

B L A C K F O X S T R A T E G Y

CEO SURVIVAL GUIDE

A Roadmap for the First 18 Months

**What Nobody Tells You About the Job
And What to Do About It**

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New Science. Ancient Wisdom. Better Business.



The Uncomfortable Truth

You got the job. You beat out the other candidates, earned the board's confidence, and stepped into the role of a lifetime. Congratulations. Now here's what nobody's going to tell you at the welcome dinner:

The odds are not in your favor.

40–60% of new CEOs fail within the first 18 months.

— Harvard Business Review; McKinsey & Company

That's not a scare tactic. That's decades of research from some of the most credible institutions in business. And the number hasn't moved. Not in fifteen years.

What's worse? Over 60% of executives stepping into senior leadership roles report they were unprepared for the strategic challenges they faced. Not the operational ones — the strategic ones. The ones that determine whether the organization you're now responsible for will thrive or simply survive.

And here's the part that should make every board member and new CEO sit up straight: more than 90% of failing new CEOs say they wish they had managed their transition differently.

They didn't fail because they lacked talent. They failed because they didn't have a roadmap.

This guide is that roadmap. Not a generic checklist. Not a collection of platitudes about “listening and learning.” This is a strategic framework for navigating the most consequential 18 months of your career — built from 30+ years of working alongside executives in organizations of every size, type, and industry, and grounded in a fundamental understanding of what actually drives organizational success.

Why CEO Transitions Go Sideways

Let's dispense with the obvious. Yes, the first months are a firehose of information. Yes, there are political dynamics that weren't visible from the outside. Yes, you're making decisions with incomplete data while every stakeholder watches your every move.

But those aren't the reasons CEOs fail. Those are the conditions. The reason is more fundamental.

Most new CEOs step into the role with a plan for what they want to accomplish and no framework for understanding the living system they've just inherited. They come in with



strategic priorities already forming — often the very priorities that got them hired — and begin executing before they’ve understood the deeper dynamics at play.

The result is predictable: bold moves that ignore internal capacity, growth targets disconnected from organizational reality, and “transformation” initiatives that break more than they fix. One board director I worked with described it perfectly: “They grew so fast they broke everything in their wake.”

Here’s what I’ve learned over three decades of doing this work: organizations must thrive within before they can deliver to those they serve in a sustainable way. That’s not a philosophy. That’s a law of nature. Organizations are not machines — they are living complex adaptive systems. Treat them like machines, and they’ll break like machines.

The framework I’m going to walk you through is built on three things that must exist for any organization to succeed, regardless of what it does or how large it is: Purpose, Growth, and Evolution — held in dynamic Equilibrium. Miss any one of these, and you’ve got a structural crack in your foundation that no amount of charisma, cost-cutting, or clever pivoting will fix.

Your Strategic Compass: Purpose, Growth, Evolution

Before we get into the phases of your transition, you need to understand the lens through which everything else in this guide is framed. It’s deceptively simple. That’s part of its power.

Every successful organization has three things working together: a clear and compelling Purpose, intentional Growth, and active Evolution. When any one of these is neglected or out of balance with the others, things start to fall apart — and they fall apart in predictable ways.

When purpose is unclear, drift and disconnect prevail. People show up but don’t engage. Strategy becomes a binder on a shelf that no one references.

When growth is haphazard, stagnation creeps in — or worse, the organization grows so fast externally that internal capacity collapses.

When evolution is an afterthought, irrelevance marks the beginning of the end. The market moves on. Your best people follow.

The fourth element — Equilibrium — is the mechanism that keeps these three in balance. It’s not a concept. It’s a decision-making discipline. It’s how you prioritize when everything feels urgent. It’s how you vet opportunities against the plan. It’s how you maintain strategic coherence when the ground is shifting.

This is the Essential Strategy Foundation. And your first 18 months should be organized around understanding, establishing, and activating it within the organization you now lead.



PHASE 1

Discover the Real Organization

Months 1–5: See it before you shape it

You have been hired to lead. But leading effectively requires understanding the reality of what you're leading — not the version that was presented during interviews, and not the version that lives in last year's strategic plan. The real organization. The living one.

92% of external hires take far more than 90 days to reach full productivity.

— McKinsey & Company

That stat should liberate you, not scare you. It means the pressure to “make your mark fast” is artificial. The CEOs who succeed take the time to truly discover the organization before reshaping it. The ones who fail start swinging before they understand where the walls are.

