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THE 90-DAY ONBOARDING STRATEGY THAT DOESN'T BURN LEADERS OUT

Welcome to The Highly Valued Leader podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Hey, leaders, welcome back to the podcast. I've got a great one today. I do a lot of onboarding with my clients because so many of my clients will get new opportunities in their careers, whether it's a new opportunity in the organization they currently work in, or they're getting a new job. So we talk a lot about onboarding, and 90-day plans come up a lot.

One of the things I wanted to talk to you about today is a very simple way of thinking about your 90-day onboarding strategy, kind of a new way of thinking about it so that you don't burn out in the first 90 days. I find that as leaders, one of the things that the majority of my clients struggle with or worry about when they're onboarding is, *how do I onboard in a way that doesn't burn me out?* A lot of them, a lot of the leaders, are hard workers, and I'm sure you are too and struggle with the push and pull of doing too much and taking care of themselves.

When you're onboarding into a new role, it's really common to overwork because you want to prove yourself in this new job. You want to help them see that they made the right decision in bringing you on board, whether it's the new job, a new boss, or a new project that you've been assigned to, whatever it is, and you want to do well. But if you are doing this overwork or burning yourself out in the first three months because you're trying to prove yourself, what you're going to have at the end of three months is that you are really tired and exhausted.

And maybe you are doing well, but you've set this expectation for your work ethic that you cannot possibly sustain. You're already seeing the cracks or the cracks have already shown up. You've overworked and burned yourself out to the point that you're not performing at your best. You're tired. You're saying yes when you don't want to. You're not saying what you mean. You're starting to resent things. You're worried that you can't keep it up. And probably, you're already starting to get some feedback, something along the lines of, *"You're doing well, but here are a few things that you need to work on."* And that is the worst thing — that was the thing you were trying to avoid in the first place. So it's working against you, this whole idea of overworking yourself and trying to prove yourself.

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What I want to cover today is what to put in a 90-day plan so that you can onboard into your new leadership role, do it well, not overwork, not burn out, and really show up as your best. Like I said, you can do this. You can use this idea, this strategy that I'm framing as a 90-day plan. You can build a 90-day plan and use this strategy when you get a new boss who you want to prove yourself to, when you get a new team, when you're assigned a new project — any situation where you think, *"Oh, I got to prove myself here."*

I want you to enlist this strategy for the 90-day plan. And if you do, my goal here is that you onboard effectively without burnout, where you have a less stressful onboarding, where you're worrying less, where you build really strong, foundational relationships, and basically show up as your best leader, more often, more confidently right out of the gate, not a year later after you've proven yourself. That's what we want to be able to be here. I want you to be: the year-later version of you, now.

I'm going to give you basically three pillars that you need to look at in your 90-day plan. And I think one of the pillars is going to surprise you, for sure, because it's not a normal pillar. It's not what people normally put in their 90-day plan. Before I introduce those three things, what I really want to do first is just talk a little bit about this *"proving yourself"* energy. I have said this before in many podcasts. I say it on my social media all the time, and I don't think the frequency of saying it is a bad thing, because we forget it. We lose focus on it all the time.

But this idea of telling yourself that you need to prove yourself, or being in what I call *"proving yourself energy,"* is not helpful to you. I also call it *"Chihuahua energy."* Imagine a Chihuahua—wide-eyed and sort of shaky. That's what that energy feels like. And immediately, when you tell yourself that you need to prove yourself, you're putting yourself on your back foot. Telling yourself you need to prove yourself is essentially saying, *"I need to get approval. I am looking for approval that I am good at my job from other people. I need to prove to them that I am good, and until they tell me that I am, I can't just relax into the fact that I'm good at my job."* That's what approval feels like

And when you're looking for that approval, what we tend to do is not want to rock the boat. We don't want to upset anyone, because we're looking for their approval, so we're trying to act the way they want us to act. And what that does, basically, is you act like someone who maybe is people-pleasing. *"Of course, I'll do that."* You say yes more often than you need to. You overwork. You don't rock the boat; you don't put up your hand and maybe professionally and strategically offer a different point of view from someone you want approval from.

