

THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER SIX

The First Ninety Days

Five practices set in order, from reading the week to measuring what the team can do alone.

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Chapter Six of The Manager's Week. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-managers-week (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989102).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Five practices set in order, from reading the week to measuring what the team can do alone. It is a quarter to eight on a Monday, and the head of a department of some sixty people has arrived before anyone else, which she does not usually do. She has six managers reporting to her, each with a team of their own, and a manager above her who sits on the executive. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has recognised her week in the first, the charge nurses in her own deputies in the second, herself in the glass room of the third, the corner of the screen in the fourth and, most uncomfortably, the blank line of the handover note in the fifth. She has a notebook, a coffee and her calendar for the week, which has thirty-eight entries in it.

CHAPTER SIX

The First Ninety Days

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The First Ninety Days

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Monday, day one

It is a quarter to eight on a Monday, and the head of a department of some sixty people has arrived before anyone else, which she does not usually do. She has six managers reporting to her, each with a team of their own, and a manager above her who sits on the executive. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has recognised her week in the first, the charge nurses in her own deputies in the second, herself in the glass room of the third, the corner of the screen in the fourth and, most uncomfortably, the blank line of the handover note in the fifth. She has a notebook, a coffee and her calendar for the week, which has thirty-eight entries in it.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these first weeks are described in the research the earlier chapters read and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. This chapter is written to her, and to anyone in her position: a person who manages, often a person who manages managers, and who wants to begin. It sets out the first ninety days in order: who is involved, what each step needs, roughly how long it takes, the decisions that change the result, the mistakes made at each step and how to see them early, how to read what comes back, and what to do on the first Monday. The working pages it refers to are gathered in Chapter 7.

Two things should be said before the plan. The first is that it can be misread as a programme, and it should not be. Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, in the book on management that the earlier chapters have quoted most, warns against exactly this, in a sentence that a ninety-day plan should be honest enough to print:[35] "The answer isn't a technique. It's not a set of best practices or a leadership framework you can implement in ninety days." What ninety days can do is establish five practices and show whether they are being kept. The orientation underneath them, the canon's view that a manager's work is to grow people who can do the work, takes longer, and the practices are how it begins. The second is that the order matters more than any single step. The chapters were written in the order a reader meets the problem. The ninety days run in the order the practices depend on each other.

Why this order

The five practices in this book are the week read back (Chapter 1), the span counted (Chapter 2), the note upward (Chapter 3), the work returned (Chapter 4) and the team measured by what it does without its manager (Chapter 5). In the first ninety days they run in this sequence: read the week and count the span together, then change the week, then reshape the span, then carry knowledge up, then return the work, then measure and test.

The reasoning is simple. Every later practice spends hours the manager does not yet have. Returning work to a team takes a weekly review, the patience to let a first decision stand and the time to write down the answers that live in one head. Carrying knowledge up takes an hour a decision. A manager who tries either inside the week of Chapter 1 will find no room for it, and will conclude that the practice does not work. So

the first change is to the week itself, and the first change to the week is to read it, because a manager who protects her mornings without having read her week will protect the wrong ones.

The span comes next because the week cannot be changed much while the structure keeps writing it. A manager holding seventy-four people, or six managers who each bring her every hard case, will find her protected mornings filled again within a month. The note upward follows once there is time to listen, and the returned work follows the note because the two share a skill: hearing what a team knows and treating it as information. The measurement is agreed last, because it measures what the other four have produced. Its first move is made on day ten, though: the history against which any change will be read is copied and fixed before anything changes, for the reason Chapter 5 gives.

The canon puts the cost of getting this wrong in four words that apply to every layer of the department: "Disempowerment is a lineage." Managers manage the way they were managed. A head of department who changes her own week, her own span and her own habit of answering will find that her six managers begin to change theirs, often before she has asked. One who asks them to change theirs while keeping her own will find they do exactly what she does.

