

The 10-Step Guide for Executives in a New Role

Introduction



Starting any new role can cause anxiety but stepping into a new executive position is more difficult than most. The responsibility doesn't get much greater – there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people that look to you for guidance. But what about guidance for yourself?

We've taken insights from the studies of IESE professor Guido Stein from the Department of Managing People in Organizations and from four IESE alumni executives, who give us first-hand accounts of their key learnings from their time in charge.

This guide does not aim to offer a comprehensive list of the elements involved in the various stages of taking charge, but rather to provide a practical guide to starting a new executive role in the right way.

The first days and weeks of your new position can set the course for your time in charge, so we'll look at processes, thoughts and ways of working that will help you get your new life as an executive off to the most effective start.

Step 1:

Onboard yourself

A lot of guides talk about the crucial first 90 days in a new role. That three months is undoubtedly vital, but how about day one? The tone of your tenure as an executive is set almost immediately. You need to get it right.

A good first impression will stick. As will a bad one, though the latter is much harder to shake. The best way to put your stake in the ground is via actions, rather than statements of intent. Start small. Customize your space with photos, books, paintings, etc., according to your preferences.

Set the agenda for the first week; this is the visible expression of what is going to be done and how. And vary your week one plan. Consider meetings within and outside the office, visits to clients, suppliers, public officials and in general to the relevant stakeholders. Be wary not to fill the whole week, you need spaces in which to work alone, too.



In this onboarding period, assistants can be a fantastic ally. They can represent the most effective shortcut to letting people know things have changed, and that things are going to be done differently.

Keep in mind that if the person who used to hold the position still belongs to the circle of those affected, you should pace yourself to avoid appearing disrespectful. Of course, like so much in a new executive role, empathy, respect and trust are paramount. Use your emotional intelligence to gauge boundaries and guide your decisions in the first few days.

Key points:

- Use actions, not statements, to demonstrate change.
- Make your space your own by personalizing it.
- Work with your assistant(s) to convey messages.
- Set the first week's agenda before you start.

Step 2:

Greet, greet, greet

Beatriz García-Cos Muntañola, Group CFO for Ferroglobe PLC and graduate of IESE's Advanced Management Program 2019 cites the importance of making yourself visible from day one. "You need to give people the opportunity to meet you and know you," she says. Trust is crucial, and a deeper connection allows you to be much more effective and deliver quickly.



Beatriz García-Cos Muntañola

Group CFO for Ferroglobe PLC
IESE AMP 2019

Every new meeting is an opportunity to build rapport and trust.

In short, everyone should know you have arrived, and you should take every opportunity to meet people and give them the opportunity to get to know you.

There are two things to beware of in your first few weeks. Firstly, don't isolate yourself. There is sometimes such an urgency – whether from yourself or from the business – to prepare a plan that some executives become buried under their papers from the outset. If executives retire to their offices and stop meeting the requests of those around them, staff can feel disappointed and confused about their intentions.

A failure to meet and greet is a failure of leadership and authority in your new position.

Secondly, avoid creating a small “clique” that is inaccessible to the rest of the staff. The company is all the employees, not just the leadership team. Ignore that and you exclude other incredibly valuable viewpoints.

Key points:

- Make the most of chance encounters.
- Learn names and be personable.
- Avoid the temptation to stay behind your desk.
- Beware of creating cliques.

Step 3:

Ask for help

Regardless of how prepared you may be, you will still need help from others.

García-Cos Muntañola points to the importance of engaging with your stakeholders as soon as possible. “You need to take the perspective of your key stakeholders. But understand there are two types of stakeholder – formal and informal. The former are easy to spot, the latter, less so. You need to set up your network in the company well and get advice from a broad range of people.”

Demonstrating your eagerness to collaborate and willingness to lean on those with more knowledge makes it easier to settle in and starts to build trust within the team. It can also give a good confidence boost during the first few days when taking on new actions.

Key points:

- Take as much advice as you can from the outgoing executive and the rest of the team.
- Find out as much as possible about cultural, political and technical elements of the business.
- Asking questions is a strength, not a weakness.
- Transition periods are an invaluable chance to get up-to-speed.