You don't necessarily make the hard decisions. You do more of the CYA – the *"cover your ass"* behaviors so that you get the approval that you're looking for. And the energy that comes with this is really a worried energy: *"Do they like me? Did I do that right?"* It's needy. It's *graspy*. Because you're on your back foot, waiting for other people to tell you that you're good enough, versus just creating that energy for yourself. It's almost, dare I say, kind of desperate. And I don't mean to say that you are desperate. You're not. But when we're looking for approval from others, we can act a bit desperate sometimes. And I want to just say that it's not a very leaderly look. It's not cute.

What we want to be able to do, what we're looking to do, is get you to act as your most confident leader now, which, ironically, is actually what's going to demonstrate that you are capable of this job. When you come in—and I'm not saying that you solve all the problems and just rock the boat like crazy—but you come in, and you are confident, and you believe in your opinion, and you're professional, and you share your ideas, and you're not afraid to maybe say no sometimes or offer differing opinions, and deal with the hard issues upfront. That's what people want.

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So you don't need to prove yourself. You just need to be that great leader that they hired, that they saw in the interview, or whatever got you this position. Even if it's a new boss and you come into a situation wanting to prove yourself to the new boss, just be your great self. On top of that, be open, compassionate, supportive, and helpful, whatever that version of you looks like for your new boss. You're not trying to prove yourself. You're not trying to be better than them or cut them out—be welcoming. That's a whole different podcast. Obviously, maybe how to deal with a new boss coming in would be a good one.

But in any situation where you think you need to prove yourself, just don't. Just don't go there, because that's going to actually hold you back, even if you've started a new job and a bunch of stakeholders or clients or your new boss come to you and say, *"You need to really prove yourself now."* They can say that, but that doesn't mean you have to act that way. That's my intro to the solution.

I'm going to give you the three buckets now, the three things. The third one is the area that I think we don't really think about. I'm going to give you the three things, and then I'm going to tell you what I think should be in each of those buckets, and then we'll just summarize at the end. The three buckets are really easy. They're three words: learn, meet, lead. Those are the three buckets: learn, meet, lead.

Learn—I'm suggesting you're going to spend about half of your time on learning. The reason I say half of your time on the *Learn* bucket is because most people are spending 80% of their time, when they're onboarding, in the *Learn* bucket. We'll kind of come back to the timeframes and what I mean by them all at the end. But *Learn* is the first bucket, and this is really where you're going to learn your core function. How things work, where stuff is, defining your role.

If you're in a director-plus title in a medium to large organization, I would say that your role is being a strategic thinker and visionary, building a high-performing team, growing the leaders, getting to know your team members and figuring out what they need, relationship management across the organization, financial management of your department or your function, and professional development of yourself. Those are the things that I would say are your roles: strategic thinker and visionary, building a high-performing team, relationship management, financial management, and your own professional development.

Within *strategic leader* and *visionary* and *building the team*, of course, there's going to be times when you have to step in and put out fires. You are *"air cover"* to a certain degree as well. But what ends up happening in the *Learn* phase is that people are going to want you to go to all these meetings. People are going to want you to get up to speed on every single project. People are going to want your opinion on how to do everything. And your job is to pick the key things that you need to know and learn about.

If you spend all your days going to all the meetings that everybody wants you to go to, then you're not going to be able to really do the rest of the onboarding that you need to do. My suggestion to you is: don't fill up your calendar with meetings. And I don't think meeting people, like one-on-ones (which is the next bucket), are considered meetings. I'm talking about meetings where there are a bunch of people around the table talking about stuff. If you fill your calendar up with those meetings at first, you're not going to be able to do all of the onboarding. I'm saying just be really selective.

