THE PLAYBOOK

The First Week

Onboarding someone into a small business, where there is no programme, no handbook and no HR department. For whoever ends up running it, which is usually you.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Executive Assistant & Operations · me.kabuhayan.app

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OPENING

Nobody owns onboarding

In a company of eight people there is no onboarding programme. There is a start date, a laptop that may or may not have arrived, and a shared hope that the new person is the kind who works things out.

What actually happens is that they spend a fortnight interrupting whoever looks least busy, learn the business in a random order determined by who happened to be free, and form their impression of how this place works from a week that nobody designed.

The cost of that is real and it is almost never counted, because it appears as a slow start rather than as a failure. Everyone assumes the person is settling in. Some of them are settling into habits nobody would have chosen.

This is fixable with about three hours of preparation and a checklist, and in most small businesses the person who ends up owning it is the executive assistant or operations manager, usually without being asked and usually without a template.

So here is the template. It assumes no HR function, no budget, and a manager who is genuinely too busy, because that is the actual situation.

CHAPTER 1

What a first week is actually for

Most first weeks are organised around information transfer: here are the tools, here are the processes, here is the client list. That is the least important thing happening.

A first week has three real jobs, and only one of them is information.

Producing one piece of real work. Nothing settles a new person like having contributed something by Friday, however small. It converts them from a guest into a participant, and it tells you more about them than any interview did.

Teaching them who to ask. In a small company the map of who knows what is the single most valuable thing to hold, and it is entirely undocumented. A new person who knows who to ask can find anything. One who does not will guess, and guessing is where the expensive mistakes live.

Setting the standard. Whatever happens in week one becomes normal. If nobody reviews their work, they learn that work is not reviewed. If the first document they write goes unremarked, they learn what the bar is. **The first week is the most efficient teaching window you will ever have and it is usually spent on software logins.**

> **They will learn how this company works in their first fortnight whether or not anyone teaches them.**

CHAPTER 2

The week before they arrive

Nearly everything that goes wrong in a first week was decided in the week before it, by nobody, through inaction.

01 Access, tested by a human

Every account created and actually logged into by someone before day one. Not requested. Tested. A new person spending Monday morning locked out learns something about the company you did not intend to teach.

02 A named first-week owner

One person responsible for them being all right, who is not necessarily their manager. Without this, everybody assumes somebody else is checking, and nobody is.

03 Their first task, chosen in advance

Small, real, useful and finishable in the first three days. Choosing it beforehand means it is a considered piece of work rather than whatever was on fire on Tuesday.

04 Six meetings booked

The people they will need most, twenty minutes each, spread across the week. Booked before they arrive, because a new person will not chase a senior colleague for a meeting and should not have to.

05 A written statement of what success looks like at ninety days

Two or three sentences. It is the single most useful document they will receive and the one most companies never write.

That list takes about two hours and it is the difference between a designed week and a week that merely happened.

CHAPTER 3

Day one

The goal on day one is not productivity. It is that they end the day knowing where they fit, who to ask, and what they are doing tomorrow.

Start with why the role exists, not with the tools. What was going wrong that caused someone to decide this job needed to be filled. That single explanation does more for a new person's judgment than a week of process documentation, because it tells them what to optimise for when the rules run out.

Then the map, not the manual. Who does what, who to ask about which thing, and who is easy to interrupt. A small business runs on this and none of it is written down anywhere.

Give them the first task before lunch. Real work, with a clear definition of done and a person to ask. The afternoon of day one is when a new person most wants something to do and is least likely to say so.

End the day with fifteen minutes. What surprised you, what was confusing, what do you need. Ask it on day one and you will get honest answers, because they have not yet learned what is normal to complain about.

WHAT NOT TO DO ON DAY ONE

Do not schedule seven hours of meetings. Do not give a tour of every system. Do not hand over a hundred-page document. All three feel thorough and all three produce a person who is exhausted and knows nothing, because none of it was attached to anything they were doing.

CHAPTER 4

The first ten days

After day one the risk changes. The new person now looks settled, everyone returns to their own work, and the second week is where quiet drift begins.

Review the first piece of work properly, in person, and be specific. This is the highest-leverage half hour of the entire onboarding. Whatever standard you apply here becomes the standard they hold. Vague approval teaches them that nobody is really looking.

