

The First 90 Days on a Major Project

How to Enter, Read and Become Useful to a New Team

The first ninety days should produce orientation, trust and control—not a performance of instant certainty.

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Document Status and Use

CONTROLLED USE *This is an external Buildit development resource. It is not company policy, an industrial instrument, a competency matrix, legal advice or a guarantee of promotion, remuneration or retention. Adapt it to the client's delegations, systems, privacy requirements, project controls and formal people processes.*

Purpose

An onboarding and internal-transfer playbook for reading a major project's contract, controls, people, legacy issues and informal operating system without creating early political or commercial mistakes.

Audience

New starters, internal transfers and consultants entering major or distressed projects.

How to Use This Manual

1. Read the relevant chapter before a live conversation, review or decision—not after the consequence has already landed.
2. Apply the method to current project work. The suite is designed to change observable behaviour, not merely increase awareness.
3. Record the decision, action, owner, evidence and review date produced by the exercise.
4. Use the related manuals where the issue crosses career, communication, judgement, leadership or stakeholder boundaries.

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1. Before Day One

Arrive with questions, boundaries and a plan to learn—not a verdict about the project.

Obtain the role mandate, reporting line, key project documents, delegations, current phase and immediate priorities. Clarify confidentiality and any issues that cannot wait for normal onboarding.

Operating Checks

15. Confirm role, authority, package and reporting expectations.
16. Request the head contract, key subcontracts, current forecast, risk register, programme and organisation chart.
17. Ask what senior stakeholders believe is most urgent and where prior attempts have failed.
18. Avoid private conclusions based on one person's handover.

2. Map the Formal and Informal Team

The organisation chart shows accountability; the first month reveals who actually carries context and influence.

Map project leadership, commercial, delivery, design, planning, finance, legal, procurement, client, consultant and key subcontractor interfaces.

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19. Contract and deal: understand the governing terms, tender assumptions, qualifications, delegations and known exposures.
20. Commercial position: establish the forecast, cash position, procurement status, claims, variations and unresolved risk.
21. People: map your line manager, delivery team, client, consultants, subcontractors and the people who actually move decisions.
22. Rhythm: learn the reporting cycle, meeting structure, decision forums and preferred escalation path.
23. Credibility: identify one useful problem you can resolve early without pretending to understand the entire project.
24. Day 30, 60 and 90: confirm what you now understand, what remains uncertain and which responsibility you are ready to carry next.

Project People Map

Person / group	Formal role	Information / influence	Engagement route

3. Read the Contract and Commercial Strategy

Do not administer clauses in isolation from the deal the project priced and the strategy it is pursuing.

Understand scope, exclusions, qualifications, design responsibility, time, payment, change, security, insurance, dispute and approval pathways. Then compare tender assumptions with current reality.

Operating Checks

25. Identify material time bars and notice obligations.
26. Trace the delegation and approval limits attached to your work.
27. Understand booked opportunities, known exposures and settlement strategy.
28. Ask which inherited positions are evidence-based and which are simply repeated.

4. Read the Cost Report, Cash and Risk Register

The numbers reveal where the project is confident, hopeful and avoiding a decision.

Reconcile forecast, commitments, accruals, variations, claims, cash, contingency and risk. Focus first on large movement, ageing items and assumptions without owners.

Commercial Position Scan

Area	What to test	Initial finding / owner
Forecast	Movement, optimism and unsupported recovery	
Cash	Certified, collected, retention and disputed	
Procurement	Unlet scope and market exposure	
Claims / variations	Age, evidence and decision pathway	
Risk	Owner, value, trigger and mitigation	

5. Find the Legacy Issues

An inherited narrative is not an inherited fact.

List ageing claims, incomplete notices, unresolved instructions, weak records, disputed baselines, relationships under strain and decisions that repeatedly return to meetings.

Operating Checks

29. Separate confirmed fact, inherited opinion and unresolved assumption.
30. Identify urgent time bars and authority gaps.
31. Ask who has already attempted resolution and what stopped it.
32. Do not reopen settled issues casually; understand the governance and relationship history.

6. Learn the Programme and Critical Interfaces

Commercial consequence follows the construction sequence.

Understand critical path, design releases, access, possessions, commissioning, client dependencies and interfaces between packages. A package can be contractually contained and operationally central.

Operating Checks

33. Walk the work with delivery and planning staff.
34. Identify interfaces where delay or scope ambiguity will move between packages.
35. Connect notices and claims to actual programme evidence.
36. Learn which milestones carry external or political consequence.

7. Establish the Line-Manager Operating Agreement

The fastest route to trust is clear authority, update rhythm and no-surprise behaviour.

Agree current priorities, decision boundaries, review expectations, escalation thresholds and development objectives.

Your line manager's interest in your success does not need to be selfless to be real.

Your line manager is judged partly through you. If you perform well, it reflects their ability to select, direct and develop capable people. If you repeatedly fail, it raises questions about why expectations were unclear, support was inadequate or intervention came too late.

Your performance remains your responsibility. But it also becomes evidence about their leadership. Whether you like each other or not, you are attached to the same outcome.

Their Scoreboard

- 37. Results: cost, margin, cash, programme, procurement, claims, quality, safety and client outcomes.
- 38. Control: accurate forecasts, early identification of risk, sound governance and no preventable surprises.
- 39. People: team output, retention, development, performance management and succession.
- 40. Confidence: whether senior management and the client trust them to hold their area without constant intervention.

