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HOW TO TAKE CHARGE, BUILD YOUR  
TEAM, AND GET IMMEDIATE RESULTS



# THE NEW LEADER'S 100-DAY ACTION PLAN

SECOND EDITION



AN ONBOARDING PROCESS  
FOR LEADERS AT EVERY LEVEL

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# THE NEW LEADER'S 100-DAY ACTION PLAN

## INTRODUCTION - AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE ONBOARDING PROCESS

Whether you are a veteran CEO taking the reins of your next organization or a new frontline supervisor, whether you are joining from the outside or getting promoted from within, *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan* will help you manage your leadership transition so you can take charge, build your team, and deliver better results faster than anyone thought possible. This matters because 40 percent of leaders going into new roles fail in their first 18 months.<sup>2</sup> (Yes, 40 percent!)

What do these failed leaders not know or see? What do they not do? Why can't they deliver? In most cases, they dig their own holes by missing one of the important tasks that must be accomplished in their first 100 days. Some don't understand the impact of their early words and actions and inadvertently send their new colleagues the wrong messages. Some focus on finding a new strategy, but fail to get buy-in and fail to build trust with their new team. Some do a lot of work and expend a lot of energy without accomplishing the one or two things that their most important stakeholders are looking for. All are unaware of some of the important steps required to achieve a successful transition. No leader wants this to happen; but it does, at an alarming rate.

Our fundamental, underlying concept is:

**Leadership is about inspiring and enabling others to do their absolute best together, to realize a meaningful and rewarding shared purpose.**

It's not about you. It's about them—those following your lead. How you set the direction and priorities and what you do to inspire and enable them is important. But what is most important is what they see, hear, feel, believe, and accomplish together as a team. Leadership is about your ability to create an environment where your team can deliver remarkable results and love doing it.

The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu expressed this particularly well over 2,500 years ago when he said: "The great leader speaks little. He never speaks carelessly. He works without self-interest and leaves no trace. When all is finished, the people say, "We did it ourselves."<sup>3</sup>

With that in mind, we have designed this book as an action plan, with a time line and key milestones you need to reach along the way to accelerate your success and your team's success in your first 100 days. These are distilled from insights gleaned from our own leadership experiences and from the work of our firm, PrimeGenesis, whose sole mission is to help executives moving into complex new leadership roles, as well as their teams, deliver better results faster. You will find our own and our clients' stories throughout this book (masked to preserve confidentiality). We hope you will find this to be a practical handbook that helps you know what you need to know, see what you need to see, and do what you need to do to for you and your team to deliver better results faster.

Over the years, we have noticed that many new leaders show up for a new role happy and smiling, but without a plan. Neither they, nor their organizations have thought things through in advance. On their first day, they are welcomed by such confidence-building remarks as: “Oh, you’re here. . . . We’d better find you an office.”

Ouch!

Some enlightened organizations have a better process in place. If you are lucky, you will be associated with an organization that actually puts people in charge of preparing for a leader’s transition into a new role. Imagine the difference when a new leader is escorted to an office that is fully set up for her, complete with computer, passwords, phones, files, information, and a 30-day schedule of orientation and assimilation meetings.

Better . . . but still not good enough. Even if the company has done this for you, if you have waited until this moment to start, you are already behind, and you have stacked the odds against yourself. Paradoxically, the best way to accelerate a transition into a new leadership role is to pause long enough to think through and put a plan in place—and then get a head start on implementing it.

We started PrimeGenesis in 2002 having noticed the difference between leaders who have a plan, hit the ground running, and make an impact on their first day, and leaders who wait until Day One to start planning. Since then, we have created and deployed a set of tools and techniques that help executives quickly and effectively transition into new leadership roles. Our work with executives has helped them and their teams deliver better results faster and reduce their failure rate from 40 percent to less than 10 percent at organizations including American Express, Cadbury, Johnson & Johnson, LexisNexis, MillerCoors, MTV Networks, Playtex, The Royal Bank of Scotland, and UBS, as well as several not-for-profit organizations.

The core principles and techniques we deploy to make our impact on senior leaders are the principles and techniques described in this book. *The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan* is the plan we help executives develop and deliver. The tools work for leaders at any level, whether you are a veteran CEO or a new frontline supervisor.