If you're not sure, get a strategy together, get a recommendation together, and check in with either a key stakeholder or your boss, depending on who is the best person to give you this advice, and say, *"Look, everybody wants me to go to these meetings. Here are the ones I think I'm going to focus on in the first 90 days, or at least in*

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the first 30 days or 60 days because I want to make time for these other things. What do you think?" They're going to push and pull a little bit, and you have to make a decision based on that. But don't go to everything.

Your job in this *Learn* bucket is to understand your core function, what the key issues in the department based on the objectives that you've been given when you were hired, and really set the tone for your role, and act in your role: strategic thinker, visionary, building the team, driving relationship management, understanding the finances, and your own professional development. That's what I think about the *Learn* bucket.

There might be things like—one of my clients the other day, who's onboarding, was like, *"Well, they really want this five-year roadmap to be unveiled, and that's what they really want me to work on in the first 90 days."* And that's fine, but again, your role is as strategic thinker and visionary. So, you want to understand this five-year roadmap—where it's at, if there are problems with it, if you see some roadblocks and issues from a strategic thinking standpoint—then you need to bring those up, and you need to help guide the team to make it happen.

A lot of people would jump in, want to change things, be in every meeting, and make sure it happens because they need to prove themselves and get this done. You still need to get that thing done, but operating from that strategic thinking and visionary level—not rolling up your sleeves, getting your hands dirty, and controlling everything.

This is a really good example, actually, because in this case, my client looked at this and was like, *"Oh, we've done this in isolation."* The team had actually put together the framework for this five-year roadmap, but they'd done it within the department. They hadn't talked to any stakeholders; they hadn't run it up and across the organization to see if it would work. And so, she actually said to the team, *"This is really great. I would like to pause for a moment and start to get some feedback on that."* Because again, strategically, we need to get feedback.

As you know, as leaders, if you go too fast, the system is going to slow you down. So you need to actually slow down a little bit and make sure you get the feedback of the system—and when I say the system, I mean your organization and key stakeholders—so that you can move fast later. She just wanted to slow it down a little bit, but she saw that as something missing in the process. Moving forward, she talked to her team about it, they agreed with her, she talked to her boss about it, made sure they were comfortable, and then implemented the process.

When I say implemented it, I mean she organized it; she didn't do it all. She didn't check with everyone. But she's getting the team to focus on getting the feedback, and she is reaching out to certain key stakeholders who are a bit more sensitive because she has a role to play at a senior level, just like you would. But she's not meeting all the people herself or telling everybody who needs to be met. She's using her team. Who are the key stakeholders? Who are we missing? Checking in, making sure she's managing up, who's the right people, picking the ones that she should develop a relationship with, allowing her team to meet with the other people, and coming back, talking about what the implications are to the roadmap based on the feedback they're getting.

She's more driving how the process is executed, versus controlling the execution. If that makes sense—hopefully, you can see the nuance of what I'm trying to say, and I think you will. If you're at a director-plus level, you understand that nuance. That's the *Learn* bucket, and that's half your time.

The next bucket is really important—it's the *Meet* bucket, and I would say that's 40% of your time. We're talking about 90%—half the time is learning what you're doing, and the other 40% is meeting people in the first 90 days.

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So really just talking to all the people—your team members, first of all, grounding yourself with the team, other key peers, and other key departments that you work with, maybe very closely, maybe medium closely, if you will—really understanding them and their needs and their perspectives, and identifying all the key external stakeholders. They could be clients, they could be vendors, they could be support partners, whatever it might be.

When I was at McDonald's, I worked in marketing. My clients would have been key franchisees. At that point, my vendor partners were really broad because they weren't just the advertising agencies that we worked with, or the promotions agencies that we worked with, or the graphic design agencies that we worked with. There were so many, but there were also other key vendors that were maybe not vendors of my department, but key vendors that we worked with. They could have been food vendors, specifically, or *Business Insights* had vendors like *Nielsen* or *Crest* or things like that that we worked with and meeting those people.

