

Making a smooth start in your first startup job

Even with years of professional experience, your first job in a startup setting can be stressful and disorienting. Having guided numerous career starters in early- and growth-stage companies, Christine Harris and Sven Jungmann share six observations that can help any first-time startup employee find their way to success.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Start before you start

How do you start strong when you have a new role with a new team in a new company? What impression do you want to give? You'll certainly face a lot of challenges and pressing tasks that need to be addressed, especially if you take on a leadership role right away. However, you'll learn quite quickly that if you aim to tackle all the pressing tasks at once, you'll most likely fail. So, we recommend you clarify the priorities on which you want your team to focus. With that said, where do you start? The most important thing to do is to start before you start. Let's discuss what that means.

Establish your presence

Take some time to decide where you want to focus your personal presence and how you want to be seen. You may want to discuss this objective with a coach or even a personal friend whose judgement you trust. Ask yourself these questions: What kind of a leader/colleague do I want to be, and which behaviours do I need to adopt to support that

persona? Which values are important to me? What do I expect from my team?

Know what to know

Plan what you need to know in advance. Which information is pertinent to fast onboarding? Many organisations will have an onboarding programme, but be ready to come up with your own list.

Know who to know

Find out whom you need to meet beforehand and arrange to meet them. Most companies will give you organisational charts and information about who is on your team. Also, you should find out who your main stakeholders are.

Prepare to listen

Put yourself in listening mode from the start. Many leaders jump in too quickly, without really understanding the organisation or the culture, and they make hasty decisions that can be damaging to the company, their reputation, or both.

Set up One-to-One meetings

The most valuable way to get the information you need is during one-to-one meetings. If you're a leader, think about what you want to get out of those meetings, particularly with your direct reports. You may have been given role descriptions, but how accurate are they? Are the interfaces clear? What is working well/not so well? What are the current issues? How do they live the organisational culture? Don't forget the personal aspects! Remember, your new team will want to know about you, including what type of leader you are and what is important to you, and you'll also want to know more about them. What's important to them? What are their

interests? How do they envision their career paths? Write a list of questions, and always start with the personal ones.

Be a team player

Understand the key elements of what it means to be a team. Many of us have been to trainings where we see slides showing the team as a triangle with the sides labelled GOAL, INDIVIDUAL, and GROUP, and the whole triangle sitting in a square labelled ENVIRONMENT. So, when you're starting in a new team, be sure to familiarise yourself with your environment (organisation, culture, structures, products etc.), understand/define/refine the goals (including roles, responsibilities, and interfaces), and get to know the individuals. Last but not least, organise an enjoyable team event to improve the team dynamic.

The precious power of stupid questions

Don't let your ignorance go to waste. In the beginning, you won't know an awful lot, but don't automatically assume that others know what you don't. Many processes, tasks, and features didn't actually emerge out of carefully-crafted and diligently-executed strategies. More often than not, they just happened. Yet, new joiners often tend to assume they shouldn't challenge the status quo, especially because they are newcomers.

They're afraid of looking stupid by asking potentially obvious questions or stepping on people's toes from day one. The opposite is true: Often, people are so used to dysfunctional 'legacy routines' that they don't see the inefficiencies those practices create anymore. As a new member of the team, you have the luxury of bringing in a fresh, outsider's perspective, and if you communicate your observations and concerns tactfully, you might even be seen as a value-adding member who garners strong support from thankful colleagues right away. The trick is to start inquiring gently whether things are the way they are for particular reasons. Also, bring these issues up in one-on-one conversations where

you've already established some level of trust before bringing it to the wider group. These trusted colleagues can help you understand any office politics and let you know who is approachable for suggestions. Then, you'll be free to make the most of your outsider's view for as long as it lasts.

Dare to bring structure to an agile world

The core goal of agile principles is to create simpler, safer, speedier ways to achieve great results. One of agility's core tenets is to experiment early and learn rapidly, allowing oneself to fail often to succeed faster. These days, few people doubt the merits of this approach. However, agile principles are often misinterpreted as permission not to plan, when the opposite is true. In order to experiment, you first need hypotheses that are well-grounded in as many insights as you can reasonably collect before you invest time and money. Experiments need structure and planning. Plus, if you only focus on your next learning and iterate from there, without an overarching objective, you'll be something like a football player who's great at dribbling but doesn't know where the goal is. In order to succeed in an agile team, every day you should find the right balance between staying agile and avoiding chaos. Whenever planning helps you avoid wasting resources and generates potentially better learnings, you should plan. However, planning shouldn't replace engaging with reality, and plans should be revised frequently based on the latest learnings.