The three main ideas are:

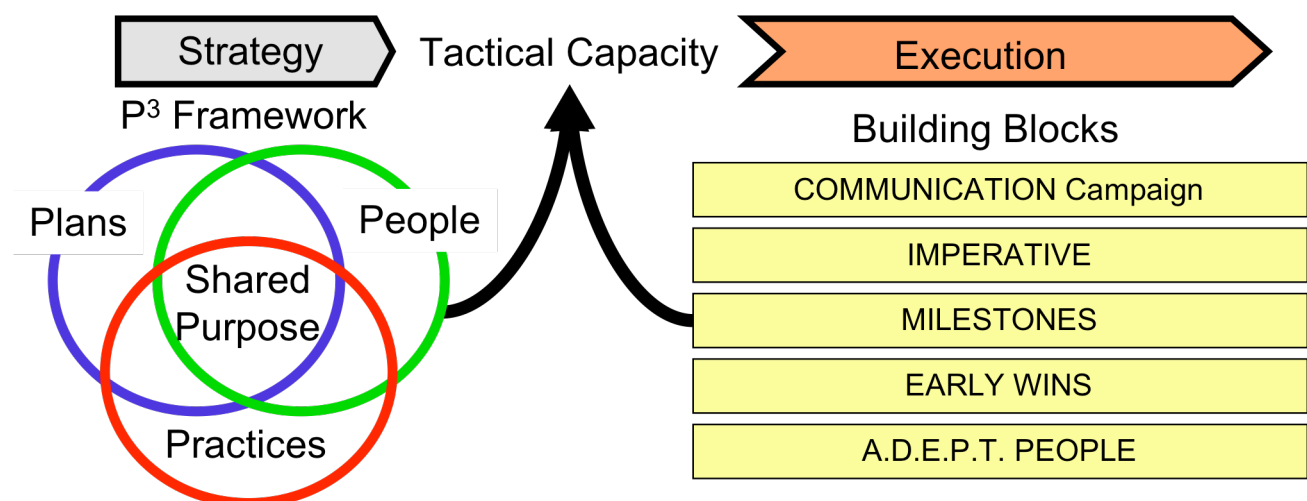
1. *Get a head start before the start.* Day One is a critical pivot point for people joining from outside the company. The same is true for the formal announcement of someone getting promoted from within. In both situations, you can accelerate progress by getting a head start and hitting the ground running. A little early momentum goes a long way.
2. *Take control of your message.* Everything communicates. People read things into everything you say and do, and everything you don’t say and don’t do. Thus you’re far better off choosing and controlling what they see and hear, and when they see and hear it, than in letting others make those choices for you, or letting them happen by chance.
3. *Build a high-performing team.* The first 100 days are the best time to put in place the basic building blocks of a high-performing team. You will fail if you try to do everything yourself, without the support and buy-in of your team. As a team leader,

your own success is inextricably linked to the success of the team as a whole.

Those ideas are built on a couple of frameworks of highly effective teams and organizations that we'll refer to throughout the book (see Figure I.1). It's helpful to explain them up front. First, the headlines:

- High-performing teams and organizations are built of *people, plans, and practices* aligned around a *shared purpose*.
- *Tactical capacity* bridges the gap between strategy and execution, ensuring that a good strategy doesn't fail because of bad execution.
- Five building blocks underpin a team's tactical capacity: *communication campaign, burning imperative, milestones, early wins, ADEPT<sup>4</sup> people in right roles*.

**Figure I.1 Core Frameworks**



## People-Plans-Practices—P<sup>3</sup>

An organization or team's performance is based on aligning its people, plans, and practices around a shared purpose. This involves getting ADEPT *people* in the right roles with the right support, getting clarity around the strategies and action steps included in *plans*, and getting *practices* in place that enable people to work together in a systematic and effective way. The heart of this is the organization's *purpose*. For that to be genuinely shared, it must be meaningful and rewarding for each of the people contributing to make its aspiration real.

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## Tactical Capacity

Tactical capacity is a team's ability to work under difficult, changing conditions and translate strategies into tactical actions decisively, rapidly, and effectively. It is the essential bridge between strategy and execution. In contrast to other work groups that move slowly, with lots of direction and most decision-making coming from the leader, high-performing teams with strong tactical capacity empower each member to come up with and quickly implement critical solutions to the inevitable problems that arise on an ongoing basis. They build on strategy and plans with ADEPT people and practices to implement ever-evolving actions that work.

You have seen this yourself. You have been on teams with members who operate in disconnected silos, incapable of acting without specific direction from above. They may know the strategy. They may have the resources they need; but any variation or change paralyzes them. FEMA actually had run the drill on a major hurricane in New Orleans months before Katrina hit. But the plan collapsed with the first puff of wind because no one could react flexibly to a situation that was different from what they had expected.