Read the Energy, Not Just the Data

Every organization has a story it tells about itself, and then it has the truth. Your job in Phase 1 is to find the truth. That means going beyond the dashboard metrics and investor decks to understand the energy of the organization — the trust dynamics, the unspoken tensions, the pockets of brilliance nobody's paying attention to, and the cultural undercurrents that will either carry your strategy or capsize it.

Talk to people at every level. Not town halls. Real conversations. Ask questions you're genuinely curious about. Listen for what isn't being said. Pay attention to where energy is high and where it's been drained. This is intelligence that no SWOT analysis will ever give you.

Read the Team, Not Just the Org Chart

Here's something most transition advice glosses over: the leadership team you've inherited is not just a collection of talented individuals reporting to you. It's a relational system — with its own patterns, trust dynamics, communication habits, and unresolved tensions. And that system was shaped by the leader who came before you. Your arrival just changed every variable.

The very nature of complex adaptive systems means that every change in leadership changes the rules and dynamics of the entire team. The relationships, the shorthand, the trust — all of it resets the moment you walk in. Even if every person on the team stays, the team itself is new.

So pay attention. Not just to who's performing and who isn't. Pay attention to the space between your senior leaders — how they interact with each other, not just with you. Where is the trust? Where is the friction? Who defers to whom, and why? What conversations are happening after the meeting that should have happened during it?



Executives report feeling 82% aligned on strategy. Actual measured alignment: 23%.

— Harvard Business Review / Workpath

That nearly 60-point gap between perception and reality is where strategy goes to die. Not on a spreadsheet. Not in a competitor's market move. In the space between leaders who genuinely believe they're on the same page when they are not even reading the same book. Your job in Phase 1 is to see this gap before it swallows your strategy whole.

Test the Foundation: Purpose

Start with purpose. Not revenue targets, not growth projections. Purpose. Does the organization's stated vision mean anything to the people doing the work? Is the mission authentic, or has it become wallpaper? When you ask employees why the organization exists, does the answer have any heat to it — or is it corporate language that's been repeated so many times it's lost all meaning?

Rule 1: Purpose must be internally compelling and externally valuable. If it's only one, you've got a crack in your foundation. Internal without external creates an inward-focused culture that loses market relevance. External without internal creates a marketing message that employees don't believe in, and that disconnect shows up in everything from turnover to customer experience.

Key Discovery Questions

- ▶ *Does our stated vision really connect to how the work gets done?*
- ▶ *Can people at every level articulate why this organization matters?*
- ▶ *Where are the biggest disconnects between what we say and what we do?*
- ▶ *What's the real state of trust on the leadership team — with each other, not just with me?*
- ▶ *What are the blind spots in our current strategy that no one is talking about?*
- ▶ *Where does energy flow freely between my senior leaders, and where is it stuck?*

Resist the Urge to Fix

I know this is hard. You were hired because you're a problem-solver. But the most consequential mistake you can make in Phase 1 is solving the wrong problems. Every bold, early decision you make without adequate understanding of the system creates ripple effects you can't predict. Everything is connected. Everything moves in response to everything else. Act too soon, and you'll spend the next year cleaning up unintended consequences.

Your deliverable from Phase 1 is not a new strategy. It's a clear-eyed, honest assessment of the real state of Purpose, Growth, and Evolution within the organization — and the real state of the leadership team responsible for all three. Where is the balance? Where are the gaps? That picture is worth more than any hundred-day plan.



PHASE 2

Build the Strategic Foundation

Months 4–10: Align the team and frame the strategy

By now, you've done the listening. You've seen the real organization. You know where the disconnects are — between vision and execution, between what the strategy says and what people work on in real time, between the growth the board wants and the capacity the organization has to deliver it.

Phase 2 is where you earn your role. Not with a dramatic restructuring. Not with a new org chart. But by creating real alignment around what matters most.

Align the Team Before You Build the Strategy

Most new CEOs jump straight to strategy. Set the vision, define the priorities, cascade the goals. It's what they were trained to do. But here's what 30 years of strategy work has shown me: alignment must precede strategy. If the leadership team isn't cohesive — if there isn't real trust, honest communication, and shared understanding of where the organization is right now — even brilliant strategy will unravel.

85% of leadership teams spend less than one hour per month on strategy. Half spend no time at all.

— Kaplan & Norton, Harvard Business Review

That's not a time management problem. That's a relational and structural one. Teams that lack trust and shared purpose avoid strategic conversations. They default to operational firefighting because it's safer. If this describes your team, no strategic framework in the world will save you until you address what's underneath.