Step 4:

Set up a mind map

During your first day, week, month and quarter, you will be bombarded with information from all sides. Unless you're Alex Mullen (the top-ranked memory athlete in the world), the best way to stay on top of everything is to document it all in a mind map.

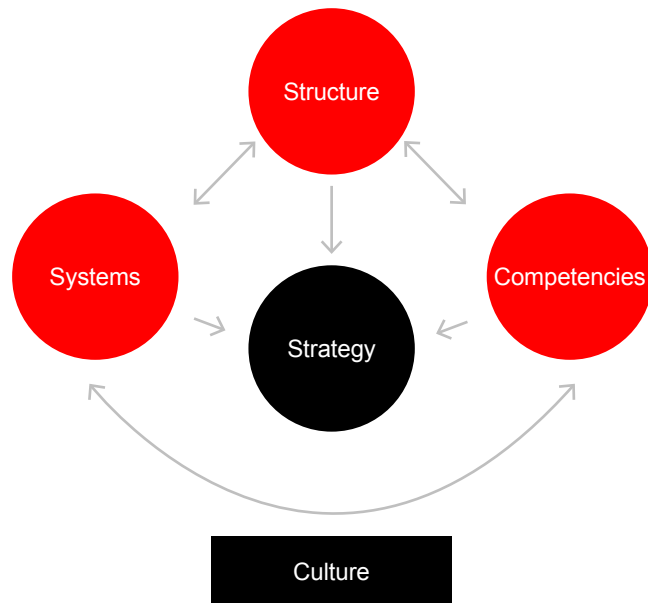
A mind map refers to the design you have in mind regarding the objectives of the company, the key people that form it, the strategies, the corporate culture, the organizational structure and all the information needed to understand the everyday mechanics, whether formal, informal or spontaneous.

Internal candidates will already have a good idea of their map, new candidates less so. But the practice can still be a valuable one.

At first, your mind map may be made up only of ideas regarding the initial landscape and actions to be performed upon arrival. However, this exercise is recommended to give rigor and discipline to the reflections that will soon be put into practice. Thinking of the goals you wish to achieve is a good way to begin taking office and preparing for the transition.

To make it easier to design this map, we should recall the organizational architecture of any company.

Organizational architecture of a company



STRATEGY: the approach adopted by the organization to achieve goals.

STRUCTURE: organization and coordination of the personnel's work.

SYSTEMS: processes adopted to add value.

COMPETENCIES: skills of the people who make up the organization.

CULTURE: values, standards and theories that define people's behavior.

Source:

Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, Boston, Harvard Business Review Press, 2003.

Your mind map should focus on three core areas of business – technical, cultural and political. These three areas will give you a true sense of how the business works and operates.

You need to get under the skin of your business and prioritize the most pressing issues from the very beginning of your tenure. The mind map is the first step to establishing priorities and setting a plan.

Key points:

- Document as much as is possible as you learn more about the business.
- The design of the mind map is up to you, but a visual representation is more effective than pages of notes.
- The map is a visual of how things are. But it should be the springboard for future ideas.

Step 5:

Find your collaborators

Finding collaborators is different from asking for help. Any employee can give you insight into their role or department, but finding collaborators is about looking for those people who want to drive the business forward.





Nicasio Muscia

Managing Director for Accenture
IESE PMD 2019

Nicasio Muscia, Managing Director for global consultancy Accenture and 2019 IESE 'Program for Management Development' graduate explains: "The first thing I did as MD was to get together the senior management team for a series of 'learning circles' to make sure we were all aligned with the future goals and direction of the business.

"Finding the right collaborators means you can perform multiple transformational actions simultaneously, making effective use of time and better guaranteeing the actions that have been announced."

But, according to IESE professor Guido Stein, finding collaborators is not without risk." Those who have had influence on the outgoing executive will inevitably try to maintain their power in this new world. People close to them will often try to offer you advice and convey their ideas in order to influence you based on their own interests.

Executives must be careful about who they listen to and who they share their thoughts with. Try not to fall into the trap of being subject to the internal bureaucracy of the company. The higher the management position for which you have been recruited, the more likely it is that the organization will try to absorb you. Over time, leaders must learn to take charge and control the internal problems of their own company.

