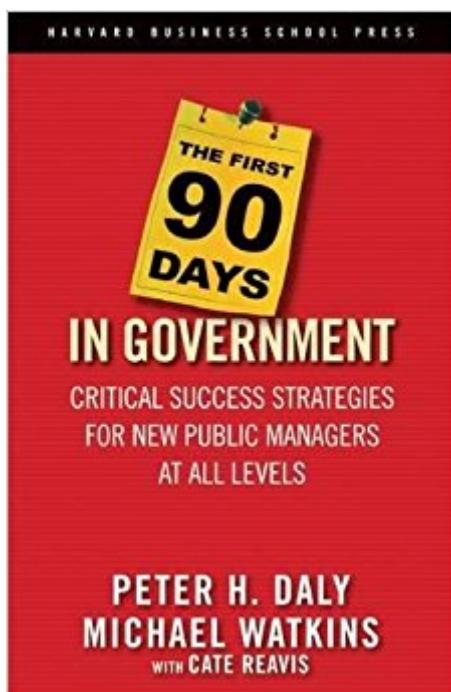


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# The First 90 Days In Government: Critical Success Strategies For New Public Managers At All Levels



## **Synopsis**

More than 250,000 public sector managers in the United States take on new positions each year and many more aspire to leadership. Each will confront special challenges; from higher public profiles to a greater number of stakeholders to volatile political environments; that will make their transitions even more challenging than in the business world. Now Michael Watkins, author of the bestselling book *The First 90 Days*, applies his proven leadership transition framework to the public sector. Watkins and coauthor Peter Daly address the crucial differences between the private and public sectors that go to the heart of how success and failure are defined, measured, and rewarded or penalized. This concise, practical book provides a roadmap that will help new government leaders at all levels accelerate their transitions by overcoming nine transition challenges, ranging from clarifying expectations to defining goals to building a team to managing personal stress. The authors also offer detailed strategies for avoiding major transition traps. *Zeroing in on the challenges faced by new government leaders, The First 90 Days in Government* is the indispensable guide for anyone seeking to lead and succeed in the public sector.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Peter Daly is a former federal executive agency head and Presidential Commission member.

Michael D. Watkins is a Professor of Practice at INSEAD and founder of Genesis Advisers, a leadership and strategy consultancy. He is the author of the international bestseller *The First 90*

## 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels.

Information has help me do my job easier.

[Updated February 2008] This book is a partial rewrite of the earlier 90 Days book that applies to commercial ventures. While the initial scenario on page 1 and 2 are right on the mark, the rest of the book basically says: define the role and mission, gather the support and resources, and then go off and achieve. Or, as the initial scenario suggests, you may find yourself marginalized and drifting. The 90-day approach will probably work if the agency you are joining has a good focus on its mission, a reasonably good management environment, and some things that it thinks need to get done in a bit of a hurry. Sort of like a capable and nimble private sector company. Of course, there are some agencies like that; maybe even a lot. But not all, by any means, and if the agency you are in is not one of the nimble ones then you need to take a completely different approach to the first 90 days. Experience in several real examples of both types of agency over a couple of decades offers the following advice: make sure you know which kind of agency you are in before hitting the after-burners. You may find that you have not properly calculated the back-blast area, and rather than soaring off to a glittering height you will just turn yourself into a crispy critter. You can recover from a slow start; you may not be able to recover from being perceived as a crazy person engaged in suicide missions. As the book says, to be successful you must know what are the important things, how does my boss operate, and what is the organizational culture? If you haven't figured these things out before taking the job, and government hiring practices often do short-change the interviewing process, then you had better try to do so as soon as you come on board - but it will not be easy. Thanks to the never-ending cycle of meetings, bloody meetings, you may well get less time, and far less direct or sincere conversations, with your boss and peers in your first 90 days on the job than you will during the 2 or 3 hours of interview process. So, if you can, get as much of the STAR process done as possible before taking the job. The upside of the currently overloaded background check process is that once you are selected as the candidate you may have 2 or 3 months - hey! 90 days! - in which to talk more with your future boss and peers. Unfortunately, having what you might consider to be an "open" or useful discussion may be a bit tricky. First, a sincere discussion of the REAL constraints and objectives may in fact be taboo - if anyone even really knows what they are. Having no bottom line, objectives in government agencies can be pretty vague, and the laws that the Congress writes for agencies to carry out are often deliberately vague and self-contradictory. Second, and you may have a hard time with this coming from the private