Those key clients and vendors, who are they, the ones that you really want to develop a relationship with? You don't have to meet them all right away, but it's good to have the list and prioritize the ones that you need to meet. And of course, you have your boss and other indirect senior stakeholders in the organization that you want to prioritize. Sometimes you got to prioritize them based on their direct impact to your department, the needs of your department, or how you function. Sometimes you got to prioritize them based on their egos. If you don't meet with them, they're going to get their knickers in a knot.

You have this really broad list of people that you need to meet, that you need to prioritize, and when you meet with them, you need to give the time to have a fruitful discussion. I often get asked, *"What do I talk to them about?"* I think it's really simple. You need to set a purpose for the discussion, and the purpose is to understand. You want to go in there to understand–that is your purpose. What you want to understand is really dependent on the person that you're meeting with.

Don't forget that there are things that you want to understand, but there are going to be things that they want you to understand. And the things that they want you to understand are going to be more top of mind for them. I'll give you a really easy example. When you are meeting with your team members, you're going to want to understand how the business is doing and the key projects that they're working on, and how they're doing and why they're doing them, and all the things—the status of those projects. They're going to want you to know that, and also they're going to want you to know who they are, what they want, what they care about, what they've done—all of the things. So you need to find the balance and recognize what they need as well as what you need. That's the first thing.

With your team member, for instance, you're going to talk about, *"Tell me a bit about yourself. Tell me where you come from. Tell me what you're looking for in your life. Tell me how that's playing out in this organization. What do you think are the key projects that we have or that you're working on right now? Why do you think that? What are you getting from those projects?"* I'm just kind of off the top of my head here. *"What do you want to see differently, not only in the projects that we're running,"* which is one sort of line of questioning? *"What would you do differently? What do you wish for in these projects, etc.? What do you wish for in your own career, in context of these projects? What is working for you? What aren't you getting access to? What are you getting access to in terms of your own growth and learning in the context of these projects you're working on, or overall?"* This is just me being curious about how this person functions in their role and in their career on my team. You can ask a million questions that I'm sure there's more that I haven't thought of, but when you're really interested in listening

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and when you want to understand how this person fits into their role in the organization and what they do and what they care about, it makes it really easy to find questions to ask.

If you're talking to a peer about your department, again, *"I would still be interested in this and tell you better about yourself. How long you've been here? How do our departments work together? What are the big wins? What are the things you're concerned about? What would you like to see in the future? Why do you want to see those things?"*

I want to just suggest that in these conversations, you're in listening mode. You're not in fix-it mode. There are going to be some low-hanging fruit, quick wins that you might start to accumulate and see a pattern around. I wouldn't do them immediately after one conversation because sometimes that can lead you down the wrong path. I definitely would check with your team on certain things, especially if other departments are asking you for stuff because you might give them a quick win, but you might piss off someone on your team.

So you want to be checking things, but in listen mode, not fix-it mode, in general. Like I said, I'm not saying you don't fix anything, but you want to really be listening, questioning, and building your own narrative about what's going on based on these conversations. And these conversations are so important at the beginning, and the more of them that you have, the better vision you're going to be able to get for the team and the department in a much more insightful, accelerated way. That's why I think these *meets*, this 40% of your time is so important that I wouldn't just get yourself sucked into random meetings and deprioritize the meet part of the 90-day plan.

So learning, learn time 50%, meet time 40%, and then I would say the last bucket, *Lead*, is the bucket that everyone forgets to put on their plan, or people don't necessarily prioritize to put in their plan. This is the other 10% of your time. What I mean by lead is deciding on the kind of leader you want to be while you're doing all of this, being purposeful and building a framework and a vision for the kind of leader you want to be.

What kind of tone do you want to bring to the job? Are you going to be sort of this fix-it person who gets quick wins and worries about themselves? Obviously, there's not only one way to look at this, but what tone do you want to bring to the job? Like, calm, focused, understanding, and pragmatic. What's the tone that you want to bring to the job? Maybe you do want to bring a more direct or assertive one.

