

FIRST TIME MANAGERS • GUIDE 1 OF 3

The First 90 Days

Learn before you lead.

A field guide for new managers. Twelve weeks, about a page a week, with room to write in it.
Tick the boxes and type straight into the tables.

How to use this guide

Read one week at a time. Do three or four things. Tick the boxes.

Each week opens with what to do, in order, with a rough time next to each task. The script or worksheet you need comes right after it. The checkboxes are real, so click them as you go, and type straight into the tables.

The guide is built for two kinds of new manager, and a few pages split by which one you are.

PROMOTED

You were on the team and now you lead it. Your friends are now your team. Expect an awkward month.

NEW

You came in from outside. Nobody has a picture of you yet. That is useful, so use it.

WHEN TO STOP AND GET HELP

Harassment, discrimination, safety, private customer data, possible misconduct, anything legal. Don't improvise. Go to HR or the right partner, and tell your boss.

If someone asks "Can you keep this between us?", say this before they tell you: "I'll keep it as private as I can, but if it involves safety or misconduct I have to bring in the right people."

THE PLAN

Day 1 to day 90, at a glance

Three months. Each one has a job.

DAY 1	Walk in curious. Names, questions, and nothing to prove.
WEEK 1	Listen. Change nothing. Meet everyone, tell them how you work.
WEEK 2	Your boss. Find out what success means to the person who judges you.
WEEK 3	Your peers. Meet the people your team depends on.
WEEK 4	The readout. One page on what you learned.
WEEK 5	Say what good looks like. Write it, and have them write theirs.
WEEK 6	Compare the two lists. The gap is the conversation.
WEEK 7	Rhythm and feedback. Make one on ones do real work.
WEEK 8	Cut the list. Pick one visible fix.
WEEK 9	Hand off something real. Stop being the answer to everything.
WEEK 10	Get it out of one head. Write down what only one person knows.
WEEK 11	Close the loops. Finish what you started, and collect the proof.
WEEK 12	The 90 day review. Write it up and plan next quarter.
DAYS 85 TO 90	Check the foundation. Seven things that should be true.

MONTH 1

The first impression.

People start forming their read on you the minute you walk in. This month you listen, line up with your boss, and meet the people your team depends on.

THIS MONTH

DAY 1 **Walk in curious.** Names, questions, and nothing to prove.

WEEK 1 **Listen.** Meet everyone, tell them how you work, change nothing.

WEEK 2 **Your boss.** Find out what success means to the person who judges you.

WEEK 3 **Your peers.** Meet the people your team depends on, before you need them.

WEEK 4 **The readout.** One page on what you learned, in your boss's hands.

DAY 1

Walk in curious.

Nobody expects you to fix anything today. They're deciding whether you're easy to talk to.

THE NIGHT BEFORE



Learn every name and what each person does

20 MIN

Check how each name is pronounced. People notice when you try.



Pick one sentence about why you're glad to be here

5 MIN

You'll say it about twenty times. Make it true.

YOUR FIRST HOUR



Say hello to each person before any meeting

30 MIN

Ask what they're working on, and ask one thing you don't know. Don't offer an opinion yet.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE



Put a one on one on the calendar with every person this week

10 MIN

Send the invites tonight so they're waiting tomorrow.



Write three things that surprised you

5 MIN

By week 3 you'll have stopped noticing them.



Ask your boss what you should be careful about this week

5 MIN

A short answer is fine. You're learning how they think.

PROMOTED OR NEW, TODAY

Promoted: everyone already knows you, so the question is what changes. Skip the speech. Say hello the way you always have, then book the one on ones.

New: nobody has a picture of you yet. Say who you are in two sentences and spend the rest of the day asking what they're working on.

Listen. Change nothing.

Every part of you wants to prove you deserved this. Hold off. Everyone gets a real conversation with you, and nobody gets surprised by a change.

THIS WEEK

- ☐

Tell the team who you are and how you work

30 MIN

One short group meeting. Script and How I Work sentences on the next pages.
- ☐

Meet every person one on one

30 TO 45 MIN

Each person gets their own half hour. Book them all on Monday. Whoever you meet last will notice.
- ☐

Sit in on real work

2 HOURS TOTAL

Ask: is there a step everyone skips? A workaround is a complaint nobody has filed yet.
- ☐

Write down what you hear, every day

10 MIN

What people told you and what you've confirmed are two different lists.

A STORY FROM MIKE

My first leadership job, I wanted to impress my boss, so I came in hot. Never missing another deadline. A six month project done in five. I had no idea how.