The Team Your Strategy Depends On

Let me be direct about something that most CEO transition advice treats as a footnote: team cohesion is not a nice-to-have. It is strategic infrastructure. Without it, even a brilliantly designed strategy will fail in execution. With it, you have a force multiplier on every initiative your organization touches.

The data on this is not subtle.

Teams with above-average trust were 3.3x more efficient and 5.1x more likely to produce results than teams where trust was below average.

— McKinsey, Cracking the Code of Team Effectiveness (2024)



Not marginally better. Multiples better. That's not a soft-skill return. That's the difference between an organization that executes its strategy and one that spends two years wondering why nothing's moving.

When a leadership team isn't clicking, the root cause almost always falls to one or more of three things: a lack of shared purpose, a lack of honest communication, or a lack of understanding about how each person on the team actually thinks, decides, and engages. Let me take those one at a time, because as a new CEO, each one is yours to address.

Shared Purpose Isn't Assumed — It's Built

You might think that because everyone on your leadership team showed up for the same organization, they're aligned on why they're there. They're not. Each person carries their own interpretation of the mission, their own professional motivations, and their own sense of what success looks like. Unless you've done the work to surface those perspectives and forge a genuinely shared understanding of purpose, you're operating on assumption. And assumption is the enemy of alignment.

One team of nine executives I encountered — who professed to be aligned on their top three priorities — was challenged to write them down. They listed fifteen different priorities between them. This is not unusual. It's the norm. And it's invisible until someone has the courage to surface it.

Communication Is Happening — But Not the Kind That Matters

Most leadership teams are communicating constantly. Meetings, emails, Slack threads, reports. What they're rarely doing is communicating honestly. The kind of communication that moves a team forward requires candor, and candor requires psychological safety, and psychological safety requires trust. Without that trust, communication stays surface-level. Polite. Performative. And ultimately useless for strategic decision-making.

I've watched leadership teams spend an hour debating a relatively minor operational decision while avoiding the strategic conversation that everyone knows needs to happen. It's not laziness. It's self-protection. The strategic conversation requires someone to name what isn't working, and in teams where trust is thin, that feels like stepping into traffic.

The Team Doesn't Actually Know Each Other

This is the one that surprises people most. Your leadership team members may have worked together for years and still not truly understand how each person processes information, makes decisions, handles stress, or engages with conflict. They have surface-level familiarity without real insight into the cognitive and motivational styles that drive behavior in high-stakes situations — which is precisely when it matters most.

High-functioning teams have a greater awareness of each other's cognitive, engagement, and motivation styles, and they use the unique dynamics of their individual and collective profiles to improve communication, decision quality, and strategic agility. Without that awareness, teams



default to assumptions, misread intentions, and create friction that has nothing to do with the work itself.

Why This Matters More for You Than Anyone

As a new CEO, you are inheriting a team you didn't build. The dynamics that exist predate you. The trust — or lack of it — between your senior leaders was established under different conditions. And here's the part nobody warns you about: the patterns that show up at the executive level replicate throughout the entire organization. If your leadership team operates in silos, your departments will too. If trust is fragile at the top, it will be nonexistent in the middle. The organization is a living reflection of the team that leads it. That means the team dynamics work isn't separate from the strategy work. It is the foundation the strategy work stands on.

Only 31% of C-suite executives consider the C-suite to be their primary team. The majority identify with their functional units, not their peers at the top.

— Gartner / Harvard Business Review (2025)

If more than two-thirds of your senior leaders don't even identify as being on the same team, what are the chances they'll execute your strategy as a coordinated unit? This is the gap that no strategic plan can bridge on its own. It requires intentional investment in the relational infrastructure of the leadership team.

Frame Strategy Through a PGEE Lens

Once alignment is underway, frame the strategic conversation around three questions that cut through the noise:

Purpose: What must occur to advance our vision, and what must exist to inspire common cause from within?

Growth: Where do we want to grow in terms of impact and reach, and where must we build capabilities to support that growth?

Evolution: How must we evolve to meet the anticipated needs of those we serve — and those who serve from within?

Then apply **Equilibrium:** are we balancing strategic priorities across all three? Or are we chasing growth while neglecting the internal capacity to sustain it? Are we so focused on what's worked that we're failing to anticipate what's changing?

This framing does something that traditional strategic planning misses entirely. It creates context for building strategy that allows the organization to thrive — not just perform. It connects vision to the actual conditions required for success. And it prevents the lopsided plans that dominate most organizations, where growth targets get all the airtime and purpose and evolution are treated as nice-to-haves.