I don't know what it is because I don't know your personal style. I don't know what the job needs, but to decide ahead of time what you do and don't want to bring to the role in terms of tone, in terms of how you're going to manage all the suggestions that are going to be thrown at you. Because everyone's going to be throwing ideas your way. They're going to want you to do all the things. How will you manage it? Will you try to fix everything? Will you run around trying to make people happy? Will you be pragmatic? I don't know.

Where will you be on this continuum? How will you manage your own insecurities? Because they will come up. How do you want to establish your role with the team? How do you want to talk to them about their career development? What is the energy that you want to bring to the culture of the team? Because you might walk in there and they might all be kind of going crazy and working their asses off, and there's going to be people who are happy that you're there, and there's going to be people rather that aren't happy that you're there. How do you want to handle that? What kind of leader do you want to be to those people who don't trust you yet? How do you want to bring them in? How do you want to create safety for them? Have you thought about these things?

When you're in prove-yourself energy, you get kind of blocked off from being a great leader. You become reactive. And what I'm suggesting in this lead bucket is you get proactive in defining the leader that you want to be. The

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reason I'm telling you that you should spend 10% of your time on this, it's not going to take you 10% of your time to come up with a framework, but it's going to take you a little bit of time every morning and throughout the day to ground yourself in the framework.

"I'm going into this new meeting with this person. I'm going to read again this framework of the leader that I've decided I want to be. I'm going to set a purpose for this meeting. I'm going to decide on my tone. I'm going to decide on how I want to ground myself as a leader as I go into this meeting with this person that I know isn't in love with our department, so I'm going to be especially listening to them and focused on them and trying to understand them and not make any decisions in this meeting." You get to go in and decide who you want to be.

Same thing if you are meeting someone on your team who doesn't like you or doesn't want you there, or someone who does want you there—someone who's so excited and happy that you're there. Who do you want to be with that person? You want to be thinking about that. Who do you want to be as you go into these meetings that you've been invited to? Do you want to be the listener? Do you want to throw in ideas right off the top? Do you want to be more pragmatic and purposeful about the kind of leader you want to be?

It's going to take you grounding yourself every day in that person, sometimes just in the morning before you start work, sometimes throughout the day as you're going from meeting to meeting, or meet to meet or whatever, because you're going to get caught up in the stress of the day. You're going to lose your focus. That sort of prove-yourself energy is going to creep in because somebody important said something to you, and you're going to need to take a beat and keep grounding yourself in this aspirational version of yourself that isn't so aspirational. It's just intentional. You have to continually intentionally ground yourself because if you just go with your gut constantly and be reactive, you're not going to be steady. You're not going to be consistent as the leader that you want to be, and that's where you want to get to.

My key tactic on this is to notice when your vibrations are rising up, like when you're starting to get anxious or starting to get worried. You can start to feel that in your belly. When I say the vibrations are rising up, you can start to feel nervous. When you start to notice that feeling, I want you just to breathe. Breathe into the tension and ground yourself in this vision of yourself as a leader that you want to be as you go into this job. Having a vision for yourself as a leader is going to help you stay focused and consistent.

So, learn your job 50%, meet 40% of your time, and lead 10% of your time. Really give yourself that 10% of your time. What are we talking about in an eight-hour day? What is that, 80 minutes? No, I don't know. Point eight of an hour, in the morning and throughout the day to stay grounded in the leader that you want to be.

Okay, my friends, that's what I have for you. Let me know what you think. I'm always open to your emails and comments on social, and I will see you next time. Bye for now.

Hey, if you want to simplify leadership while amplifying your value, then you need to get your hands on my free training. Head over to melsavage.com/simple for instant access to the training and get a taste of how I help my clients lead with ease and make more money in the process. I'll see you there.

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