Key points:

- Find collaborators who have and will help drive the business forward.
- Drive home your own goals for the business into your collaborators so they become your alter egos in the business.
- Beware of ulterior motives and be careful who you listen to.

Step 6:

Decide what type of leader you will be

When you step into an executive role, the job becomes more about directing others than getting caught up in day-to-day operations. To do this well, you need to focus on your management style and the way you communicate with others. You want to be yourself, but there is more to determining your style and leadership than relying on your personality.



Daniele Cerutti

Business Development Director Southern Europe for IKO Insulations. IESE AMP 2018

Daniele Cerutti, Business Development Director Southern Europe for IKO Insulations and 2018 graduate from IESE's Advanced Management Program says leadership style is crucial: "You're always growing as an executive so it's natural that you take a lot of insight from your previous role into the new one. But you don't want to go into a new business and just do what you did previously, you need to tailor your style and approach. To do that, you have to learn about the business first."

You can analyze the successes and failures of the outgoing executive. You should get feedback from colleagues in the organization about their tenure.

New executives may sometimes avoid taking certain actions considered typical of their predecessors in order to demonstrate their authority and ability as the new leaders. The personal style of outgoing executives, if considered by the staff as functional and successful, still has their seal of approval.

For a transition of power to take place without interruption, humility and generosity are required of the predecessor in order to make room for the new arrival; and the incoming leader should also be humble and understanding in order to avoid making unfounded hasty decisions.

Leadership is not just a question of style, but mainly of character, consisting essentially of effort, tenacity, patience, friendliness, humility, generosity, respect, honesty and commitment – traits that endure over time.

Key points:

- Be yourself, but think deeply about what type of executive you want to be.
- Learn from existing employees and the outgoing executive.
- Leadership is not a question of style, but character.
- Focus on core traits – humility, generosity, patience, honesty and trustworthiness.



Step 7:

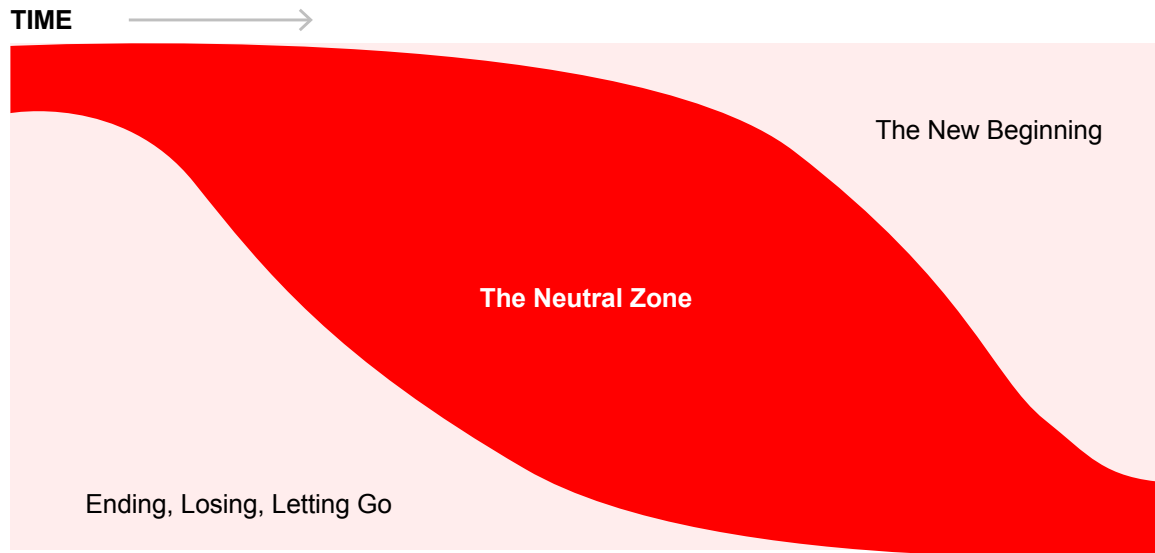
Understand the difference between change and transition

Although they may seem synonymous, change and transition are two different realities. While a change involves facing a new situation, a transition is the process of adjusting to this change.

