

# The First 100 Days of a New EMS Leader

---

 [emsworld.com/node/214482](http://emsworld.com/node/214482)

## Leadership

By Matthew R. Streger, Esq., MPA, NRP Sep 23, 2016

## Print Version

*Presidential candidates often talk about what they'd do in their first hundred days. Should new EMS leaders place a similar emphasis on their earliest days in office?*



You never get a second chance to make a first impression, or so the saying goes. For a leader the first 100 days in a new position can make or break you. It is during this honeymoon period that, according to tradition, your initial accomplishments are evaluated and your success as a leader is measured. But looking solely at accomplishments during this phase may not set you up for long-term success.

Regardless of what new role you assume—as a supervisor, manager or executive—you will need to take concrete steps to learn the position, establish priorities, get to know your team and get to work. Failing to take certain steps along the way can have significant negative impact on your long-term viability as a leader.

Whether you are being promoted from within your organization or coming from the outside to a new department or unit, the biggest trap you can fall into is assuming you know what's going on. EMS leaders are take-charge, confident men and women, and you would not be accepting this new role if you were not in that mold. But remember, confidence needs to be tempered by humility and an understanding that you do not know everything.

A huge part of the initial time in your new role concerns this learning curve, but do not use this knowledge gap as any kind of excuse. Instead use it as a tool for getting to know the areas in your system with which you're less familiar, and keep in mind that these gaps do exist. Most important, remember that assumptions you make about your knowledge base or the "way things work" will almost certainly come back to bite you.

## **Key Initial Steps**

There are some concrete steps you can take during your first 100 days that will make the path ahead easier. First is to get to know the people in your organization. This sounds deceptively simple, but it is anything but. You should sit with your team members, one on one, and learn about them. Many new leaders will use this opportunity to establish their authority and priorities, but this is actually your best (and sometimes only) chance to learn about these people as people. What motivates them? What are their aspirations? What do they need to

succeed? What kind of person are they outside of work? What kind of environment will make them thrive? This is an incredible chance to connect with your team members and establish areas of commonality.

Getting to know people does not end with your direct reports. Use this same skill with everyone you meet. Share from your life and experiences to establish areas of common ground and get to know the people you work with. Getting to know what makes people tick will help you be a leader, rather than just a manager, and help establish an environment of trust. Your employees may not always like what you say or do, but they should understand that your word means something and you have reasons for the decisions you make.

The second step, which is directly linked to the first, is to get out and be seen. We are all doing less with more, and especially during your first 100 days, you are going to be overwhelmed. Do not use this excuse to hide in your office and start digging through the pile. Your success as a leader is directly linked to the people you work with, so establish blocks of time to get out of your office and into the work environment, and do not let anything preempt this time. Ride on an ambulance or sit in the dispatch center. Go out with the supervisor and see what he or she faces.

This sounds simple, but few new leaders take this step, and it's hardwired to the recommendations above. Getting out into the job space will help you learn what you don't know about the job and see the actual issues that face your staff each day. There are probably many parts of the job people have accepted as normal and unchanging but that could be easily altered with a new vantage point and a little effort.

#### Continue Reading

If you are in the public eye when you do this, consider uniforming yourself identically to the staff so you do not stand out. It will put them more at ease and not make it look to the public like you're checking up on a crew.

Finally, getting out and doing the job will help establish some credibility with your staff, who often think the people above them have lost their skills or are out of touch. When you are out with your staff, they will learn that you have their backs, sometimes literally.

#### **A Few Easy Wins**

It may not be obvious, but the key to all of this is to listen. As new leaders our first instinct is to talk to people—to tell them about our background, why they should follow us, what our goals are, what our management style is. Yet the real key to getting to know your job, staff and strategic environment is to listen to what other people tell you. There is a famous quote, attributed to various leaders from Lyndon Johnson to Mohandas Gandhi, that says, "Only talk when it improves the silence." This is a hard skill to learn but an essential one for new leaders.

Once you get out into the workspace and know your staff, use the knowledge you've gained to establish priorities for acting. This is a balancing act, as you will want to immediately tackle the big issues and make positive changes, but at the same time those changes can take a long

time.

To establish credibility with your employees, and based on your own observations from getting out into the workspace, you should first fix some simple quality-of-life issues for your staff. It should not be hard to come up with a list of three things that drive your people crazy and you can correct with a small application of money and effort. Those issues and goals you choose should be concrete, demonstrable and achievable. Your goal in your first 100 days is to get a few easy wins under your belt, improve things somewhat and get some momentum. Nothing will derail you faster than biting off more than you can chew and falling flat with your first big initiative.

At the same time, you cannot neglect the big-picture issues early on, as they will take longer to fix and require much more preparation. Choose these issues carefully also—make sure they're worth fighting for, because in most organizations the planning and budgeting process lead times require as long as two years to get moving. The worst time to take a new job is immediately after the last budget was approved, as you are now stuck implementing a budget (and programs) you had no hand in drafting. Furthermore, you then have to wait an entire year before even trying to get your strategic priorities into the budget. You have no control over this part of the process and have to play the cards you have, but you should be thinking of long-term strategy very early, just as much as you're trying to get short-term momentum.

Finally, remember to tell your team members why decisions are made and praise them for their hard work. Today's workforce is much more engaged, and explaining the rationale behind decisions will go a long way toward getting commitment from your staff. Also, we often forget that a simple "thank you" and "nice job" can go a long way in improving morale. This positive feedback is so often lacking; establish yourself early as someone who subscribes to the old adage of "praise in public, and punish in private."

## **Conclusion**

Unlike a new presidential administration, your first 100 days are less about your initial accomplishments and more about establishing yourself as a leader. You will apply your communication skills up and down the chain of command, demonstrate your competency in your job and cement your integrity with your employees. The fundamental leadership skills you build will display a vision of where you'll lead in your new role.

*Matthew R. Streger, Esq., is a member of the EMS World editorial advisory board and a member of the law firm Keavney & Streger in Princeton, NJ. He has more than 30 years of experience in EMS in a wide variety of roles and locations. He is a featured speaker at EMS World Expo, October 3–7 in New Orleans, LA, where he will moderate a panel discussion on emerging employment issues in EMS at 3:30 pm on October 5. There is still time to register at [EMSWorldExpo.com](http://EMSWorldExpo.com).*