Who is involved

Four roles carry the first ninety days, and they should be named before anything else is done.

The manager is the person whose week, span and team are being looked at. In this chapter she manages managers, so the practices run at two levels at once: in her own week, and in the weeks of the six people who report to her. Expect it to take three to four hours a week of her time beyond her ordinary work in the first month, most of it spent reading and talking, and less after that. Much of it is time she will recover from her own week within the month.

Her own manager is the person who wrote some of her hours without meaning to and who decides the structure above her. He does not need to do much. He needs to know what she is doing and why, to read the reading-back of her week in the first fortnight, and to reply to the notes upward when they come. A manager who begins without telling her own manager will find the first hours she protects quietly reclaimed from above.

A partner from finance or human resources holds the records the measurement will later read: departures and which were regretted, internal moves and promotions, absence, the dates on which new joiners first worked unsupervised, and whatever measures the team's own work. The partner's first job, before day eleven, is to copy and date one to two years of each. Later, the partner will either do the calculation or find someone with no stake in it who can.

The convenor keeps the record: the diary and its reading, the span count, the notes upward and their replies, the classes of work returned and the decisions made inside them, the log kept during the manager's

absence. Often this is a deputy or one of the six managers. The convenor needs about an hour a week, and the one quality that matters is that people trust the convenor to write down what happened rather than what the manager would like to have happened.

One decision changes the result more than any other at this stage. It is whether the manager shows her reading-back to her own manager, including the hours he wrote. The canon's book on executive perception asks leaders to imagine the middle of their organisation, and the most useful single act a person in the middle can do is to make that imagining unnecessary, by showing the view.

Days one to ten: reading before changing

The first ten days change nothing visible. They gather four inputs, and the manager gathers three of them herself.

The first is the week. For one ordinary week she keeps the diary of Chapter 1, in quarter hours, at the end of each block, with the three marks: who asked, who else could have done it, whether it moved one of her few written priorities. In the same week, on the same page, she keeps the list of Chapter 4: every question or decision brought to her, one line each, marked *T* or *A*. Keeping both on one page is easier than keeping them separately, because most of the *A*s arrive as blocks in the diary.

The second is the span. In the same week she counts the four spans of Chapter 2 for her own position: the formal span, the daily span, the working span (the different people who brought her something that needed her), and the unheld span (the people she is responsible for and has had no working contact with in a month). For a head of department the formal span is six; the working span is usually much larger, because the managers' people find their way to her, and the count often shows it.