William Bridges wanted to understand these business transitions so he could help overcome the fear of uncertainty in unfamiliar situations. To do so, he conducted a study based on three overlapping phases: ending, neutral zone and beginning. Since these phases overlap, you may find yourself in situations in which more than one phase occurs at the same time.

Transitions are marked by changes in the dominant phase rather than by absolute changes. The following figure helps to understand this concept.

Change and transition



Source: William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, Da Capo Lifelong Books, Cambridge, 2009.

Let's look at each phase in more detail:

ENDING:

Before a new beginning, we must bring the situation we are leaving to an end. Executives can sometimes experience a range of emotions that are identified as the typical feelings that arise when adapting to change: rejection, anger, anxiety, sadness, disorientation and depression. Not everyone goes through them the same way but overcoming them helps to face new stages with a positive attitude. Executives should also strive to help the people around them who may be affected by a departure to adapt to the new situation as quickly as possible.

NEUTRAL ZONE:

A period of uncertainty during which executives are not yet in the role they are going to take on in the coming days, nor are they in the previous post. It is an intermediate stage that creates confusion and pressure. During this period, executives try to forget the habits they acquired in the previous post and make assumptions about the new habits they will fall into. Many executives, motivated by their situation of uncertainty, become very creative.

BEGINNING:

Executives begin to develop a new identity, experience increased energy and discover a new sense of purpose, which leads to the change being a success. But we must not forget that all beginnings involve risks. They require executives to implement a new way to manage, which can sometimes be rather disconcerting.

To address it in the best possible way, William Bridges recommends following the “four Ps”:

Purpose: describe clearly and specifically why you are making the change.

Picture: describe to those affected by the change what the organization map will look like once the change is made.

Plan: explain the steps needed to carry out the plan.

Part: motivate the people who are affected by the change to meet the new goals.

This new executive role might seem like a huge change, but for you, your new team and, indeed, your family, this is a transition period. By understanding the way transitions work, and communicating properly to the team, you can lay the foundations for a smooth handover of responsibilities from the previous executive to yourself.

Key points:

- Change involves facing a new situation, while a transition is the process of adjusting to this change.
- There are three stages to transitional change. Understand them internally, and plan the first days and weeks of your new role around them.
- Follow the “four P’s” to ease the transition – purpose, picture, plan, part.

Step 8:

Pick apart the culture

Firstly, what type of business have you inherited? Daniele Cerutti tells us, “I use the STARS methodology to work out the challenge – Start-up, Turnaround, Realignment, or Sustain Success (the ‘A’ doesn’t have a name!) Usually companies are in these four key states when you join them. Each category aligns with a different type of approach that will affect the first two or three months of my activity.

“How do I work that out?” he asks. “I speak to people internally – my boss and other stakeholders. That gives me a chance to understand the business and get a feel for the deeper culture.”



During the first 90 days in your new role, one of the most pressing actions is taking stock of the culture, discovering its specific features and assessing the real potential for change.

When landing in an organization, pay attention to the “silent language” employees use and start to use it as quickly as possible. It is crucial to diagnose the state of the culture based on the norms – unwritten rules regarding what should and should not be done.

Executives pick up “credits” if they adapt their attitudes to the culture of the group. Once

they have accumulated some credits, they can spend them to start making changes. It takes some time to accumulate credits; trying to make sudden changes to the corporate culture, the promotion and incentives system or scheduling tends to be counterproductive.

So, how can a new executive earn idiosyncrasy credits? An executive performs two basic functions: generating business and setting an example. Through the idea of exemplary behavior, executives build the trust and social cache needed to make the necessary changes.

Key points:

- Culture is a “silent language”. If you want to make changes to the culture, you first have to understand the one that already exists.
- Trying to make sudden changes to the corporate culture, the promotion and incentives system or scheduling tends to be counterproductive.
- Exemplary behavior is the best way to build your own cultural cache.

Step 9:

Focus on your time

As Nicasio Muscia points out, “It can be easy to get caught up in the new role, trying to be involved in everything. But sometimes you need to take time to yourself. Take the time to reflect and digest alone. Personal headspace is equally important as collaboration.”

