

# You Made It to the Top – But No One Trusts You Yet. Do These 4 Things to Change That

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You made it. After years of building, optimizing and scaling to the nth degree, you've earned a seat at the table in the C-suite. Not just a C-suite title, still reporting to another executive who makes the real decisions; you are actually in the "situation room." You bring a deep understanding of the technology that powers your business. You celebrate. You update your LinkedIn. Then day one arrives.

And you realize something: People are a bit skeptical of you, and it isn't just the people below you. People above you, your peers and the investors all seem to have a certain take on you.

You learn quickly that a title alone doesn't build trust. Your technical brilliance doesn't move your team, your peers and your executive counterparts. They're looking for leadership that values business outcomes rather than just technical best practices. This is why you're the CTO/CIO, not the IT person.

In an article he co-authored, Harvard Business School professor Boris Groysberg said, "Technical skills are merely a starting point, the bare minimum. Requirements for all the C-level jobs have shifted toward business acumen and 'softer' leadership skills." This next stage is about blending driving value with your expertise, rather than just explaining how things work.

Let's go over some of the roles you need to fill and milestones you need to hit in your first year on the job.

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## Day one: Everyone is going to lie to you (unintentionally)

On day one, you'll ask questions and hear confident answers. But most of them will be incomplete and even sometimes completely inaccurate, but hold your judgment initially.

It's not deception. It's diffusion. In any organization of scale, no single person holds the full picture. Documentation is outdated. Systems are interconnected in convoluted and undocumented ways. History is buried in inboxes and hallway conversations. Late-night crises solved by sleepless IT staff have gotten the company back up by morning, but only by a patchwork that makes little sense.

The instinct, especially as a first-time leader, is to clean house. To draw hard lines between what's broken and what's working properly and who's to blame. Trust me, resist that.

Why? Because if you say, "This is all bunk, we're starting over," or we are in the mess because the last guard was incompetent, you're not leading; you are actively setting yourself up for the same demise. As The Who once sang, "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss."

Instead, don't give in to the easy blame, trust that there is always context and be **the** empath in your organization. This means active listening without judgment, understanding how and why decisions were made before assuming they were wrong and recognizing that institutional constraints often explain more than incompetence ever could.

When you seek to understand, not audit, you become the kind of leader people trust with the truth.

## **Week one: Start speaking in business, not just systems**

The fastest way to lose trust in your first week is to speak in technical jargon and expect others to keep up. They won't. And they shouldn't have to.

Your job now is to be the translator. That means reframing technology conversations into business impact.

Saying, "We need \$250,000 or we risk being hacked," might be true. But it sounds like fear-based budgeting. Instead, say, "This investment reduces our incident response time and enables faster feature delivery, which directly affects our speed to market."

You're not dumbing it down. You're tuning it up. You're connecting the dots between what the system needs and what the business values. That's leadership.

And if you can't do that yet, now's the time to learn.

## **Quarter one: Deliver value that ripples across departments**

You don't need a moonshot in your first 90 days. However, you do need a win, one that demonstrates your understanding of how the business operates, not just how the tech stacks up.

Pick a persistent pain point that cuts across teams. Fix a bottleneck in onboarding. Streamline reporting. Solve something people have silently suffered through.

This is where the operator shows up, a role that combines

execution with empathy. You're proving that your leadership isn't just smart. It's useful, visible and repeatable.

And just as important: make sure the win isn't just yours. Highlight the teammates who made it possible. Trust builds faster when people see your leadership as expansive, not self-serving.

## **Year one: Don't demand the seat – earn it**

There's a common refrain among technical leaders: "We deserve more authority." You want to report to the CEO. You want a louder voice in strategy. You want influence.

If you want to be at the table, learn how that table works. Understand margin pressures. Know what drives your CFO's decisions. Learn how compliance constraints shape your CMO's roadmap. Understand how product timelines interact with hiring cycles.

A real executive doesn't just ask for influence. They wield it responsibly, cross-functionally, and with context.

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## **Create a space where tech leaders can thrive**

If you're already in the C-suite, part of your responsibility is to make sure your technical leaders gain buy-in and succeed.

That doesn't mean coddling. It means creating clarity.

- **Invite them early.** Don't bring your CTO in at the end of a strategy session to "weigh in." Bring them in when the

goals are still being shaped.

- **Set expectations.** Don't just ask for deliverables. Ask for insight. Ask them to explain how tech can enable outcomes, not just avoid outages.
- **Eliminate the silo.** Technology touches every department. The org chart should reflect that.
- **Reward translation.** The best CTOs turn complexity into clarity. They make everyone around them smarter. That's the leadership skill we should be measuring.

When technical leaders fail, it's rarely a failure of intelligence. It's a failure of integration.

If you're seated in the "big chair," you can't expect people to intuit where they need to go. You need to build the bridge. You have to make everyone around you smarter, more capable, and more confident in their decisions because you're part of the conversation.

That's what makes you trusted. And that's what makes you dangerous – in the best way.

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