks on experiential learning and one book on organizational behavior. As an authority on experiential learning, he has presented at numerous conferences across the US and Canada.

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