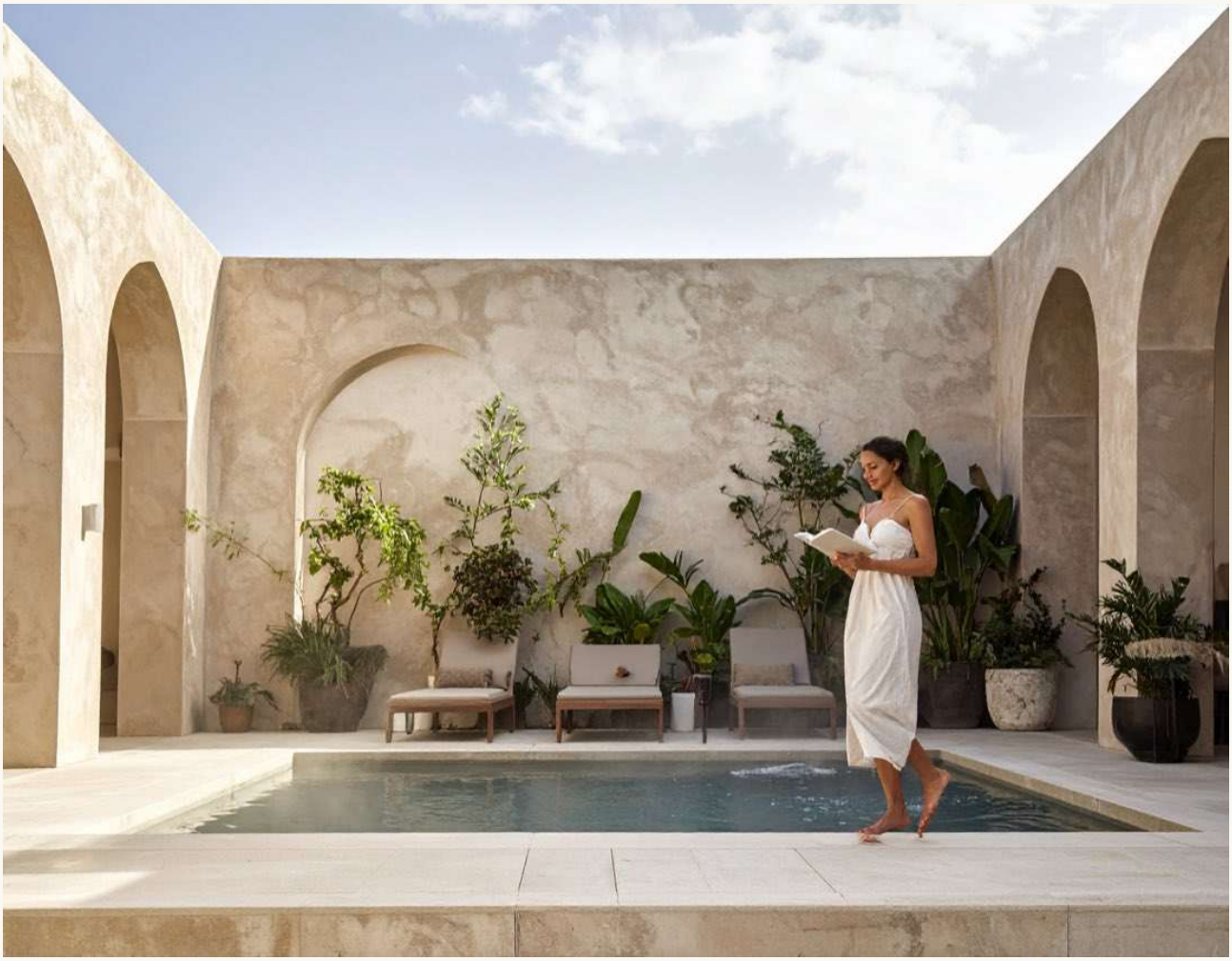
The third is the decisions of the last quarter that waited for her. With the convenor, she lists the decisions in her area that took longer than they should have, and for each one asks, privately and without blame, where it waited. Most managers who do this find that a good number waited in their own diary.

The fourth is the history. Before day eleven, the partner from finance or human resources copies out one to two years of each record that bears on the department's people and work, dates the copy and files it unaltered. Nothing is decided about it yet. It is the history the measurement conversation will read in the last month, fixed before any practice could move it.

At the end of the ten days the manager writes, on a single page, a first guess at where her capacity is going and where it is being held up: a sentence on the week, a sentence on the span, a sentence on the decisions that wait. It is labelled as a guess and kept for day ninety.

What goes wrong at this stage. The commonest mistake is to keep the diary for a day and call it a week; a single day is always unusual. The second is to start changing the week in the middle of reading it, which makes the reading meaningless. The third is to announce an initiative. A manager who tells her department

she is starting a programme on capacity will find her week full of people asking about it. The early sign is a question in a corridor: *what is this called?* If people are asking what it is called, it has been named, and the manager should stop naming it.



Days eleven to thirty: changing the week

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Days eleven to thirty: changing the week

In the third week the manager reads her week back, with the convenor, using the sorting of Chapter 7, and then she does four things in order.

