



## **Turn It Around in Three Months**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Have you ever been given a new leadership position and been told to "turn it around in three months"? I know many leaders who have been given a mandate of this nature. It is not uncommon to be given a challenge like this when taking over a new situation. Sometimes the time extends out to six months or a year, but the challenge is still given to the new leader by the superior doing the hiring. Red flags should go up when an assignment of this nature is given. This challenge sounds innocent, albeit aggressive, but it spells trouble for several reasons.

First, the superior is literally saying that the performance of the group under the prior leader was inadequate. The culture did not deliver what was required. You need to know why the culture was so poor. Was it because the previous leader did a bad job, or was it for some other reason?

Second, the superior who is hiring you to turn things around is the same one who was in place when the prior leader failed. You need to know what contribution he made to creating the problems that you are supposed to fix in three months. Chances are pretty good that he had a lot to do with the failure of your predecessor but may be oblivious to that possibility.

Third, why did you receive a specific time frame to "turn it around"? Was three months just an arbitrary figure, or is there some validity to the bogy? Why didn't your new boss ask you to turn it around in a week, or even a day. What is magic about three months? Is he expecting too much or too little?

Fourth, what does "turn it around" really mean? You need a lot more specific goals than a hackneyed phrase if you are going to succeed. Does the boss expect you to double productivity, or is it more like just make people less frustrated at work? Are there quality or delivery concerns? Is there a customer service issue, or perhaps there are safety issues? You cannot tell what to do until you know what the specific problem is. You also will be unable to determine if you have succeeded with such a vague goal.

With these four problems, it is likely that your new boss is not a very good leader himself, yet you are being challenged to make things better despite working for an individual who is not very astute. That spells trouble from the start.

In a situation like this, the best thing to do is to pin the future boss down on answers to all four of these issues before agreeing to do the job. If you accept the position, you are likely doomed to fail for all four reasons. Having a failure on your scorecard is not good for your long term career.

It is possible through sheer grit and determination, mixed with some outstanding leadership skills on your part to make things a lot better. It is also quite possible that the improvement would be evident long before three months have elapsed. Unfortunately, it is more likely that you will struggle to measure up, and your new boss may be looking to replace you before long.

The antidote to this mess is to force clear objectives and ground rules before agreeing to accept the position. It would be logical to at least have a chat with the former leader about your future boss before accepting the position. If you do not, you run the risk of having a really bad year.

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