In contrast, a great example of tactical capacity at work was the way NASA team members came together during the Apollo 13 crisis. Right from "Houston, we've had a problem," the team reacted flexibly and fluidly to a dramatic and unwelcome new reality—a crippling explosion en route, in space. They went beyond their standard operating procedures and what their equipment was "designed to do" to exploring what it "could do." Through tight, on-the-fly collaboration, the team did in minutes what normally took hours, in hours what normally took days, and in days what normally took months. This teamwork was critical to getting the crew home safely.

If you're lucky, you've been on teams where actions and results flow with great ease, where team members know what is really required and intended and support each other in making those things happen. Those teams have tactical capacity.

As the new leader, it's your job to orchestrate the alignment of people, plans and practices around a shared purpose. You must convince key people to embrace a burning imperative and deliver against it with a great sense of urgency. A burning imperative is the antidote to silos and departments that don't cooperate. Tactical capacity is not only about the team responding quickly to changes in external circumstances, it also is about team members working well with each other in support of the team's burning imperative.

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## Building Blocks of Tactical Capacity

The good news is that, as a leader in a new role, you can build tactical capacity into your team quickly by implementing five building blocks:

1. Drive action with an ongoing *communication* campaign.
2. Embed a strong *burning imperative*.
3. Exploit key *milestones* to drive team performance.
4. Overinvest in *early wins* to build team confidence.
5. Secure ADEPT people in the *right roles*.

The NASA team dealing with the Apollo 13 got each of these five building blocks in place, allowing it to react with tactical capacity of the highest order:

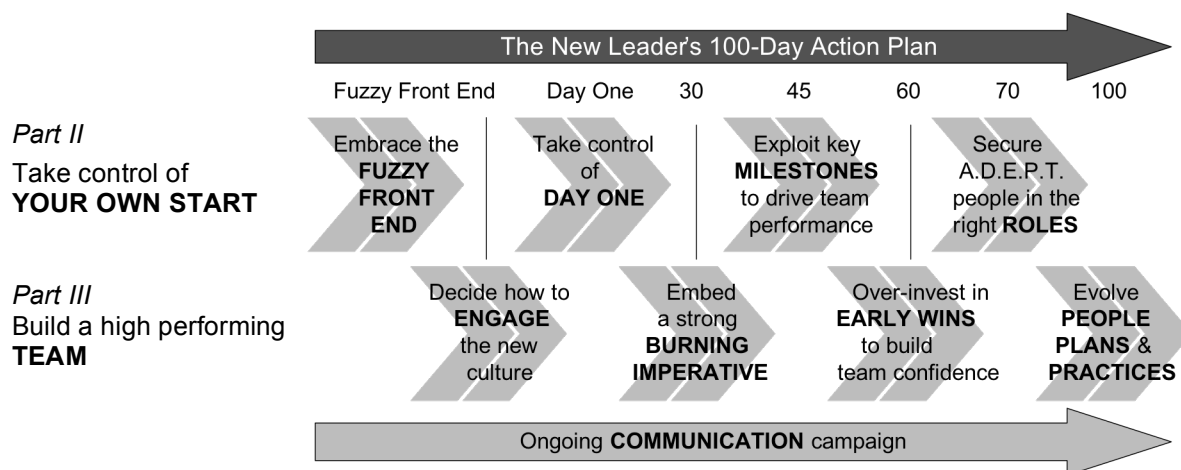
1. The culture had been strong. But everyone's *communication* reinforced the message that "failure is not an option" throughout the rescue mission.
2. The team's mission changed from "going to the moon to collect rocks" to the one *burning imperative* of "getting these men home alive." This was galvanizing enough (as a burning imperative must always be) to transcend all petty issues and focus everyone's efforts.
3. The team's *milestones* were clear: turn the ship around, preserve enough energy to allow a reentry, fix the carbon monoxide problem, survive the earth's atmosphere, and so on.
4. The carbon monoxide fix kept the astronauts alive temporarily and was the *early win* that made the team believe it could get the crew back to earth safely. It gave everyone confidence.
5. Everyone was working with the same end in mind; but they were working in different and essential *roles*. One group figured out how to turn the spaceship around. Another group fixed the oxygen problem. Another dealt with the reentry calculations and the spare crew did whatever it took.