She tells the department, in a sentence or two at a meeting she already holds, what the reading showed and what she is going to change. She protects two or three longer blocks a week for the work only her position can do, and says when she is reachable instead. She hands one recurring piece of work to a named person, with the authority to decide, chosen because the diary showed her presence added little. And she looks

hard at the standing meetings: for each one, the question is when it last changed a decision, and what would be lost if it met half as often with a written note between.

On the same days she shows the reading-back to her own manager, with the hours he wrote marked plainly and without complaint, and asks him one question: whether there are any of those hours he would rather she spent differently. Most managers who do this are surprised by the answer.

The decision that changes the result is what she protects the blocks for. The temptation is to fill them with the work she enjoys or the work that is most overdue. The diary is the guide: the work that only her position can do, which in a head of department is usually the thinking that needs the whole department in view, the conversations with her own manager and her peers, and the conversations with whichever of her six managers is ready for something larger.

What goes wrong. She protects the blocks and then gives them up for the first meeting that asks. She cancels standing meetings without asking what they did, and loses the one that was quietly holding two teams together. She hands work to the strongest person rather than the one who would learn most. The early signs are visible in the diary itself, kept again for one week at the end of the month. If the protected blocks have been filled, the reason will be written beside them, and it is usually a request from above or a question from below that belonged somewhere else. Both are the subjects of the next steps.

How to read what comes back. By day thirty, the second diary week should show some longer blocks used for the work only she can do, fewer hours asked for by people who could have decided without her, and at least one standing meeting changed. It will not show a quiet week. It is not meant to.

Days twenty-one to fifty: reshaping the span

Overlapping with the changed week, the manager turns to the span: first her own, then, with each of her six managers, theirs.

For her own, the count from the first ten days usually shows that the managers' people are reaching her directly, often because her managers are too stretched to hold them, or because she has been answering. For each of the six, the manager and the convenor run the same count in an hour: the four spans, the people outside the chart, and Gulick's three questions about how varied the work is, how much time the manager has, and how far apart the people are in space and hours. The arithmetic of Graicunas is used once, if at all, to show a director why a span of twelve people who work closely together is larger than it looks.

The count usually shows one of three things, and each has its own answer, as Chapter 2 sets out. A span too wide for the work, which is a structural decision for the manager's own manager. Relationships held by the wrong person, which she can often move herself. Or informal leaders already doing the work without time or authority, in which case the answer is to make the structure true: name the groups they already hold, give them protected time, and give them the decisions they are already being asked to take.

The decision that changes the result is who holds the newest person in each group. The newest person in any span is the one most likely to be unheld, and the one whose first months most decide whether she stays. Every new group drawn should have a named answer to that question.

What goes wrong. The count is taken from the chart. The new groups are drawn without asking the people in them, and split pairs who have worked together for years. Informal leaders are given groups without time. The conversation with the director becomes a request for headcount and is refused before the evidence is read. The early sign is that the people asked to hold groups say yes too quickly, which usually means they think they have no choice. The manager should ask each of them, privately, what they will stop doing to make the time.

How to read what comes back. By day fifty, each of the six managers should have a count of their own span on one page, and at least one structural change should have been made or proposed with the evidence attached.

Days thirty-one to sixty: carrying knowledge up

By the second month there is usually a significant decision from above to carry down: a change to a process, a budget, a structure, a system. The manager uses the first one to begin the habit of Chapter 3, and asks each of her six managers to do the same with their teams.

She carries the decision down first, in person, in her own words: what was decided, why, what she thinks of it, and what she does not yet know. She asks the question on the card, *what do you know about this that the people who decided it might not?*, and listens. She sorts what comes back into forecasts, preferences and grievances, honours all three in the room and carries the forecasts up, within a week, on one page with three headings: what the team understood and accepts, what it will cost them, and what they know that the decision may not have accounted for. She asks for one thing, a reply. And she names the people who saw what the decision missed.

The decision that changes the result is speed. A forecast that arrives while the design of a change is still open is information. The same forecast a month later is a complaint. The week is the practical limit.