I burned trust in a week. It took months to learn that one person needed a push, one needed space, one wanted help, and one wanted me to leave him alone. I'd treated them all the same.

AM I DOING THE THING THAT GOES WRONG?

Coming in swinging

- ☐ I've said "we're going to" more than "I'm learning"
- ☐ I set a goal without asking what's realistic

IS WHAT I'M FEELING NORMAL?

Feel like you don't know enough? Normal. Worry only if you've stopped asking.

Quiet, polite one on ones? Normal. They're watching you too.

How your team learns about you.

They won't say what they think yet. They'll show it in how they act around you, and they're watching how you act first.

WHAT THEY SEE YOU DO	WHAT THEY TAKE FROM IT
Who you talk to first	Who you trust, and who doesn't count.
Whether you ask before you change something	Whether their experience matters to you.
How you react to the first bit of bad news	Whether it's safe to bring you the next one.
Whether you do the small thing you said you'd do	Whether to believe the big things.
Who gets your time, and who gets what's left	Who the favorites are.

Pick one row and watch yourself on it all week.

IF THEY ALREADY SEEM TO DISLIKE YOU

- ☐ **Check whether it's one person or the whole room**
One cold person on a team of eight is a person. Four is a pattern.
- ☐ **Find out what happened before you arrived**
A reorg, a bad manager, a colleague passed over. Ask someone you trust.
- ☐ **Say it once, privately**
"I get the sense this hasn't been easy. What would I need to do for it to feel better?" Then listen.
- ☐ **Keep one small promise, where people can see it**
Trust comes back in small deliveries, not speeches.

Introduce yourself

Short, honest, and mostly about them.

NEW • SAY THIS TO THE GROUP

YOUR INTRO

Hi everyone, I'm _____, your new _____. I've spent ____ years working on _____, and I have a lot to learn about how things work here.

My priority right now isn't changing things. It's getting to know each of you. I'd love to hear your role, what you like working on, and anything I should know.

Notice who talks first and who stays quiet. Don't comment on it yet.

PROMOTED • SAY THIS INSTEAD

NAMING THE SHIFT

I know this is a little different now that I'm your manager. Here's what I don't want to change, and here's what will be different.

If someone on the team also wanted your job, have that one on one first.

HOW I WORK • FILL IN, THEN SAY IT IN A MINUTE

Bad news reaches me best <i>Early, even half formed</i>	
If you need me fast <i>Message, call, or walk over</i>	
Every week, count on me for <i>Only write what you'll keep</i>	
What I need from you	

Your first one on ones

One person at a time. Keep it light. This isn't an interview.

ASK THESE

- 1

What made you take this role in the first place?
- 2

What's the best way for me to give you feedback? Find out now, not the day you need it.
- 3

If you could change one thing about how we work, what would it be?
- 4

What would make this a good year for you? Ask, then stay quiet.

"I heard it" is an answer. "I'll fix it" is a promise. Don't make promises yet.

YOUR TEAM, ONE COLUMN PER PERSON

	PERSON 1	PERSON 2	PERSON 3	PERSON 4
Name				
How they want feedback				
What they want from this job				
What I guessed before I asked				
Follow up I owe them				

Bigger team? Copy the table. Update it after every one on one.

Your friends are now your team.

The hardest part of being promoted from inside. Almost nobody warns you.

A STORY FROM MIKE

A friend of mine was the most liked of twelve project managers. I promoted her to run the group, and she kept going to lunch with everyone like always.

It couldn't last. Her job now was to hit numbers, which meant pushing people. If she went soft, her team would pay for it.

Then she stopped getting invited to lunch, and found a team Slack channel she wasn't in. I told her this was normal. People need somewhere to vent that doesn't include the boss. Don't force your way in. She never invited me to every lunch either.

DO THESE



Say the shift out loud, once

1 MIN

Use the “naming the shift” line from the last page.



Talk early to anyone who wanted your job

30 MIN

If you wait, it becomes a story the team tells without you.



Watch where your time and information go

If your old lunch crowd hears things first, everyone notices.

Everybody wants something different.

Nobody teaches this, and it changes how you manage every person.

A STORY FROM MIKE

I've always been driven by money and title, so I assumed everyone was. Some of my best people wanted to leave at five and never work a weekend. They wanted stable. I'd been managing them like they wanted my life instead of theirs.