sector, often failure IS an option; the unspoken strategy may well be to fail on purpose so as to get more money.Third, you must understand that in many government situations there are few, if any, TRULY pressing deadlines, even if they ARE enshrined in law or Presidential orders. Not too many dates will get anyone fired (it is not like missing a major new product roll-out or failing to turn in a major contract proposal). If there are any real glass balls, your staff and boss will be clear on that, and your staff will know how to meet the need and will be working on it already. The last thing you need to do is disrupt that.Sometimes your managers are very clear on things that need to happen quickly. Note the plural: make sure there are at least two levels of commitment to the "goal", because even in government, managers and executives come and go, leaving you stranded on the beach with their objectives. "Very clear" and "commitment" means "calls the other stakeholders in to emphasize how important this thing is and they need to cooperate with the new manager in making it happen", and otherwise displaying actual commitment and investment of political capital, rather than platitudes or giving you 1:1 instructions (which nobody else knows about). If you get that clear commitment, by all means go with the 90-days-to-success route in this book.But if that does not happen, then you are better served to watch and wait. If the agency doesn't seem to share your focus on pressing needs, it may well be that these are not seen as serious goals. If the office does not really want you to go in a direction, regardless of what they may have said to the contrary, you will hurt only yourself trying to achieve progress at private-sector speed. Even if the environment is somewhat supportive, you will still be lucky to do in 90 weeks what you would have thought you could do in 90 days - and the funny thing is, nobody will expect you to do even that much.So, if the office you are in does not seem to have any pressing goals and deadlines, it is entirely possible that the best thing to do for the first 90 days will seem to you to be VERY LITTLE. Not exactly nothing; just don't press forward relentlessly to accomplish goals that are in fact illusory. Better to spend time meeting with the people you can assume you will have to interact with, and enlist them as your friends for battles you have yet to identify. Over time you will find out what (if anything) is considered important.So, what about the book? Perhaps this book ought to be entitled "The 90 Days Before Getting Into a Public Sector Job". The STAR system is ideal for structuring your half of the discussion to learn about the styles of the existing executives and what it is exactly that they think you will be expected to do. If you get solid and consistent answers to the STAR questions then you might be dealing with a mission-driven organization (in which case, follow the steps in this book). If you don't seem to get any traction on the STAR process during the interview period, and you cannot seem to get much more clarification in the 90 days before you do come on board, then maybe your new situation will be more political than performance-oriented. By political I do not mean "partisan"

but "driven in a direction that is defined only by the current status of shifting internal coalitions". In that case, you might rethink whether this is the way you like to work, and if not, bale out before it is too late. Then you can use this book again while assessing your next interviews. Assuming you still want the political job - some people thrive on this - you will only drive yourself (and everyone else) crazy trying to define a plan and solid objectives to strive for. In that case, forget the STAR system and focus on the coalition-building activities discussed all-too-briefly in this book. A small investment in a different book ("The Prince" comes to mind) might also be handy. If it is too late, and you are a just-get-the-job-done person who has wandered into an office-politics environment, then let us hope that by the time you figure it out you haven't annoyed too many people by trying to get impossible things done. Then it is perfectly safe to sit back, take a deep breath, and evaluate. Take all the time you need. 90 days is a blink of an eye to these people. Chat, visit, whatever you have to do to figure out what value people will LET you add and then work out how to do that. If this ends up being more confining than your personal energy or professional ethic can stand, then you might have to consider moving on to an organization that is more in tune with what motivates you. But - hey - didn't you learn anything? Not too fast. Survive your probationary period so you can be a "Status" candidate. Then, when you find another agency, or an office within your agency, that may better suit your style, you'll be eligible to apply, and you can use this book to guide your points of interest in those interviews.

Whether you're a new or experienced manager/leader, this is a great book to help you jump start a new assignment.

I joined a newly formed state agency and this book helped me diagnose situations and strategize on ways to find success on a very amorphous environment during a legislative session.

I highly recommend this book, especially for individuals just moving into management roles. It is a good refresher for those promoting to a higher management level.

I originally ordered this book because I thought it would help out my husband in his new job, but it turned out it was a better fit for me, and I read it cover to cover three times! Starting a new job as a coordinator for a state athletic organization, this book has been a lifesaver! It has fit my situation perfectly and the advice is always right on track. This has good info for anyone who reports to several different people with somewhat conflicting goals, and has a vocal public constituency, even

if it's not a government job per se. Thanks for the assistance for the great start to my new job. I'm now 6 mo. in and it is going very well. I credit much of that to the organizational tips from this book. In response to the review that says a person should have all this figured out BEFORE taking the job, that would be ideal. However, I think my situation may be typical - the entire picture is often not laid out until after job is actually begun. I think that is especially true when it comes to learning the office politics and "who's who" in the job. Those are in-house secrets are not routinely shared in the interview. My bosses, although friendly, gave me precious little hard info before the hire. It is very much a "create your own job description" within the framework of the larger goals of the organization. I had to actively work during those first few months to flesh out many of the concepts mentioned in this book. I would have stepped on many land mines in the process if I hadn't been forewarned. Also, *Shaping the Game* (Negotiation skills) book by Watkins is excellent as well! I bought both at the same time.

The advice in this book for a new mgmt position is extremely helpful. The author identifies different types of mgmt needs and addresses each with grace and courage. I enjoyed the examples and the positive outlook...

Many private sector people have great trouble coming to terms with the public sector. If they have been quite successful in the private sector they often have even more trouble adapting and shifting into the new environment. The first part of this book provides a good insight into the realities of this fairly tough environment - and it is only getting harder. I have made a transition into senior public sector management and found this very useful, I also recommend it for those stepping up within the public sector.

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