This is a foundation you are building for the long-haul. The answers to PGEE don't simply last through the current planning cycle. When you do it right, these imperatives resonate to the core, and all the rest of the plan logically lines up to support them.

Define Your Risk Appetite

One of the most overlooked conversations in any CEO transition is risk appetite. Not risk management — that's tactical. Risk appetite is strategic: how much are we willing to invest before the cost is too great? How fast can we grow without sacrificing existing value? To what extent are we willing to change? These are questions that define the boundaries of your strategy, and they deserve explicit answers from your leadership team.

Key Foundation Questions

- ▶ *Are our strategic priorities balanced across Purpose, Growth, and Evolution?*
- ▶ *Where is the greatest disequilibrium in our current strategy?*
- ▶ *What internal growth is required to support our external growth targets?*
- ▶ *How must we evolve, and are we talking about it openly?*
- ▶ *What threats have the potential to disrupt our strategic equilibrium?*
- ▶ *Does my leadership team function as a true team — or a collection of functional leaders who happen to share a meeting schedule?*



PHASE 3

Activate and Adapt

Months 8–18: From plan to living strategy

This is where most CEO transitions stall. The plan is built. The priorities are set. Everyone nods in the room. And then... nothing changes. Operations resume their pre-existing rhythm, the strategic plan goes into a deck that gets reviewed quarterly, and the same blind spots that existed before the transition remain firmly in place.

The gap between strategy formulation and execution is where organizational performance goes to die.

It's not new — research consistently shows that roughly two-thirds of well-formulated strategies fail due to poor execution. But the failure isn't usually operational. It's structural. The plan was never connected to the work in a way that gave it life. And more often than not, the team responsible for executing it lacked the trust and cohesion to carry it forward under pressure.

Build the Implementation Blueprint

The strategic plan communicates meaning and direction — the why and the what. But it is not enough to define the how. Phase 3 is where you build the implementation blueprint that bridges strategy and operations, cascading meaning throughout the organization so that every team, every function, understands not just what they're supposed to do, but why it matters.

This is where most leaders underestimate the work required in two ways. First, they assume that the strategic plan has enough detail to inform implementation — it does not. Additional work is needed with every team member around the table to sort through and negotiate resources, priorities, and roadblocks. Second, when the team does come together to build the blueprint, they almost always plan too aggressively on the first pass, ignoring capacity constraints and underestimating the effort needed to create efficiencies before taking on new initiatives. A reality check here — an honest one — saves you from the slow bleed of overcommitment.

Navigate, Don't Just Execute

Here's the shift that separates leaders who build thriving organizations from those who merely manage declining ones: strategy is not a document to be executed. It's a living discipline to be navigated.

The moment your plan is set, the world keeps moving. Markets shift. Key people leave. New opportunities appear that weren't on the radar. If your strategy is rigid, it breaks. If it's reactive, it lurches from crisis to crisis without direction.

The Equilibrium principle gives you a built-in mechanism for navigating change without losing coherence. When an unexpected opportunity appears, you vet it against the PGE imperatives.



When a crisis hits, you assess the impact to strategic equilibrium before reacting. When the plan needs to change — and it will — it changes thoughtfully, maintaining balance across what matters most.

This is what I mean by strategic thinking discipline over static plan-building. It's the difference between steering a ship and publishing a schedule. The schedule says where you intend to go. The discipline gets you there when the conditions change.

The Team Makes Adaptation Possible

Here's where the team dynamics investment from Phase 2 pays its highest return. When the environment shifts — and it will keep shifting — the team's capacity to sense, adapt, and respond together is what determines whether you navigate it or get overwhelmed by it.

A team that built trust during Phase 2 can have the hard conversations Phase 3 demands. A team that understands each other's cognitive styles can make faster decisions under pressure without the political risk calculations that slow everything down. A team that shares genuine purpose doesn't fracture when the plan needs to pivot — they recalibrate around what matters most.

Organizations that consistently execute strategy aren't the ones with the cleverest plans. They're the ones led by teams that function as teams in real time — where trust runs deep, communication is honest, and every person at the table understands not just the strategy but each other. Without a cohesive, trust-rich leadership team, the most elegant strategy in the world will collapse under its own weight.

Build the Muscle for Evolution

The organizations that sustain success aren't the ones that manage change well. They're the ones that build the capacity for continuous evolution into their operating DNA. This means creating mechanisms for anticipating shifts rather than reacting to them. It means investing in the adaptive learning and creative problem-solving capabilities of your people, not just their technical skills.