THEY WANT	WHAT HELPS	WHAT BACKFIRES
Money and title	A clear path with real dates.	Vague promises about someday.
Stability	Predictable hours, early notice, a protected weekend.	A 4:45 request. Reading limits as low ambition.
Learning	New problems, someone to learn from.	The same work forever.
Recognition	Specific praise, sometimes in public.	A generic “great job.”
Autonomy	A clear outcome, then room.	Hovering and status checks.
Belonging	Time with the team, being asked.	Weeks without a real conversation.

Most people are a mix. Use this to notice, not to label. And never use what someone tells you as leverage later.

Your boss.

One boss lives in the metrics. Another in the budget. Another only cares whether customers are happy. Don't assume yours wants what your last one did.

THIS WEEK

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--|---------------|
| ☐ | Have the day 90 conversation
Write your own answer first and bring it. | 45 MIN |
| <hr/> | | |
| ☐ | Email back what you heard, the same day
Any mismatch shows up now instead of in month five. | 15 MIN |
| <hr/> | | |
| ☐ | Get the numbers your boss reports upward
And where your team stands on each. No baseline is a finding. | 30 MIN |
| <hr/> | | |
| ☐ | Set a standing weekly one on one with your boss
Bring what moved, what's at risk, and what you need. | 5 MIN |

ASK THIS

At the end of 90 days, what would make you confident I'm succeeding? What must not slip while I'm learning? Which decisions are mine, and which should I bring to you first?

If you hear "just get up to speed," ask what that would look like on a Friday afternoon.

THEN SEND THIS

Thanks for today. Here's what I heard: success at day 90 looks like _____. What can't slip is _____. I'll decide _____ on my own and bring _____ to you. If I've got any of it wrong, tell me this week.

Learn how your boss works

They'll tell you in pieces over the first month. Write each piece down while it's fresh.

YOUR BOSS, IN YOUR WORDS

How they like to get news <i>Written, spoken, or a quick message</i>	
How often they want to hear from me <i>Daily, weekly, only when it changes</i>	
What makes them nervous <i>What gets them a call from above</i>	
What a good update sounds like <i>Ask for one they liked</i>	
How they react to bad news <i>Watch the first time</i>	

THE NUMBERS YOUR BOSS REPORTS UPWARD

THE NUMBER	WHERE MY TEAM STANDS	WHO OWNS THE DATA

No baseline is a finding. Write that down too.

Your peers.

What slows new managers down in month two is usually someone outside the team they haven't met. Meet them now, while you need nothing.

THIS WEEK



List the three to five people your team depends on most

15 MIN

Who hands your team work, and who receives it.



Meet each one, with nothing to ask for

20 MIN EACH

Ask what your team does that matters most to theirs, and what you should tell them earlier.



Find who your predecessor always looped in

Usually someone in finance, legal, or ops.



Pick one peer you can be honest with

Someone who'll tell you how things really work.

READ THIS

It gets lonely.

Around now you notice you can't vent to your team like you used to, and the other managers aren't really your peers yet. You're between groups for a while. It's normal and it ends, faster if you have somewhere to put it: a manager outside your team, someone from a past job, and your honest peer.

Don't vent to your team about your boss or the company. It feels like honesty. It lands like a weight.

AM I DOING THE THING THAT GOES WRONG?

Staying the most liked



I'm putting off a conversation to stay popular



I'm bending a standard for a friend

IS WHAT I'M FEELING NORMAL?

Not invited to lunch anymore? Normal. Worry only if one person is freezing you out.

Someone cold or hostile? Common if they wanted your job. Talk early.

Map the people you depend on

Five names is plenty. Fill it in before the meetings, then correct it after.

WHO	WHAT MY TEAM NEEDS FROM THEM	WHAT THEY NEED FROM US	MET

Add the date once you've met. Anyone still blank after week 4 gets a call this week.

The readout.

One page on what you learned, in your boss's hands before they ask for it.

THIS WEEK



Close every "I don't know yet"

Answer it, or give a new date.



Write the readout and walk your boss through it

45 MIN

If it takes more than fifteen minutes to read, cut it.



Tell the team one thing you heard and one thing you'll do

10 MIN

Small is fine. They're watching for follow through.

YOUR MONTH 1 READOUT

What I've learned <i>Three things that matter most</i>	
What's working that I'll protect	
What I'm not changing yet, and why	
What I'll do in month 2 <i>Three things at most</i>	
What I need from you	

MONTH 1 IS DONE WHEN



I've had a real one on one with every person on my team.



My boss and I agree in writing on what success looks like at day 90.



I've met the people my team depends on.



I've told the team one thing I heard and one thing I'll do.

MONTH 2

Make it clear.