Even though you're unlikely to jump into a situation as urgent as Apollo 13, in today's environment almost all leadership transitions are "hot landings," where you must hit the ground running to have a chance of success. Often you will need to fix something, fast. Sometimes you will have more time to plan. In most onboarding situations, you will have at least a few days to create an onboarding plan—especially if you give yourself a head start.

## The 100-Day Action Plan

Here are the steps in our onboarding process. They are the chapters in this book. As Dr. Seuss advised, "be dexterous and deft, and never mistake your right foot for your left!"<sup>5</sup>

*Part I* – **POSITION** and **SELL** yourself; **MAP** and **AVOID** landmines, Do your **DUE DILIGENCE**



## **Part I Create Your New Leadership Role**

### **Chapter 1: *Position* Yourself for a New Leadership Role or Promotion**

Positioning yourself for a leadership role is about connecting values with goals, and crossing strengths and communication. You must supplement your talent with learning and practice to build your knowledge and sharpen your skills over the short, mid, and long term. Then, when you're ready, you need to communicate those strengths to secure the promotion or new leadership role you deserve.

### **Chapter 2: *Sell* before You Buy: Answer the Only Three Interview Questions**

You cannot turn down a job you have not been offered. So first put your energy into getting the job offer. Remember that there are only three fundamental interview questions and be prepared to talk about your (1) *strengths*, (2) *motivation*, and (3) *fit* with the organization and the position. Remember also that interviews are not about you. They are about what you can do for those doing the interviewing. Selling is about positioning your strengths, motivation, and fit characteristics in terms of their needs.

### **Chapter 3: Map and Avoid the Most Common *Land Mines***

In general, you'll want to mitigate *organization*, *role* and *personal* land mines before accepting a job, and jump-start *relationships* and *learning* even before Day One so you can concentrate on successful *delivery* and *adjustment* after you start.

### **Chapter 4: Do your *Due Diligence* on the Organization, Role, and Fit**

The ability and willingness to assess and deal with risk is often a critical differentiator between success and failure. Once you've been offered the job—and only after you've been offered the job—make sure it is right for you. This involves choosing between options and mitigating risks by answering three questions:

1. What is the organization's sustainable competitive advantage?
2. Did anyone have concerns about this role; and, if so, what was done to mitigate them?
3. What, specifically, about me, led to your offering me the job?

With those answers in hand, you can then decide if you've got a *low level of risk* that requires no extraordinary actions, *manageable risk* that you'll manage as you go, *mission-crippling risk* that you must resolve before going forward, or *insurmountable barriers* requiring you to walk away.

## Chapter 5: Act Differently When You Are *Promoted* from Within

While joining an organization from the outside involves positioning yourself for the first time, getting promoted from within often requires repositioning yourself to people who already know you. There are three key differences when you are promoted from within versus joining from the outside:

1. *You can't control the context*, so prepare in advance and be ready to adjust as required in planned, unplanned, or interim changes, securing resources and support along the way.
2. *It is hard to make a clean break*, so take control of your own transition by managing the internal announcement cascade and how key stakeholders learn about your promotion, securing your base and managing first impressions in the new role.
3. *There is no honeymoon*, so quickly accelerate team progress after the start by evolving the stated and de facto strategies, improving operations, and strengthening the organization.

## **Part II Take Control of Your Own Start**

### Chapter 6: Embrace the *Fuzzy Front End* and Make It Work for You before You Start

The time between acceptance and start is a gift you can use to rest and relax or to get a head start on your new role. Our experience has shown that those who use this fuzzy front end to put a plan in place, complete their prestart preparation, and jump-start learning and relationships are far more likely to deliver better results faster than those who choose to rest and relax. Here are the five key steps:

1. Identify key stakeholders up, across, and down.
2. Plan your message, fuzzy front end, and first 100 days.
3. Manage personal setup so you have less to worry about after you start.
4. Conduct prestart meetings and phone calls to jump-start key relationships.
5. Gather information and learning in advance to jump-start learning.

### Chapter 7: Decide How to *Engage* the New Culture: Assimilate, Converge, and Evolve, or Shock

Be careful about how you engage with the organization's existing culture, using an ACES model to determine whether you want to Assimilate, Converge, and Evolve, or Shock it at the start. You need to make this choice early on because it will determine your approach to your fuzzy front end, Day One, and first 100 Days. Culture is hard to assess in advance, but you can build at least the start of a good working model by looking carefully at the "Be-Do-Say" of an organization:



- *Be*: The underpinning of culture (and integrity) is what people really are, their core assumptions, beliefs and intentions.
- *Do*: These are things that can be seen, felt, or heard such as behavioral, attitudinal, and communication norms, signs, and symbols.
- *Say*: What people say about their culture can be found in things like mission statements and creeds. As Edgar Schein points out,<sup>6</sup> these get at the professed culture.