People don't work for people; they work WITH people

You probably know the famous Ghandi quote: *"Your beliefs become your thoughts; your thoughts become your words; your words become your actions; your actions become your habits; your habits become your*

values; your values become your destiny". With that truth in mind, consider how you want to position yourself from your very first days. As a new joiner, you of course need to find your place on the team. Even as a seasoned professional, you can feel overwhelmed during the first months and worry that you're not yet pulling your weight, but that doesn't mean you should belittle yourself. For example, instead of introducing yourself by saying "I work *for* [fill in name of CEO]", say, "I work *with*". The "*working for*" mindset can mean that you end up trying to fit into a predefined role, understand the boundaries, and be careful not to overstep. The "*working with*" mindset gives you a broader horizon, more freedom of movement, and more room for proactivity. You might worry that this behaviour could be seen as inappropriately dominant in a new employee, but if you do it right, (i.e., you truly work *with* and not *against* others), then your actions should be seen as mindful and constructive. Actually, a good manager should create this sort of mindset. If they don't, use subtle language to claim your position. If you face real resistance, it's probably time to reassess whether the company is a good fit for you. If you *are* a manager, work to establish a sense of togetherness right from the start. For instance, avoid saying "my team" or (even worse) "my people" and instead use "we" as often as possible.

Learn and overcome your internal biases

When you think of stereotypes, you usually think about biases people have toward *others* based on gender, race, social identity, domestic situation, and many other factors. However, did you ever think you might have some of these biases toward yourself? For example, as a woman, you might misguidedly tell yourself you're not suited for a founder role. As a senior member of the company, you might think you shouldn't apply for a promotion because of your age. As an immigrant, you might mistakenly feel you have no place representing the company in front of key customers or investors. Or, you might also hold assumptions about your

skills, the opportunities available to you, and which life goals are appropriate based on your gender, family expectations, or national identity. These biases can be incredibly limiting.

Another tendency to avoid is seeing prejudice in others against you when in reality they behave the same way toward everybody. For example, you might assume racist motivations behind someone's rude behaviour, when actually they're losing their temper with everyone because they're overwhelmed with stress. Generalised perception of bias against yourself can be constraining because it affects your behaviour and risks preventing you from seeing the real cause behind another person's actions, which can cause you to lose out on important learning opportunities. It's important that you recognise these thoughts and the resulting fears as threats when they appear. Awareness goes a long way. When you find yourself in situations in which you are the minority, try to find other lenses through which you can define yourself (e.g., instead of saying *"I'm the only foreigner in this meeting"*, you can also notice that you are *"the only person in the room seeing this from an entirely other perspective"*).

Practice empathetic leadership

Empathetic leaders mean more motivated employees, better performance, and higher retention rates. However, few people are really clear about how to show and cultivate empathy.

Especially since the pandemic, companies seem to be placing more emphasis on empathy. Recently, at a senior leadership coaching session, the question of what empathy looks like was raised, and one of the older leaders told the story of the first virtual one-to-one meeting he had with a young mother. Shortly after the meeting began, a young child ran in and started waving into the camera. Initially, the senior leader was irritated, as he believed that such behaviour had no part in a work meeting. He was

just about to say so when he noticed the young mother's face, which evidenced embarrassment, fear, and anxiety. He realised that as a leader, he needed to see things from her perspective (show empathy). So instead, he waved back to the young child, saying, "How nice of you to join our meeting! But if you're going to be part of our meeting, I need to know your name. By the way, my name is Paul". The young child beamed, and the mother's face immediately relaxed into a smile. After a minute or so, the senior leader said, "Now, I need to speak to your mother about some things, so maybe you can go into another room, and I'll see you next time". After that, the child showed up to the one-on-one every week, said hello, exchanged some information, and then left again. This leader spoke about how the working relationship between himself and the young mother blossomed and how her work improved.

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within that person's frame of reference. In other words, it's the ability to place yourself in another person's position.

To show empathy as a leader, try sharing personal information about yourself to make others more comfortable about opening up. When doing so, stay authentic and show your true personality. Try to stick with positive communication when you share, and be mindful of your body language.

Also, make time to get to know people. Take those few minutes on Monday morning or at the start of a meeting to show interest and ask about your coworkers. Ask questions about the things they share, even if the topic isn't one that particularly interests you at first. Doing so builds rapport, makes people feel comfortable and builds connections that create an atmosphere of trust.

Additionally, try to be broadminded rather than judgemental. Be open to subjects where you've generally had fixed opinions. Empathy doesn't

mean you have to agree with everything someone says, but it does mean you value what people say and try to see things from their viewpoint. Be conscious about trying to do so.

Finally, listen, listen, and listen some more. Active listening is a crucial empathetic skill. Try to take a smaller role in conversations than you normally would. In addition, pay attention to more than words—notice facial expressions, body language, gestures, voice, etc. Sometimes people show, rather than say, what they are feeling. Pick up on those cues.

Parting thoughts

When we began writing this piece, we were surprised to find that we'd observed very different common challenges, which might be because we have different roles. Christine has an external role, while Sven is a leader who coaches his team. Our different observations might also be because we've learned to pay attention to different things. Everybody's situation is different, of course, and depends on who they are, where they come from, the position they are taking, and the startup for which they work. We hope you find these reflections helpful, see yourself in some of them, and still glean value from the others. The underlying theme here is that awareness and a willingness to question one's own perceptions are critical to success. Coaches and good leaders can be helpful, but the journey starts with you.

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