You've listened for a month. Now turn it into clarity people can feel.

THIS MONTH

- | | |
|--------|--|
| WEEK 5 | Say what good looks like. Write it down for each role, and have each person write theirs. |
| <hr/> | |
| WEEK 6 | Compare the two lists. The gap between them is the conversation. |
| <hr/> | |
| WEEK 7 | Rhythm and feedback. Make one on ones do real work. Ask about you. |
| <hr/> | |
| WEEK 8 | Cut the list. Pick one visible fix and announce it. |
| <hr/> | |

Say what good looks like.

Most early friction is two people with different definitions of a good job, each assuming the other knows.

THIS WEEK

- ☐ **Write what good looks like for each role** 30 MIN A ROLE
The outputs they own, the quality bar, and how they flag problems.
- ☐ **Ask each person to write their own version first** 5 MIN
If they see yours first, they'll just agree with it.
- ☐ **Book 45 minutes with each person for next week** 10 MIN
Tell them what you're asking for so they can come ready.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE, ONE ROLE

Role and person	
The work they own	
What good looks like <i>Quality and timing</i>	
How they flag a problem	
Decisions that are theirs	

ASK EACH PERSON TO WRITE THIS FIRST

Three lines: what you think this job is for, what a great month looks like, and what gets in your way.

Compare the two lists.

The gap between what you wrote and what they wrote is the conversation. Don't rush to close it.

THIS WEEK

- ☐ **Compare the two lists side by side in a one on one** 45 MIN
Start with where you agree.
- ☐ **Write down what you agreed** 10 MIN
Send it to them the same day.
- ☐ **Book a recheck** 5 MIN
Four weeks out. Expectations drift if nobody looks.

THE THREE USUAL GAPS

GAP	SOUNDS LIKE	HOW TO CLOSE IT
Priority	They're busy on something you see as low value.	Name which work actually moves the business.
Quality	Their "done" is your rough draft.	Show a real example of finished.
Autonomy	They think good means asking first. You think it means deciding.	Say exactly which decisions are theirs.

SAY THIS

I want us to have the same picture of success. Here's what I think this role needs to deliver. How does that compare with yours? Where are we not lined up yet?

AM I DOING THE THING THAT GOES WRONG?

Vague expectations

- ☐ I've said "be more proactive" without saying what I mean
- ☐ I'm holding someone to a standard I never said out loud

IS WHAT I'M FEELING NORMAL?

They push back on your list? Good. Better now than at review time.

Rhythm and feedback.

A one on one that gets moved twice teaches people it's optional. Make it the most reliable meeting on your calendar.

THIS WEEK



Lock the one on one rhythm

Same time weekly. One running shared doc. They add to it during the week.



Let them own the first half

Their agenda first. Status updates belong in a tracker, not here.



Ask for feedback on yourself, specifically

"What's one thing I could do differently in our one on ones?"

5 MIN EACH



Change one small thing because of what you heard, and say so

Silence after asking teaches people not to bother.

THE 30 MINUTE ONE ON ONE

5 MIN

Check in. "What's top of mind? Doesn't have to be work."

10 MIN

Their agenda. Whatever they added to the doc.

10 MIN

Follow ups. "Last time you mentioned this. Where did it land?" and "What's in your way that I could remove?"

5 MIN

Close. Who owns what, by when.

"What's in your way that I could remove?" is the question most one on ones skip.

Cut the list. Fix one thing.

A team with ten priorities has none. And one small fix people can feel beats a strategy nobody reads.

THIS WEEK



Ask three people, separately, what the top priority is

15 MIN

Three different answers means a focus problem.



Name the one or two things that matter most, out loud

Say what's waiting, too. Not doing something on purpose is a decision.



Pick one annoyance from month 1 and fix it fast

Choose by how fast people will feel it, not how impressive it looks.



Announce it before you do it

A quiet fix gets a fraction of the credit for the same work.

WHEN SOMETHING NEW LANDS ON THE TEAM

We can take this on, but something else moves. Right now it's _____ and _____. Which matters more, and what are we willing to delay?

MONTH 2 IS DONE WHEN



Every person and I agree on what good looks like, in writing.



One on ones happen every week and they own the agenda.



I asked for feedback on myself and changed something.



The team can name its top one or two priorities.



One fix is announced and underway.

MONTH 3

Make it last.

Stop being the answer to everything. Hand off real work, write things down, and show your boss what changed.

THIS MONTH

WEEK 9 **Hand off something real.** Give away work that matters, with the why and the limits.

