What New CEOs Get Wrong Early

Idea In Short

New chief executives face intense pressure to deliver visible change quickly, yet a well-known consulting firm's research argues the most consequential planning should happen before a new CEO's first official day, not after. Its guidance boils down to three core ideas: plan the transformation before starting, fund the effort through disciplined early cost reduction, and recognize that transformation itself takes ten distinct forms worth naming precisely rather than treating as one vague catchall term.

A Narrow Window to Prove Real Change

New chief executives are typically brought in at genuinely critical junctures in a company's history, moments carrying heightened expectations that something substantial will happen, well beyond incremental improvement or simply competent management.1 A well-known consulting firm's research argues there is only a short window of opportunity to establish real momentum, and the greater risk facing new leaders is hesitating or acting too timidly rather than moving too aggressively.

Planning Starts Before the Badge Arrives

The research's most striking recommendation is temporal: a genuine change agenda should take shape roughly a hundred days before a new CEO's official start date, not afterward. Waiting until after formally starting the role to begin developing a thoughtful, strategic point of view leaves too little runway during the critical early period when stakeholder attention and patience are both at their highest. Rallying the organization, securing early quick wins, and holding people accountable all matter too, though these follow-on steps are considerably less surprising than the core recommendation to start planning well before officially starting the job.

Funding Transformation Through Early Discipline

A useful way to frame any major transformation is across short, medium and long time horizons, and the short-term horizon carries the most immediate weight. Early, relatively low-risk moves, simplifying organizational structure, reducing unnecessary costs, and improving return on assets, generate the capital and organizational bandwidth needed to fund the larger, more demanding transformation work that follows. Layoffs, cost reduction and divesting underperforming assets often represent decisions an organization already understood were overdue, even if nobody had yet forced the issue.

A Structured Approach to Cutting Cost

The research outlines roughly a dozen distinct approaches to reducing cost and freeing up resources, several of which overlap or reinforce each other directly; organizational simplification, for instance, often connects naturally with outsourcing decisions and broader personnel cost reduction. Approaching cost reduction as a structured menu of related options, rather than a single blunt instrument, tends to produce a more coherent and defensible plan.

Transformation Deserves a Precise Definition

The word transformation gets used loosely across client conversations and business media alike, frequently describing almost anything long-term and difficult without much precision. The research offers a considerably sharper definition: a profound change in a company's strategy, business model, organization, culture, people or processes, representing not incremental adjustment but a fundamental reset producing sustainable, quantum-level performance improvement that genuinely alters a company's future trajectory.2

Ten Distinct Flavors, Not One Catchall Term

Rather than treating transformation as a single undifferentiated concept, the research sorts it into ten distinct categories, each requiring somewhat different tools, timelines and success measures. Naming precisely which type of transformation an organization is actually pursuing, rather than defaulting to the word as a vague catchall, sharpens both planning and internal communication considerably.

Communication Sustains a Multi-Year Effort

Large-scale transformation initiatives frequently run three to four years, long enough that people involved can genuinely grow confused, exhausted or simply bored well before the effort concludes. Getting managers genuinely bought in, carefully scripting core messages, and maintaining a steady drumbeat of visible progress throughout the effort cannot be overstated in importance. These extended initiatives function remarkably like a multi-year political campaign, requiring leaders to travel the organization repeatedly, refine their message continuously, and actively stage moments that build enthusiasm and genuine advocacy rather than passive compliance.3

A Lesson That Applies Below the CEO Level

None of this planning discipline is exclusive to chief executives. Any new leader stepping into a senior role, a division head, a department manager, or a project lead inheriting a struggling initiative, faces a version of the same narrow window and the same temptation to wait until settling in before forming a real point of view. Arriving with a genuine plan already in hand, rather than improvising one after the fact, applies at nearly every level of leadership transition.

The Core Message for Incoming Leaders

The research's summarizing message is direct: incoming leaders need to act immediately rather than easing into the role gradually. Laying genuine groundwork in advance positions a new leader to lead from the front with real clarity of vision, concrete objectives, and the practical tools needed to succeed from day one rather than scrambling to develop a plan only after arriving.

- 1Chief executive officer
- 2Organizational transformation
- 3Change management

Summary

New CEOs face a narrow window where stakeholders expect real change, and the biggest risk is acting too slowly or too timidly rather than too boldly. Planning a transformation before day one, funding it through disciplined early cost takeout, and naming precisely

which of several distinct transformation types is actually underway all separate leaders who deliver from leaders who merely manage.