Five Mistakes New Executives Make Starting a New Role

Why Early Success Depends on Listening, Learning, and Leading with Intention

Whole Leader Institute | Leadership Insights

Stepping into a new executive role is both an exciting opportunity and a significant leadership challenge. New executives arrive with experience, fresh perspectives, and often a strong desire to demonstrate their value quickly.

Yet the very qualities that helped them succeed in previous roles—confidence, decisiveness, expertise, and a bias for action—can sometimes undermine their effectiveness in a new environment.

The challenge is not simply learning a new organization. It is understanding its people, culture, relationships, and unwritten rules while establishing credibility and building momentum.

The most successful executive transitions are not defined by how quickly leaders make their mark, but by how thoughtfully they establish the foundation for lasting impact.

Here are five common mistakes new executives make—and how to avoid them.

1. Moving Too Quickly to Make Changes

New executives often feel pressure to demonstrate immediate results. They identify opportunities for improvement, introduce new strategies, restructure teams, or challenge existing practices before fully understanding the organization.

While their intentions may be positive, moving too quickly can create resistance, erode trust, and overlook important organizational history.

What appears inefficient may have a legitimate explanation. What worked in a previous organization may not translate easily to the new one.

A better approach: Spend your early weeks listening, observing, and understanding before making significant changes. Ask employees what is working, what isn't, and what they would change if given the opportunity.

Decisiveness matters, but informed decisiveness is far more powerful than premature action.

2. Underestimating the Importance of Relationships

Executives are often hired for their strategic expertise and track record of delivering results. Yet success in a new role depends just as much on the relationships they establish.

A new executive who focuses exclusively on business priorities without investing in relationships may struggle to build the trust and collaboration necessary to execute their strategy.

This is particularly true when leading former peers, inheriting an established leadership team, or entering an organization with a strong existing culture.

A better approach: Intentionally build relationships with direct reports, peers, key stakeholders, and informal organizational influencers.

Seek to understand their priorities, challenges, expectations, and perspectives.

Remember that people are more likely to support a leader's direction when they believe the leader understands and respects them.

3. Assuming Past Success Guarantees Future Success

Executives naturally draw upon the experiences that helped them advance in their careers.

But one of the greatest risks in transitioning to a new role is relying too heavily on familiar approaches.

A leadership style that worked well in one environment may be less effective in another. Different organizational cultures, business challenges, and team dynamics require different approaches.

New executives can unintentionally communicate arrogance when they repeatedly reference how things were done at their previous organization.

A better approach: Bring your experience, but leave your assumptions at the door.

Approach the new role with curiosity and humility. Recognize that your expertise is valuable, but it is only one part of understanding what the organization needs.

The goal is not to recreate your previous success. It is to discover what success requires in this new environment.

4. Failing to Establish Clear Expectations and Priorities

In their desire to build relationships and understand the organization, some new executives delay clarifying expectations, decision-making authority, and performance priorities.

Others move in the opposite direction, introducing numerous initiatives without establishing a clear sense of what matters most.

Both approaches create confusion.

Employees need to understand where the organization is headed, what is expected of them, and how their work contributes to broader goals.

A better approach: Establish a small number of meaningful priorities, clarify roles and decision rights, and communicate what success will look like.

Create opportunities for your leadership team to discuss expectations openly, including what they need from you and what you need from them.

Clarity builds confidence, alignment, and accountability.

5. Neglecting Their Own Leadership Transition

Perhaps the most overlooked mistake is failing to recognize that starting a new executive role requires personal transition as well as organizational transition.

New executives are often so focused on understanding the business and proving themselves that they neglect their own self-awareness, reflection, and development.

They may feel pressure to have all the answers, demonstrate constant confidence, or avoid acknowledging uncertainty.

Yet stepping into a new role often requires letting go of familiar habits, redefining one's leadership identity, and developing new capabilities.

A better approach: Make reflection an intentional part of your transition.

Ask yourself:

- What leadership strengths will serve me well in this new role?
- What assumptions or habits might limit my effectiveness?
- How is my behavior affecting the people around me?
- Where do I need to adapt my leadership approach?
- Who can provide honest feedback and challenge my thinking?

An executive coach, trusted mentor, or thoughtful peer can provide valuable perspective during this period.

The most effective executives understand that leading a new organization begins with leading themselves.

The First 90 Days: Build the Foundation Before the Momentum

The first 90 days are often viewed as a period in which new executives must prove their value.

But the more important objective is to establish the conditions for sustained success.

This means balancing the need to learn with the need to act, building relationships while establishing accountability, and demonstrating confidence without sacrificing humility.

It also means recognizing that not every issue can wait. Urgent operational, financial, safety, or people concerns may require immediate action. The key is knowing when to move quickly and when to invest more time in understanding the situation.

A thoughtful executive transition is not passive. It is deliberate.

The Whole Leader Perspective

At the Whole Leader Institute, we believe successful executive transitions require attention to three interconnected dimensions of leadership:

Leading Self: Developing self-awareness, managing the pressure of transition, and recognizing when familiar leadership habits need to evolve.

Leading Relationships: Building credibility, trust, and meaningful connections with the people whose support and collaboration are essential.

Leading Teams: Establishing shared priorities, clear expectations, accountability, and the conditions for collective success.

Together, these dimensions help executives move beyond simply assuming a new position to becoming effective leaders within a new organizational context.

The ultimate measure of a successful executive transition is not how quickly a leader demonstrates authority, but how effectively they earn trust, create alignment, and enable others to succeed.

Because the best executives don't enter a new organization determined to prove how much they know.

They enter determined to understand what matters, build on what works, and create something better together.

Research and Further Reading

- Watkins, M. D. (2013). *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter.* Harvard Business Review Press.

- Ciampa, D., & Watkins, M. D. (1999). *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role.* Harvard Business School Press.
- Gabarro, J. J. (1987). *The Dynamics of Taking Charge.* Harvard Business School Press.