What goes wrong. The decision is carried down by email. Nothing is carried up because the decision is made. Everything is carried up, unsorted, and the director reads it as resistance. The director does not reply. The early sign of the last is plain, and the manager's answer is to send the note anyway for three weeks and then raise the habit, with the unanswered notes in hand, in her own next conversation with her manager. The canon's governance chapter describes an experiment in its own terms, and the same spirit fits here: "The commitment is not to succeed — it is to *learn*."

How to read what comes back. By day sixty, the convenor's record should hold two or three notes upward from the manager and some from her six managers, with their replies, and at least one decision from above that changed in its design because of what a note carried.

Days forty-one to seventy: returning the work

With the week changed and the span reshaped, there is room for the practice that most changes what the department can do without her. The manager takes the list of *A*s from the first ten days and groups them into kinds. For each kind, at a meeting with the people who will hold it, she says the four things of Chapter 4: the decision is now theirs; here is the limit and what lies outside it; here is who to ask when a case is unclear; and a reasonable decision made inside the limit will be backed, including when it turns out to be wrong. She writes down the answers to the commonest technical questions on a page the team can correct. And she sets a short review at the end of each week for the hard cases.

Her six managers do the same with their own lists, and the manager asks each of them, at the end of the first month, which class of decision they returned and what happened to the first one they would have made differently.

The decision that changes the result is what the manager does with the first returned decision she would have made differently. If she reverses it, she has returned nothing. If she lets it stand where it can stand and takes it to the review, asking what it teaches about the limit, she has returned the work and the learning with it.

What goes wrong. A decision is returned without a limit, and the team either freezes or gives everything away. A decision is returned without the promise of backing, and the questions keep coming. The manager returns the questions she dislikes and keeps the ones she enjoys. Her own manager goes on bringing questions in a returned class directly to her, and undoes the design from above. And for the newest people the limit is set as wide as for the rest, which is the abandonment the canon warns of. The early signs are in the list, kept again for a week at the end of the period: if the *A*s in a returned class have not fallen, something is keeping the risk where it was.

How to read what comes back. By day seventy the list should be shorter, the page of technical answers should have been corrected at least once by the team, and the review should have moved at least one limit.



Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring and testing

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Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring and testing

In the last month two things happen, and the second depends on the first.

The first is the measurement conversation of Chapter 5. The partner from finance or human resources leads it. The manager, one or two of her six managers, someone who speaks for the people whose work is being measured, and whoever will do or check the calculation are in the room. The manager's own manager attends and says little. The conversation reads the history fixed before day eleven and agrees, on one page, the records that will be read (departures and which were regretted, internal moves and promotions, time to independence for new joiners, decisions made below the manager and how they held), the second measure that travels with each, the things that move the numbers for reasons nobody controls and how each will be allowed for, who calculates and who checks, and how the result will be shown to the department. It usually takes two meetings of ninety minutes.

The second is the test. Some time in the last month the manager takes a week away, or a fortnight if she can, with a handover written in draft three weeks before and shown to the people who will hold her decisions, limits on one page, one stated reason to be rung, and a log kept by her managers of every decision they made that they would normally have brought to her. She does not read her email. If leave is not possible in the period, a week in which she withdraws from every decision not on the list of her own is the next best thing, and is recorded as such.

The decision that changes the result is what she does with the log on her return. She reads it, takes the decisions she would have made differently to the next review, and reverses nothing that can stand. The log goes into the record beside the history, and is kept again each time she is away.

What goes wrong. The baseline is taken from a bad recent period, because it makes the gain look larger. An adjustment is proposed after results are known. A single measure is used alone. Internal moves out of the department are counted as losses. The calculation is done privately and announced. And the manager reads her email during the week away, which tests nothing. The early sign of most of these is the same: someone in the measurement conversation goes quiet. The manager's job at that step is to notice who has stopped speaking.