There is also an informal test: does their team create problems or resolve them? Do good people improve under them? When they recommend someone, is their judgement trusted? Your work contributes to their answer.

They Are Also Your Shield

Most employees see the pressure their manager applies. They do not see the pressure their manager absorbs. When a forecast moves, a notice is missed, a client escalates or a package falls over, your manager is usually the person required to explain why it was not known, controlled or escalated earlier.

A good manager acts as a pressure regulator, not a pipe. They absorb the anger, separate useful direction from executive heat and return with a problem the team can still solve. The calm conversation you receive downstairs may follow a significantly harder conversation upstairs.

Tolerance also changes with level. A junior's mistake is usually a capability or supervision issue. The same mistake from a senior person becomes a question of judgement. At management level it becomes a failure of control or leadership. At director level repeated surprises become a question of whether the business can continue to trust you.

Your manager can only shield you if you give them something defensible. Early warning, accurate facts, ownership and a credible recovery plan allow them to protect you. Late surprises and changing explanations leave them exposed.

The Useful Alignment

A stronger employee carries more responsibility, requires less correction and gives the manager more time to deal with work that genuinely requires their authority. Your improvement strengthens their team and makes their own advancement easier to defend. Aligned self-interest is useful.

The qualification is that your development must support the work they remain accountable for. If you chase visibility while leaving packages exposed, seek promotion without a handover or cultivate senior

relationships by embarrassing your manager, your ambition becomes a cost to them. Become more valuable without becoming less dependable.

Read the Pressure Behind the Personality

The manager interrogating every forecast may previously have been blindsided by a major movement. The manager insisting on written records may have inherited a dispute with no evidence. The manager reluctant to recommend someone may have backed a person who failed publicly and damaged their credibility.

Understanding the cause does not excuse bad management. It helps you respond to the real exposure rather than merely taking offence. People often call a manager controlling when the manager is managing uncertainty badly. Remove the uncertainty and you may remove much of the control.

Make the Relationship Work

41. Give early warning. Bad news delivered early creates options; bad news delivered late creates exposure.
42. Bring a recommendation with the problem: consequence, options, preferred response and decision required.
43. Learn their communication rhythm. Ask what they need, in what format and how often.
44. Close loops. If you say something will be done, confirm when it is done.
45. Give them evidence they can defend before asking them to attach their reputation to your advancement.

The relationship remains reciprocal. Your manager owes you clear expectations, usable feedback, appropriate authority and support with obstacles above your level. A manager who transfers responsibility without clarity or authority is not delegating; they are transferring exposure.

When the Alignment Fails

The principle applies broadly, not universally. Some managers hoard capable people, feel threatened by strong employees, take credit, transfer blame or block movement because replacement would be inconvenient. Clarify expectations, keep accurate records and test your interpretation with credible people. Build relationships beyond the reporting line without ambushing your manager. If the pattern continues, use appropriate channels or leave.

THE PRACTICAL POSITION You share a scoreboard. Make it easier for your line manager to trust, defend and support you, and expect them to provide the clarity, authority and backing required for you to perform.

Manager Alignment

Topic	Agreement
Top three priorities	
Delegation / approvals	
Update rhythm	
Immediate escalation triggers	
Review standard	
90-day success evidence	

8. Build Relationships Without Joining a Faction

Listen widely, contribute early and avoid importing another person's enemies.

Major projects accumulate history. Treat complaints as information requiring corroboration. Become useful across boundaries without becoming a carrier of gossip.

Operating Checks

- 46. Meet each critical function and ask what they need from the commercial team.
- 47. Acknowledge prior work before proposing change.
- 48. Do not promise a result before understanding authority and evidence.
- 49. Give credit for inherited strengths as well as naming gaps.

9. Create a Credible Early Win

Resolve something useful enough to matter and contained enough to understand.

An early win should close an ageing issue, improve visibility, remove uncertainty or establish a reliable rhythm. Avoid claiming ownership of results produced before arrival.

Example — the ageing variation

EXAMPLE *A new Contracts Manager finds a variation that has circulated for four months. Rather than reopen every argument, they identify the two remaining evidence gaps, arrange a focused review with delivery and the client representative, and close the assessment within three weeks. The win demonstrates control and respect for prior work.*

10. Days 30, 60 and 90

Each checkpoint should convert new understanding into clearer ownership and fewer unknowns.

Day 30 establishes the map and urgent controls. Day 60 tests relationships, assumptions and operating rhythm. Day 90 confirms the role's stable mandate and the next capability or recovery priorities.

30–60–90 Plan

Checkpoint	Required outcome	Evidence
Day 30	Team, contract, commercial position and urgent risks mapped	
Day 60	Priority workstreams owned; assumptions tested; rhythm operating	
Day 90	Credible contributions recorded; next scope and development agreed	

Commitments and Review

Use this page to convert the manual into a small number of observable commitments. A manual has no value if the reader cannot identify what will be done differently, where it will be practised and what evidence will prove the change.

Commitment	Practice ground	Evidence / reviewer	Review date

Related Buildit Manuals

- 50. 03 — The Commercial Construction Industry Map
- 51. 05 — Navigating the Tier 1 Organisation
- 52. 10 — Recovering a Difficult Package
- 53. 17 — Stakeholder Pathway and Communication Routing Playbook

Closing Position

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Notes