Give them something to own by day ten, however small. Ownership, not assistance. A recurring task that is genuinely theirs, with a definition of done, changes how they relate to the work and gives them something to be competent at while everything else is still unfamiliar.

Have them write down what they learned. A new person is the only one who can see what is confusing, and that ability expires in about three weeks. Ask them to keep notes on anything that took longer to work out than it should have. That document becomes the onboarding guide for the next hire, written for free by the person best placed to write it.

Every new hire should leave behind a better version of the process that brought them in. Do that three times and you have a genuine onboarding system assembled from the observations of people who actually needed one.

CHAPTER 5

Teaching judgment, not just tasks

Tasks are the easy part and they transfer through documentation. Judgment is what makes someone useful and it transfers only through exposure and correction.

Explain the reasoning behind decisions they were not part of. When something is decided in their first month, tell them why, briefly. Not because they need to approve it, but because a dozen of those explanations build an internal model of how this business thinks, which is what they will use the first time something happens that no procedure covers.

Let them make small decisions early and correct them out loud. A new person who is never allowed to decide anything for two months learns to check everything, and that habit is very hard to unlearn afterwards. Give them a low-stakes category immediately, and when they get one wrong, say so plainly and explain the reasoning.

Tell them the unwritten rules on purpose. Which client is sensitive about tone. Which internal deadline is real and which is aspirational. Who to copy on what. This is exactly what nobody writes down and exactly what a new person gets wrong in month two, at which point everybody privately wonders whether they were the right hire.

> **People are rarely fired for not knowing the process. They are quietly written off for not knowing the things nobody told them.**

CHAPTER 6

The thirty day check

Thirty days is the right moment for a real conversation, and almost nobody in a small company has one. The person is past the novelty, has formed genuine impressions, and is still willing to say them.

Four questions, in this order, and then mostly listen.

What is different from what you expected? Their answer tells you what your hiring process is promising, accurately or otherwise, and it is information you cannot get any other way.

What has taken longer than it should? This is your process audit, delivered by the only person who can still see the friction.

What are you not sure you are allowed to do? Almost always there is something. Answering it releases capability that has been sitting idle for a month.

What would you need to be confident by day ninety? Then write down what you agree, because a thirty-day conversation that produces nothing written is a pleasant chat they will discount.

AND SAY THE HONEST THING

If something is not going well at thirty days, say it now, specifically, with what needs to change. Almost every failed hire in a small business was visible at week four and addressed at month five, by which point the conversation is a dismissal rather than a correction.

CHAPTER 7

What the manager owes them

An operator can run everything above, and three things still belong to whoever this person reports to.

Time in the first fortnight, protected in advance. Not availability in principle. Booked slots. A manager who is genuinely too busy in week two is telling the new person exactly how much this hire mattered, and they will believe it.

A written statement of what success looks like. Two or three sentences about what should be true at ninety days. Without it the person invents their own version, works hard against it, and may be disappointed at a review for missing a target that never existed.

Correction while it is still cheap. The instinct in a small friendly company is to let early mistakes pass, because it feels kind and because the person is new. It is neither kind nor efficient. A habit corrected in week two costs a sentence; the same habit corrected in month six costs a difficult meeting and a person who reasonably asks why nobody mentioned it before.

None of these requires an HR function or a budget. They require somebody to decide that the first month of a person's employment is worth designing, which in most small businesses nobody has ever decided.

CLOSING

The week they remember

People remember their first week at a company for as long as they work there, and often for years afterwards. They remember whether the laptop was ready. They remember whether anyone had thought about them. They remember the first time somebody reviewed their work and whether it was taken seriously.

None of that requires a programme. It requires two hours of preparation the week before, a first task chosen deliberately, six meetings booked in advance, one honest conversation at day thirty, and a manager who protects a little time when it matters most.

And it compounds. Ask every new person to write down what confused them, and after three hires you have an onboarding system built by the only people qualified to build it.

If you are the assistant or operations person reading this and nobody has asked you to own onboarding: own it anyway. It is unclaimed, it is visible, it is genuinely valuable, and it is one of the clearest ways to demonstrate that you operate rather than assist.

Start with the next person who joins. The preparation is one afternoon and they will feel the difference on the first morning.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Senior Executive Assistant, Operations and Project Manager.
Ten years supporting C-level leadership. Available for remote work.

me.kabuhayan.app
linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo
pacardopaul18@gmail.com