What this step does not settle is how a measured gain is then shared with the people who produced it: the proportions, the timing, the thresholds and the terms. Those depend on the organisation, its people and its history; they are decided with the people who will be covered, and for an organisation working with Luminous Prosperity they are the substance of the engagement, not of a book. What the first ninety days can do is make that later decision honest, by producing a gain both sides already believe.

Day ninety: reading what you have

The manager and the convenor meet on day ninety with the first-guess page from day ten, the two diary weeks, the span counts, the notes upward and their replies, the list of returned work and the decisions made inside it, the log of the week away, and the signed measurement page.

They ask a short list of questions, in order. Where was the first guess right, and where wrong? How much of the week is now spent on the work only the position can do, and what filled the protected blocks when they were filled? Which spans changed, and who now holds the newest people? Which decisions from above changed because a note carried something up in time? Which classes of decision now sit with the team, and how did the first ones hold? What did the department do during the week away, and what did the manager learn from the log? And then the question that matters most for the next ninety days: which of the six managers have begun to change their own weeks, and which have not?

What not to conclude is as important. Ninety days are too short to say the department's capacity has changed; they are long enough to say whether the practices are being kept. Departures and promotions

move slowly, and one quiet quarter is not yet a gain. And a department that ran perfectly during the week away may have had an unusually quiet week, which is why the log is kept every time.

The canon asks a manager a question in its introduction that fits day ninety better than any measure: "Can you embrace the mastery of becoming increasingly unnecessary?" Ninety days will not answer it. They will show whether the answer has begun to change.

What to do on Monday

If the whole of this chapter is too much to begin with, three things can be done on the first Monday, and none of them needs anyone's permission.

Keep a diary of today, at the end of each block, with one mark beside each entry: who asked for it.

Each time someone brings you a question today, write it down, and mark whether they could have answered it themselves if they had known they were allowed to.

And look at your calendar for next week and find one block, of two hours or more, for the work only your position can do. Write one word in it, and tell the people who would otherwise fill it when you will be reachable instead.

The canon's book on management ends its opening with a sentence that is uncomfortable to read on a Monday, because it removes the comfort of thinking that a busy week is a neutral one: "Every day, in every interaction, you are either growing people or you are not." The ninety days are a way of finding out which.

Monday, day ninety-one

It is a quarter to eight on a Monday, and the head of department is not the first in; two of her managers are already at their desks. Her calendar has twenty-nine entries. Two mornings have a single word in them. The standing meeting on Wednesdays now happens on alternate Wednesdays, with a page between. On the shared drive there is a page of answers that her team has corrected eleven times, and in the convenor's folder a log of nineteen decisions from the week she was away.

None of these has a name. Nobody has announced anything. She opens the notebook, writes what she is least sure about this week, and goes to find out.

References

1. Sources for this chapter: The practices and their sources are those of Chapters 1 to 5: Mintzberg, Tengblad and Bandiera and colleagues on managerial time, Perlow on interrupted work, Graicunas, Gulick, Meier and Bohte and the nursing studies of McCutcheon and Meyer and colleagues on span, Floyd and Wooldridge, Huy, Mollick and Anicich and Hirsh on the middle, Heifetz, Wageman and Hackman on returning work, and Project Oxygen, Lazear, Shaw and Stanton, and Hoffman and Tadelis on what managers build; full references are in those chapters' notes; Santa Anna, A. *Empowerment-Driven Management*, "Why Management Is a Developmental Art", "The Cost of Disempowering Management", "The Manager's Inner Landscape" and "The Ultimate Measure". The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *Conscious Governance Models*, on experiments and learning reviews. The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *Executive Presence Cultivation*, "Exercise 3: The Position Rotation". The Luminous Developmental Canon; The time estimates in this chapter are planning guides from practice, not findings of a study; adjust them to the organisation.

The First Ninety Days

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