

The New ED Survival Guide

Your first 90 days as Executive Director — what to do, in what order

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The first 90 days of an executive director's tenure set the trajectory for everything that follows. Most new EDs spend those days learning on the fly — putting out fires, trying to understand the culture, and hoping they don't miss something critical. This guide gives you a framework so nothing critical gets missed.

DAYS 1–30 — LISTEN & LEARN

Action	What This Means
■ Meet every staff member 1-on-1	Ask: What's working? What's not? What do you wish leadership knew?
■ Review last 3 years of financials	Budget vs. actual, audit findings, reserve balance, and restricted fund status.
■ Read every active grant agreement	Know what you're obligated to deliver, to whom, and by when.
■ Map the compliance calendar	Every report, renewal, certification, and deadline for the next 12 months.
■ Identify the top 5 operational risks	What keeps your staff up at night? What's closest to breaking?
■ Meet your top 5 funders and partners	Introduce yourself. Ask what they need from you. Listen more than you talk.

DAYS 31–60 — ASSESS & PRIORITIZE

Action	What This Means
■ Complete the Nonprofit Operations Health Check (Tool 1)	Objective baseline of your operational state across 10 areas.
■ Map staff capacity against function ownership (Tool 5)	Who owns what? Where are the gaps and the overloaded roles?
■ Audit your partner network (Tool 9)	Active vs. inactive. MOUs on file. Emergency partners identified.
■ Draft your first board report using the template (Tool 8)	Establishes your reporting style and sets the board's expectations early.
■ Identify your top 3 operational priorities	Write them down. Share them with your board. Own them publicly.
■ Set your first 90-day milestones	Specific, measurable, with a named owner and a due date.

DAYS 61–90 — BUILD & COMMUNICATE

Action	What This Means
■ Present your 90-day assessment to the board	What you found, what you're prioritizing, and what you need from them.
■ Launch or update your top-priority SOP	Show staff that you're building infrastructure, not just talking about it.
■ Establish your monthly reporting cadence	Board report, staff meeting rhythm, and partner check-in schedule.
■ Address your highest compliance risk	Don't wait. The cost of finding it later is always higher.
■ Communicate your leadership style to staff	How you make decisions, how you want to receive feedback, what you expect.
■ Celebrate one early win publicly	Culture is built in small moments. Find one and name it.

The EDs who struggle in their first year usually didn't do too little in the first 90 days — they did too much of the wrong things. The listen-assess-build sequence works. Skipping the listening phase to jump to building is the most common mistake. You can't fix what you don't fully understand.

Ready to close the gaps?

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