

# Leader First Impressions

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For a leader, the first impressions are most critical. Let's say you were just transferred to a new unit. What happens in the first few hours will determine your success for the next several months. First impressions stay with people until supplanted by ideas from events that play out over time.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book, *Blink*, demonstrated how human beings can size up another person in an instant. The level of trust that will prevail during the entire first year is usually set during the first week. It is crucial to get off on the right foot with people.

Unfortunately, many leaders come into a new assignment with the wrong attitude. The impressions they make mean a rocky start. Here are seven things that can help you get off on the right foot in any new position.

## 1. Learn about the culture

Don't start making changes before you assess the situation calmly. It is a mistake to come into a new job with the attitude that everything is messed up. Seek to understand the strengths and good performance that already exists. The best advice is to keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut in terms of reactions. Seek to learn, appreciate, and reinforce for the first week or so.

## 2. Establish rapport one on one

Meet with each employee in the new unit privately to chat about his or her role. Get to know the individual as a person. Be sure to put the person at ease with your demeanor, and indicate you have no hidden agenda. You will begin to form some trust between you and the person.

Asking questions about the employee's family and hobbies demonstrates that you care. Sharing some of your own stories also tends to form a basis for trust. Many new supervisors like to ask what the employee would like him or her to do or not do. This simple question often brings out issues that have been lurking in the culture before the new leader arrived.

## 3. Build trust as early as possible

When meeting a new person, the basis for trust is in the answer to five basic questions. I call these things "The five C's of trust." As a leader:

1. Are you Competent?
2. Do you have good Character and Values?
3. Are you Consistent?
4. Be Cordial
5. Show you Care about the other person

When you chat with new employees, keep these five things in mind. Work to answer all five of them as positively and quickly as you can.

#### **4. Avoid pushing ideas from your former job**

It is a good idea to refrain from bringing up the excellent policies in your prior position. Many new leaders make the mistake of saying, "In my last job we used to do this or that." It undermines the will of the people in the new unit. Individuals do not want to hear what went on in the boss' prior position a dozen times a day. It wears thin very quickly.

There is an antidote to this common problem. Early on, refer to the prior job only one time in public. Once you have played that chit, refrain from other references for at least two months. Appreciate the good things in the new area before giving a lot of suggestions.

#### **5. Observe the informal organization and cliques**

The culture of an organization is heavily influenced by the chemistry between individuals. You need to be alert to the "informal power structure." It is operating in tandem with the formal organization.

You must know who the informal leaders are and begin a process to gain their trust. The sub-culture is extremely powerful, and it is often negative. Work slowly and carefully before taking any action with a clique of individuals. Ultimately, you can make great strides working with the informal leaders. You must first develop some credibility and trust.

#### **6. Practice management by wandering around extensively until you are a known quantity**

Many new leaders make the mistake of sequestering themselves in strategic meetings early on. That habit labels them as suspect and less transparent. Be open and out there for people to interface with daily. Extra time devoted to this activity, even if it means extra working hours, pays huge dividends.

## 7. Check your body language

Let people know you are truly happy to be there. Smile! Make sure all your body language reflects that of an appreciative and interested leader. Be sincere about getting to know the ropes before making important decisions.

## Conclusion

Do these seven things during your first weeks of a new assignment. You will be on your way to a great tenure as a leader of the group. It is the first blink of an impression that makes the most difference to your future.

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