WEEK 10 **Get it out of one head.** Write down what only one person knows how to do.

WEEK 11 **Close the loops.** Finish the fix, recheck expectations, collect the proof.

WEEK 12 **The 90 day review.** Write it up, walk your boss through it, plan next quarter.

Hand off something real.

Staying in your old work feels safe. Every hour there is an hour not spent on the new job, and your team notices which one you show up for.

THIS WEEK



Pick one thing you're still doing that someone else should own

Something that matters. A token task doesn't count.



Hand it off with the why, and the limits

30 MIN

Use the brief below.



Let the first version be worse than yours

Rescue it only if something is truly at risk.

THE HANDOFF BRIEF

The outcome, and why it matters	
Done looks like <i>Quality and timing</i>	
You decide on your own	
Check with me before	
We'll check in on <i>Dates, based on risk</i>	

SAY THIS

I'd like you to own _____ because I trust your judgment on it. You can decide _____ on your own. Check with me before _____. Let's look at it together on _____.

Get it out of one head.

Every team has something only one person knows how to do. That’s a risk to them and to you.

THIS WEEK

- ☐ **Have each person list the work only they know how to do** 15 MIN
Ask in a one on one, not a group.
- ☐ **Pick the riskiest one and give it an owner and a deadline**
The one that hurts most if that person is out for a week.
- ☐ **Write the first version down on one shared template**
Five steps, not fifty. It can be rough.
- ☐ **Have someone else follow it**
Wherever they get stuck is where the page is missing something.

WORK THAT LIVES IN ONE PERSON’S HEAD

PERSON	WORK ONLY THEY KNOW	RISK IF THEY’RE OUT	BACKUP AND DATE

AM I DOING THE THING THAT GOES WRONG?

Not letting go

- ☐ I took the work back at the first wobble
- ☐ I’m still the only person who can approve every step

IS WHAT I’M FEELING NORMAL?

The first version is slower and worse than yours?
Normal. That’s the price of someone else learning it.

Guilty handing work away? Common. It’s the job now.

Close the loops.

Finish what you started in month 1 and 2, and start collecting proof that things changed.

THIS WEEK

- ☐ **Finish the visible fix and name it again**
“Here’s what you flagged. Here’s what changed.”
- ☐ **Recheck expectations with each person** 20 MIN EACH
Is what we wrote still true? Change whatever isn’t.
- ☐ **Ask for feedback on yourself again** 5 MIN EACH
Ask once and it’s an event. Ask on a schedule and it’s a habit.
- ☐ **List what changed and who noticed** 20 MIN
You’ll need it for the review next week.

THE PROOF LIST

WHAT CHANGED	HOW I KNOW	WHO NOTICED

The 90 day review.

A clear picture of what changed, what didn't, and what's next. It isn't a graduation.

THIS WEEK

- ☐ **Write the 90 day summary** 45 MIN
One page, below.
- ☐ **Walk your boss through it** 45 MIN
Use the script on the next page.
- ☐ **Agree on next quarter with your boss** 45 MIN
Three priorities at most, each with an owner and a date.
- ☐ **Tell the team where you landed** 15 MIN
What you learned, what changed, and what's next. They helped build it.

YOUR 90 DAY SUMMARY

What I've learned	
What changed, and the proof	
What still needs attention	
What I need from you	

Walk your boss through it

Bring the summary and the proof list. Let them react before you defend anything.

SAY THIS

Here’s what I understand now that I didn’t when I started. Here’s what improved, what didn’t, and what I think we should focus on next. Where does your view differ from mine?

NEXT QUARTER’S TOP THREE

PRIORITY	OWNER	DATE
1		
2		
3		

Three at most. Anything that isn’t on this list is a decision, so say so.

THEN TELL THE TEAM

Here’s what I learned from you in the first 90 days, here’s what we changed, and here’s what we’re working on next. Thanks for being patient while I figured it out.

You built the trust you'll need later.

Nothing new to start. Here's how to know it worked.

BY DAY 90, THESE SHOULD BE TRUE

- ☐ Everyone on my team knows what good looks like, and so do I.
 - ☐ One on ones happen every week, and they lead them.
 - ☐ My boss and I agree on how I'm doing, and on next quarter.
 - ☐ I know the people my team depends on, and they know me.
 - ☐ Something real is owned by someone who isn't me.
 - ☐ At least one process lives on paper, not in one person's head.
 - ☐ The team felt one thing get better.
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NEXT

Guide 2 covers day 90 to month 6: the harder conversations. Performance, your first real conflict, your first review cycle.

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