## Chapter 8: Drive Action with an Ongoing *Communication* Campaign

Everything communicates. You can either make choices in advance about what and how you're going to communicate or react to what others do. It is important to craft your own communication plan and be clear on your platform for change, your vision, and your call to action before you start trying to inspire others. It will evolve as you learn, but you can't lead unless you have a starting point to help focus those learning plans.

- *Platform* for change: Why it's necessary to do anything differently
- *Vision* of a brighter future: How people see themselves fitting into that future
- *Call to Action*: What the audience should do next to be part of the solution

Leadership is personal. Your message is the key that unlocks personal connections. The greater the congruence between your own values, intentions, actions, and words, the stronger those connections will be. This is why the best messages aren't crafted; they emerge. This is why great leaders live their messages not because they can, but because they must. "Here I stand, I can do no other."<sup>7</sup>

## Chapter 9: Take Control of *Day One*: Make a Powerful First Impression

Everything is magnified on Day One, whether it's your first day in a new company or the day your promotion is announced. Everyone is looking for hints about what you think and what you're going to do. This is why it's so important to control your message by paying particular attention to all the signs, symbols, and stories you deploy, and the order in which you deploy them. Make sure people are seeing and hearing things that will lead them to believe what you want them to believe about you and about themselves in relation to the future of the organization.

## **Part III Your 100-Day Action Plan**

### Chapter 10: Embed a Strong *Burning Imperative* by Day 30

The burning imperative is a sharply defined, intensely shared, and purposefully urgent understanding from each of the team members of what they are "supposed to do, *now*," and how this works with the larger aspirations of the team and the organization. While mission, vision, and values are often components of the burning imperative, the critical piece is the rallying cry that every one understands and can act on. Get this created and bought into early on—even if it's only 90 percent right. You, and the team, will adjust and improve along the way. Don't let anything distract you from getting this in place and shared—in *your first 30 days*!

## Chapter 11: Exploit Key *Milestones* to Drive Team Performance: Day 45

The real test of a high-performing team's tactical capacity lies in the formal and informal practices that are at work across team members, particularly around clarifying decision rights and information flows.<sup>8</sup> The real job of a high-performing team's leader is to inspire and enable others to do their absolute best, together. These leaders spend more time integrating across than managing down. The milestone tool is straightforward and focuses on mapping and tracking and what is getting done by when by whom. High-performing team leaders take that basic tool to a whole new level, exploiting it to inspire and enable people to work together *as a team!*

## Chapter 12: Overinvest in *Early Wins* to Build Team Confidence: Day 60

Early wins are all about credibility and confidence. People have more faith in people who have delivered. You want your boss to have confidence in you. You want team members to have confidence in you, in themselves, and in the plan for change that has emerged. Early wins fuel that confidence. To that end, identify potential early wins by day 60 and overinvest to deliver them by the end of your first six months—*as a team!*

## Chapter 13: Secure ADEPT People in the Right *Roles* with the Right Support by Day 70

Make your organization ever more ADEPT by Acquiring, Developing, Encouraging, Planning, and Transitioning talent:

- *Acquire:* Recruit, attract, and onboard the right people
- *Develop:* Assess and build skills and knowledge
- *Encourage:* Direct, support, recognize, and reward
- *Plan:* Monitor, assess, plan career moves over time
- *Transition:* Migrate to different roles as appropriate

This is one of the most important things you do. Jump-start this by getting the right people in the right roles with the right support to *build the team!*

## Chapter 14: *Evolve* People, Plans, and Practices to Capitalize on Changing Circumstances

By the end of your first 100 Days, you should have made significant steps toward aligning your people, plans, and practices around a shared purpose. Remember, this is not a one-time event but, instead, something that will require constant, ongoing management and improvement.

- Manage your organization (people) by deploying the ADEPT tool for ongoing talent development. You don't have to use this tool. But you do have to have a complete and disciplined way to strengthen your organization on a continuous basis over time.

- Manage your strategy (plans) as a cycle, ensuring you are looking at your situation, customers, collaborators, capabilities, competitors, and conditions on a regular basis and reflecting changes in them in your ever-evolving strategies and plans.
- Manage your operations (practices) by continually tracking, updating, and adding milestones. Disciplined, integrated execution doesn't happen unless you demand it, monitor it, and reinforce it over and over again.