Real change takes time, and so should you. This early period is as much about understanding as it is making an impression. You should be fact finding, not making sweeping decisions.

Part of the problem is that the company’s goals and priorities have not been fully defined. One possible solution is to try different approaches and see which one best fits the existing policy. However, beware of making too many changes, as this can be seen as having insufficient resources or lacking the attention required to succeed.

Your time should be precious, be wary of what you agree to, and use assistants to advise you on what you could, should or must attend.



Key points:

- Plan your first few weeks meticulously, but don’t fill your diary.
- The first few days should be a learning phase, not a change phase.
- Don’t try to do too much.

Step 10:

Set aside time for personal development

All IESE alumni were keen to point out the importance of continuous learning as a facet of great leadership.

Beatriz García-Cos Muntañola tells us: “IESE Business School is a brilliant opportunity to reflect on your own leadership. Businesses change and evolve, but so do positions and people. Just as you reflect on business performance, you should do the same with yourself. One of my professors referred to it as ‘Me PLC’, and I love that concept.”

Nicasio Muscia backs this point of view up: “IESE is full of inspiring people – both peers and professors. The courses are fantastic, and when you combine that with the diversity of the class, you get incredibly valuable and practical insight to apply to your own role and business. The market is constantly changing, innovation is crucial for clients and for our business. You may have stepped into a huge role at the top of the company, but you need to continuously push yourself. IESE helped hugely.”



Meanwhile, Daniele Cerutti says,

“The AMP course takes abstract concepts and shows them in action. Whether that’s marketing, market forces or business strategy, IESE frames them in real terms and the cohort of other managers adds vast value to see how other companies are doing things.

I also liked the human-centricity. I think in a lot of workplaces, there is a lack of humanity. The focus is often on productivity and results, not on the consequences of these results. People are rewarded with bonus based on financial performance. The IESE course took a broader, more human, approach to management which really connected with me.”

The message from all our alumni is that great leadership can secure an executive role, but continuous learning is a pre-requisite once you reach the top.

IESE Business School runs regular courses for the C-Suite, senior executives and functional directors. Through the collective knowledge of expert faculty members from four continents, participants gain invaluable insights into global markets and insight into the way their peers are doing things.



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Personalized Projects

Analyze and address a specific business challenge you face with invaluable feedback and support from peers and faculty.



Action-oriented Learning

Gain and apply practical knowledge through the dynamic case-based method, interactive lectures, workshops and CEO panels.

Personal development might not be the first thing you think of when you start a new executive role but planning your time to leave space for learning is crucial to ongoing success as an executive. Don't underestimate its value.

Conclusion

No two processes of taking charge are the same because no two executives are the same. The circumstances surrounding each process are never identical, although they may appear to be very similar. However, these processes often serve a similar logic, which we have tried to outline here in a practical way.

Even for the most experienced of people, stepping into a new executive role for the first time can be daunting. It's natural to feel both excitement and trepidation. By following the steps in this guide, we hope to provide a solid foundation onto which you can build a successful start to life on top of the tree.

You can't plan for every eventuality but there is no substitute for great preparation. Get that right, and you can ensure a smooth transition both for you and your new team. So good luck in the new role. And we hope to see you soon at IESE Business School.



To know more



Guido Stein is Professor in the Department of Managing People in Organizations and Director of the Negotiation Unit. He is partner of Inicia Corporate (M&A and Corporate Finance).

Stein is a consultant to owners and management committees of companies. Member of The International Academy of Management and the International Advisory Board MCC (Budapest) and is a collaborator with People and Strategy Journal, Corporate Ownership & Control, Harvard Deusto Business Review, European Business Review and Expansion.

Prof. Stein is author of the books [Managing People and Organizations: Peter Drucker's Legacy](#) and [Now What? Leadership and Taking Charge](#) and is co-author of Keys to Leadership Success. He is now working on the book Ambidextrous Negotiator with Kandarp Mehta.

He is the author of more than 60 business cases and numerous technical notes. His current research focuses on undesirable turnover in top management, power and taking-charge processes, and negotiation as a management tool.

He has created the first MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) in the platform Coursera in Spanish on leading people, with more than 35,000 followers.

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