Evolution is not about the future. It's about the decisions you make now. As a new CEO, one of the most powerful legacies you can leave in your first 18 months is an organization that expects, embraces, and actively plans for its own evolution — rather than one that treats every change as a disruption to be managed.

We have been taught to fear the unknown. To brace for the certain negative impact of change. But here's the thing — risk is simply uncertainty — it holds neither a positive nor negative charge. Consider every emerging event as both the opportunity and risk that it is. This is always a two-sided coin. You have already built your plan to flex. Now learn to see and then seize the opportunities at every turn.



Key Navigation Questions

- ▶ *Is our implementation blueprint realistic given current capacity?*
- ▶ *Are we measuring both financial and non-financial indicators of strategic health?*
- ▶ *How are we communicating strategic direction to every level of the organization?*
- ▶ *What mechanisms do we have for sensing and responding to changes in equilibrium?*
- ▶ *Are we investing in our capacity to evolve, or only in our capacity to execute?*
- ▶ *When we need to make a hard call, does the team have the trust to make it together — or does it fracture?*

Your 18-Month Roadmap at a Glance

TIMELINE	FOCUS	PGE EMPHASIS	KEY OUTCOME
Months 1–5	Discover the Real Organization	Understand current state of PGE and team dynamics	Clear-eyed organizational and team assessment
Months 4–10	Build the Strategic Foundation	Build team cohesion; define PGE Imperatives; establish Equilibrium	Aligned, trusting team with balanced strategy
Months 8–18	Activate and Adapt	Navigate using Equilibrium discipline; team executes as a unit	Living strategy with implementation muscle

Notice the overlapping timelines. This is intentional. Phase 1 doesn't stop the moment Phase 2 starts. Discovery continues as you build the foundation. Foundation-building continues as you activate. This is a living process, not a sequential checklist. That's Equilibrium in action.

The Leadership Shift Nobody Talks About

There's one more thing, and it might be the most important thing in this entire guide.

The skills that got you into the CEO chair are not the skills that will keep you there. Operational excellence, functional expertise, even strategic brilliance in a previous role — none of it is sufficient for the job you now have. Because this job isn't primarily about knowing the right answers. It's about creating the conditions where the right answers can emerge from the system you're leading.

That requires a different kind of intelligence. Not just intellectual horsepower or market expertise. It requires the ability to sense organizational energy, to understand how every action you take creates responses throughout the interconnected web of your organization, and to lead with an awareness that you are an energy system influencing other energy systems.

I call this Quantum Intelligence: the awareness that everything is energy, everything is connected, and everything moves in response to everything else — together with the capacity to apply that understanding within the realm of business.

The CEOs I've seen navigate their transitions most successfully share a common trait. They don't just manage — they sense. They don't just decide — they create the conditions for better



decisions to emerge from the collective intelligence of their teams. They understand that their presence, their attention, and their internal state ripple through the organization in ways that no org chart can capture. And they know that personal transformation and systemic transformation are intimately connected — that how a leader shows up energetically changes the field their entire team operates in.

This is exactly where the team dynamics work connects to everything else. Quantum Intelligent leaders don't just build strategy — they steward the conditions that allow strategy to take hold. They invest in the relational infrastructure of their leadership team with the same rigor they bring to the strategy itself, because they understand that one simply does not exist without the other.

The organizations that win aren't led by the smartest person in the room. They're led by the one who recognizes the quantum reality of the world we live and work in — and then applies that understanding to the organization.

What Comes Next

This guide gives you the framework. But a framework without application is just theory, and there's already too much of that in leadership development.

The real work is in applying these principles to your specific organization, your specific team dynamics, your specific strategic challenges. It's in having the conversations that need to happen but haven't yet. It's in building the strategic thinking discipline that turns a plan on a page into a living, adaptive force that moves the organization forward. And it's in investing in the team responsible for all of it — not just their roles and deliverables, but their ability to function as a cohesive unit when it matters most.

That's the work I do. If you're a new CEO or executive director navigating a transition — or a board preparing to support one — and you want a strategic partner who's been in the trenches for 30+ years across every kind of organization, I'd welcome the conversation.

Ready to Build Strategy That Actually Works?

Let's talk.

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Erin Sedor is a CEO Strategy Coach and executive advisor with 30+ years helping organizations build strategy that actually works. She is the creator of Essential Strategy, the ESQI 360, and the Quantum Intelligence framework for conscious, adaptive leadership.

