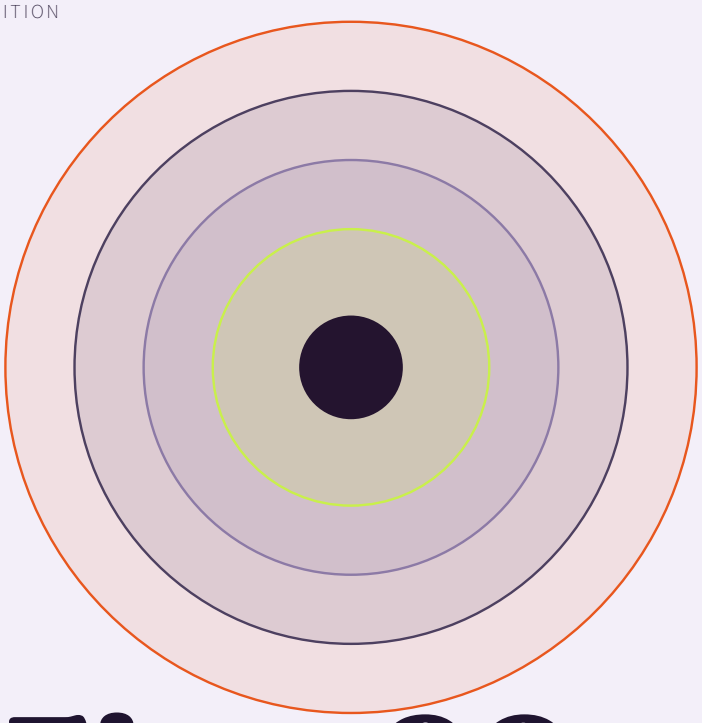


The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter

A reading of the book by Michael D. Watkins (2013)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Michael D. Watkins is a professor of leadership and organizational change at IMD in Lausanne who earlier taught at Harvard Business School, and he has spent his career studying how leaders take on new roles. The First 90 Days argues that a transition is the most dangerous and the most promising stretch of a leader's career, and that most people handle it by improvising. His goal is to help new leaders reach the breakeven point, where they add more value to the organization than they take from it, sooner. The book works through ten challenges, from preparing yourself and learning fast to negotiating success with your boss, building your team and managing yourself. Its best-known tool is the STARS model, which sorts a new role into start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment or sustaining success, because each calls for a different strategy. The examples are short case studies of managers moving into new jobs, promotions and companies. This updated and expanded edition adds a chapter on speeding up transitions across a whole organization.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Every new leader starts out taking more value than they add, and the real goal of the first 90 days is to cross that line sooner.

Watkins calls the crossing the breakeven point. On day one you draw on other people's time, patience and budget while you contribute little. A good transition shortens the stretch before you pay that back, and a bad one can stall before you ever reach it.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The skills that got you the new job are often the ones that will sink you in it.

The first challenge is to prepare yourself, which means mentally leaving the old role behind. A promoted manager who keeps doing the work they were best at, instead of the work the new level needs, ends up doing the old job well and the new one badly. Watkins asks you to name what has to change in how you spend your time.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

One strategy does not fit every role: a turnaround and a healthy business ask for nearly opposite moves.

The STARS model sorts a role into start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment or sustaining success. In a turnaround people already know things must change and want quick, firm decisions. In realignment or sustaining success the same speed can wreck what still works, so you learn first and act more carefully.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Most jobs are a portfolio of situations, so diagnose each part of the unit on its own.

A single role can hold a product line in trouble, a team growing fast and a mature business that only needs protecting. Watkins suggests you sort each piece into its STARS situation and plan for each one, rather than giving the whole unit one label.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Treat learning as an investment you plan, not something that happens while you are busy.

Accelerating your learning means deciding what you need to know about the work, the culture and the politics, and who can tell you. Asking the same handful of questions of many people, from the front line up, shows you quickly where views agree and where they split.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

You, not your boss, are responsible for making the relationship work.

Watkins splits the work into five conversations: the situation, expectations, resources, style and your own development. Holding them on purpose, and early, replaces guesswork about what success means. He also warns against avoiding the boss and against springing surprises on them.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Early wins earn you the credibility to make the harder changes later.

Pick a few problems you can fix visibly in the first weeks, ideally ones your boss cares about and that point toward your longer goals. The way you win also matters, because people read it as a preview of how you will lead.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Your title gives you less reach than you think, so build the alliances you will need before you need them.

Much of what a new leader wants depends on people they do not manage. Watkins suggests mapping who influences whom, and sorting the people who matter into supporters, opponents and the persuadable middle, where most of the effort should go.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The hardest person to manage in a transition is yourself.

A new role brings long hours, isolation and pressure to look certain. The book's answer is personal discipline, such as planning each week and stopping to reflect, plus a support system: steady routines at home and an advice network outside your chain of command.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Write down what breakeven means here
- [ ] Diagnose your portfolio with STARS
- [ ] Draft a learning plan with ten names
- [ ] Book the five conversations with your boss
- [ ] Pick two early wins

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Review your 90-day plan every Friday
- ◯ Meet one person outside your line each week
- ◯ Bring your boss news before it is a surprise

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Write down what breakeven means here

In two or three sentences, describe the point at which you would be adding more than you take in this role.

Put day 90 on your calendar next to it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Diagnose your portfolio with STARS

List the main parts of your unit and label each one start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment or sustaining success.

Note which part needs fast action and which needs careful learning first.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Draft a learning plan with ten names

Choose ten people from different levels and teams.

Ask each the same questions: what are the biggest challenges, why, where the untapped opportunities are, and what they would focus on in your place.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Book the five conversations with your boss

Put time on the calendar to cover the situation, expectations, resources, working style and your development.

They need not be five meetings, but each topic should get a real conversation.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Pick two early wins

Choose two problems you can visibly improve within about 30 days that matter to your boss and point at your bigger goals.

Write down who has to help and what done looks like.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Review your 90-day plan every Friday

Spend 15 minutes checking the week against the plan: what you learned, what moved, and what you avoided.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Meet one person outside your line each week

Have coffee or a short call with someone you will need but do not manage.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Bring your boss news before it is a surprise

In each one-to-one, raise the one thing most likely to go wrong, along with what you plan to do about it.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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30 ○						

December 2026

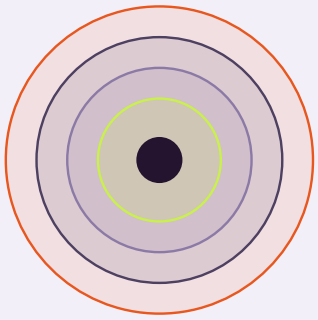
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Read the situation before you act on it, and the first 90 days start working for you.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER MICHAEL D. WATKINS