Monitor the situation over time. Identify and classify the impact of surprises as major or minor, enduring or temporary, and be ready to react as appropriate. For major, temporary events, follow the basic flow of prepare—understand—plan—implement—revise or prepare. For major, enduring changes, redeploy or restart with relentless control of the message throughout.

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## Make This Book Work for You

By now you should be aware that there may be a better way to manage transitions than just showing up on Day One or charging into your promotion announcement or newly merged team and doing what “they” tell you to do. Similarly, there may be a better way for you to tackle this book than just starting on page one and reading straight through until you lose steam.

You might want to start with the 100-Day Checklist (Tool 6.1) at the end of Chapter 6. You might want to begin with the chapter summaries at the end of each chapter. Or you may prefer to read straight through the main body of the book. Use the book's elements in the way that works best for you. Just bear in mind that there really is a logical order of thinking and acting here, and it is helpful to have this clear in your mind before you do anything. Don't read this book over your first hundred days. Read the most appropriate parts now, and then dip back in repeatedly over your 100 Days and beyond.

We have designed this as a flexible handbook split into a main body and set of appendixes. The main body (Chapters 1 through 14) is highly structured and practically oriented, with ideas, examples, tools, forms, and checklists in the book, and with easily downloadable, modifiable, and printable versions of them online. In this main body, we are highly prescriptive and directive: “Do this,” “Do that,” “Don't do the other.”

Our first prescription is that you should *not* follow our prescriptions—or at least not all our prescriptions in all situations. Instead, take the pieces that generally work for you and adapt them as appropriate for your specific situation. People have found that these ideas work for leaders going into new companies, getting promoted from within, merging teams, as well as in situations where it's appropriate to hit a restart button. Since everything is always changing, we could all lead better with an ongoing series of 100-day action plans.

The appendixes provide more depth on a couple of important subjects, more exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of the 100-Day Action Plan, and some additional ideas that you may find useful over time. Where the main body of the book takes full aim at actions for your first 100 Days, the appendixes put those actions in the context of things that will take longer to play out. It is not that the information in the appendixes is less important. It is just less urgent.

People often tell us, “This is just common sense. But I like the way you’ve structured it.” As you set out to follow our structure, understand that we have a bias to push you to do things faster than others would expect. This timetable is based on the needs of our clients, who typically are moving into demanding, complex new leadership roles, and who need to meet or beat high expectations fast; but it may not be appropriate for your situation without some customization. We present you with options and choices. You are in charge. We wish you success in your new leadership role. We hope this book will help you and your team deliver better results faster than anyone thought possible!

<sup>1</sup> The authors are some of the founders of the executive onboarding and transition acceleration firm, PrimeGenesis.

<sup>2</sup> The 40 percent failure rate comes from a 1998 study by Manchester, Inc.—often attributed to The Center for Creative Leadership. Brad Smart cited a failure rate of 50 percent in his book *Topgrading* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999). Leadership IQ published a study September 20, 2005, suggesting that the failure rate is 46 percent at 18 months. In the March 2008 *Harvard Business Review*, Olson, van Bever, and Verry wrote, “35 percent to 40 percent of senior hires wash out within their first 18 months.” So, 40 percent is still vaguely right.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrasing the 17th verse of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tzu.

<sup>4</sup> Acquire, Develop, Encourage, Plan, Transition.

<sup>5</sup> “Congratulations! Today is your day, you’re off to great places, you’re off and away. You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself in any direction you choose. You’re on your own and you know what you know, and you are the guy who’ll decide where to go. So be sure where you step, step with care and great tact, and remember that life’s a great balancing act. Just never forget to be dexterous and deft, and never mix up your right foot with your left” (Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*, New York: Random House, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> See Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Attributed to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521, when asked to recant his earlier writings.

<sup>8</sup> Neilson, Martin, and Powers, “The Secrets to Successful Strategy Execution,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2008, p 60

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### **The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan (Wiley 2006 and 2009)**

George Bradt, Jayme Check and Jorge Pedraza were founding partners of PrimeGenesis, an executive onboarding and transition acceleration group that helps leaders in new and challenging positions deliver sustainably better results faster and reduce the risk of failure. Its expert specialists provide hands-on facilitation of practical tools based on their own senior line management and organizational development experience with leading companies around the world. There’s more about PrimeGenesis at [www.primegenesis.com](http://www.primegenesis.com).

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