

The First 12 Weeks are Critical

By Barbara Brown

When you begin your first job after college, your employer knows that you need some special guidance to become the type of employee the organization wants. There will be new-hire training programs, perhaps a mentor, and frequent meetings with your supervisor. However, as a seasoned professional, you may be expected to come in and be productive immediately. This expectation is not only unlikely to happen, but, can be very dangerous for you.

According HR consultants Development Dimensions International, 53% of managers and executives brought on board from outside are gone within a year. So how can you help yourself? First, if you did not get clarification during your interviews, the most critical piece of information you need is: How are you going to be evaluated? And second, but equally important, who does your evaluation. Some positions have clearly defined objectives such as: return on investment, number of new clients brought in, reports completed, project on completion schedule. But other types of tasks and other organizations have very subjective evaluation criteria. You may be evaluated on the effectiveness of your presentations, your ability to plan, customer feedback, your initiative or the perceived ease of working with you. The more subjective the criteria, the greater the challenge to you to quickly understand what the vague terms in your job description really mean to your evaluators.

The next advice nugget for you is to listen. You should be listening about five times as much as you talk. Over lunch or coffee, ask open ended questions about the work and the environment. Just like in a first grade class where the students know who can really read, in an organization most folks know who is succeeding and who is not. Find out why. If your position has objective performance criteria, you must meet those goals. If you are being sucker punched and failure is likely, let your supervisor know. This is not an opportunity to complain, but rather your goal here is to reduce surprises and seek assistance. If you talk with your supervisor about obstacles to meeting your objectives, be sure you have a plan to succeed; a plan that he or she can help you implement. Just having problems will not help you succeed.

Third, there are positive ways to stand out in an organization and negative ways. Look and act like you belong. That means not only how you dress, but also how you respond to the environment. If a task requires overtime and weekend hours, and everyone is onboard with that, don't stand out. If the senior boss is giving a pep talk or a presentation, be attentive - look like you care. Your first 12 weeks is not the time to ask senior management challenging or confrontational questions.

Finally, schedule a meeting with your supervisor at the end of 12 weeks. Come prepared with information on your successes and plans for your continued success. Ask questions about what else you need to be doing. Armed with three months experience in the company, clarify how you are being evaluated. Tell your supervisor what you believe is the performance criteria and request feedback on your understanding. If you need help, ask for it. If you succeed in your first 12 weeks, your chances of getting past that first year are many times better.