

First one hundred days in charge

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If you become a candidate for a leader in an organization, you should devise an agenda for your first one hundred days. Quite often, imminent leaders spend time thinking about a new or revised vision statement so that when they walk in the door, they can unravel it to everyone’s great anticipation. But unfortunately, this type of introduction is often very premature. At some point your vision will need to be communicated and reinforced. Maybe you keep the same vision or maybe you change it. Either way, your first one hundred days requires initial focus on other things.

Many people in business and the media have long been enamored of vision statements from high-profile leaders; others are cynical as to their value. In leadership transition situations, employees are understandably anxious to hear a road map for the future and what it will mean for them. Similarly, customers, suppliers, and investors all want to know whether they will need to readjust their own plans. But crafting a vision statement in your countdown period to being in charge--or even during your first one hundred days--may not just be premature but a waste of time. The most immediate concerns are generally whether you are credible, what you stand for, and what tactical

and operating actions need to happen. Discussions about where you want the organization to be in five years typically ring hollow early on. So the art of taking charge is to find the right balance between setting a direction and keeping practical.

When Lou Gerstner took over IBM, his introductory statement included: “There’s been a lot of speculation as to when I’m going to deliver a vision of IBM, and what I’d like to say to all of you is that the last thing IBM needs right now is a vision.” He then went on to tell a stunned audience that what the company needed was a “series of very tough-minded, market-driven, highly effective strategies for each of its businesses--strategies that deliver performance in the marketplace and shareholder value.”

A new or revised vision statement isn’t always necessary right away. Paul Pressler, who became CEO of Gap Inc., formulated an agenda for his first one hundred days rather than a vision statement. The backbone of that agenda came from one-on-one meetings with Gap’s fifty top executives, at which he would ask each executive the same five questions:

- What about Gap Inc. do you want to preserve and why?
- What do you hope I do?
- What are you concerned I might do?
- What are you concerned I might *not* do?

- What is your most important tool for figuring out what the consumer wants?

Pressler correctly recognized that the process of asking these questions would accomplish three objectives simultaneously. It would (1) build a foundation of trust with each manager, (2) help him make important personnel assessments, and (3) gather input for developing the company’s strategy going forward.

As it turned out, the answers to these questions would also compel fundamental changes in planning Gap Inc.’s product lines. Even more important, the question-and-answer sessions made it clear to him what the culture of the organization was. From there it was an easy framework to figure out what needed to change and what needed to be preserved. At that point, a vision of the future became much clearer to him.

You can do the same thing in your arena. Figure out what needs to change and what needs to be preserved. Ask the same questions Paul Presser asked. Hearing answers to these questions can give you some much needed insight on the direction your company or organization needs to go. Strategies and objectives become clearer and people become more motivated. A successful first one hundred days paves the way for a successful first one thousand days.

~ The End ~