PLAYBOOK · FREE RESOURCE

The First 90 Days as CPO or VP Product

A phase-by-phase plan for a newly hired CPO or VP Product: what to learn in days 1-30, what to decide in days 31-60, and what to commit to and run by day 90, with interview questions and documents to produce.

By **Ratomir Jovanovic** · ratomir.com/resources/first-90-days-product-leader

This playbook is for a product leader who has just accepted, or is about to start, a CPO or VP Product role. It also works for a CEO or founder who has hired one and wants to agree on what the first quarter should produce. It assumes you are joining a company with a live product, paying customers and an existing team, not a blank page.

The outcome is a first quarter with a clear shape. By day 90 you should have a written strategy the leadership team has argued with and accepted, a roadmap tied to it, an operating cadence that runs without you pushing it, a hiring plan, and a story you can tell the board. Just as important, you should have earned enough trust that people bring you bad news early.

How to use this

1. Before day one, open the Word plan (First 90 Days Plan) and fill in the context section: why you were hired, what the CEO said success looks like, and what you already know about the product and team.
2. In the first week, build the stakeholder map in the template and book your interviews. Aim for 25 to 40 conversations across the first 30 days.
3. Log every interview in the interview log the same day. Patterns only appear when the notes are consistent.
4. At the end of each phase, write the phase document listed below and share it with the CEO before anyone else.
5. Use the 90-day scorecard to agree on what "good" looks like at day 30, and review it with the CEO at days 30, 60 and 90.
6. Keep the PDF guide nearby for the interview questions and warning signs. Do not try to run every step; pick what fits the company's stage.

The three phases at a glance

Phase	Days	Main question	Primary output
Listen and map	1-30	What is actually true here?	Discovery memo

Phase	Days	Main question	Primary output
Diagnose and decide	31-60	What matters most, and what are we going to stop?	Strategy draft and portfolio review
Commit and operate	61-90	How will we run this, week after week?	Roadmap, cadence, metrics, hiring plan, board narrative

The phases overlap in practice. You will make small decisions in month one and keep learning in month three. The point of the structure is to stop you from committing to a strategy before you understand the business, and from listening forever because deciding is uncomfortable.

Days 1-30: listen and map

The job in the first month is to build an accurate picture of six things: people, customers, product, data, architecture and money. Most new leaders over-invest in the product and under-invest in money and data, which is where the real constraints usually sit.

People. Meet every direct report one to one in week one, then every PM, designer and engineering lead in the first three weeks. Meet your peers: the CTO, the heads of sales, customer success, marketing and finance. Ask the CEO who the informal leaders are, then confirm it for yourself.

Customers. Talk to at least ten customers in the first month, including two who churned or are at risk. Sit in on sales calls and support queues. Read the last three months of support tickets in bulk rather than sampling a few.

Product. Use the product as a new customer would, from sign-up to the first meaningful outcome. Write down every point of confusion before you get used to it, because in three weeks you will not see it anymore.

Data. Find out which metrics the company actually trusts, who owns the definitions, and how long it takes to answer a simple question like "what was net revenue retention by segment last quarter?"

Architecture. Ask the CTO for a one-hour walkthrough of the system, the main dependencies and the parts the team is afraid to touch. You do not need to judge the architecture yet, only to know where it limits what product can promise.

Money. Understand revenue by segment and product line, gross margin, burn, runway and the cost of the product and engineering organization. Know which customers make up the top 20 percent of revenue.

Stakeholder interview questions

Use the same core questions with everyone so you can compare answers. Add role-specific ones on top.

1. What is this company better at than anyone else, and how do you know?
2. If you had my job, what would you do in the first month?
3. What is the product team doing that it should stop?

4. Where do decisions get stuck, and who has to say yes?
5. Which customer or deal do you think about most, and why?
6. What has been tried before and failed?
7. What do you think I was hired to fix?
8. What would make you trust the product team more?

For peers in sales and customer success, add: "Which promises have we made to customers that the roadmap does not cover?" For engineering: "What would you rebuild if you had a quarter with no feature requests?" For finance: "Which product bet would you cut first if we had to save money?"

How AI tools speed up discovery

AI tools are useful in this phase because most of the input is unstructured text. Feed interview notes (with names removed if your company policy requires it) into a language model and ask it to group recurring themes, contradictions between functions, and claims that need data to confirm. Do the same with exported support tickets, sales call transcripts, churn survey responses and product reviews. You can also ask a model to summarize long product requirement documents and old strategy decks so you can see how the story has changed over time.

Two rules keep this honest. First, check every theme against the source text before you repeat it to anyone. Models produce confident summaries of patterns that are not there. Second, check your company's data policy before uploading customer data to any external tool. In a fintech or regulated business this is not optional.

Phase output: the discovery memo. Two to four pages: what you heard, what you saw, where those differ, and the five to seven questions phase two must answer. Share it with the CEO first, then a shortened version with your peers.

Days 31-60: diagnose and decide

The second month turns observations into choices. You are not writing the final strategy yet. You are writing a draft good enough for people to disagree with.

Strategy draft. State the diagnosis (the main challenge the product faces), the guiding policy (how you will approach it), and the first coherent actions. Keep it to three pages. If you cannot name what you are choosing not to do, it is not a strategy yet.

Portfolio review. List every product, major feature area and in-flight initiative. For each, record revenue or usage contribution, cost to maintain, strategic fit, and a recommendation: invest, maintain, fix or sunset. This is often the first time the company sees all of its commitments on one page.

Team and process changes. Decide on the structural issues you can see: team boundaries that cause constant hand-offs, roles that are missing, people in the wrong seats. Make the obvious changes now and plan the harder ones. Waiting until day 120 to address a clear performance problem costs you credibility with everyone who could already see it.

Quick wins. Pick two or three improvements that are visible, low risk and genuinely useful: fixing a broken onboarding step, killing a recurring meeting nobody values, publishing a clear release note.

Quick wins earn time for the slower work. They should not become the strategy.

Phase output: strategy draft and portfolio review, pressure-tested with the CEO, CTO and the heads of revenue functions in at least one working session each.

Days 61-90: commit and operate

The third month makes the strategy operational. If it only lives in a document, it will be replaced by the next urgent customer request.

Roadmap. Build a roadmap that shows outcomes and themes for the next two quarters, with committed items only where the team has done enough discovery to commit. Make the link to the strategy explicit for every theme.

Operating cadence. Define the rhythm: weekly product reviews, monthly business reviews with metrics, quarterly planning, and how decisions are recorded. Write down who attends, what is decided in each forum, and what is escalated.

Metrics. Agree on a small set of product metrics, usually one north-star measure plus three to five input metrics, with owners and definitions signed off by finance or data.

Hiring plan. Map current roles against what the strategy requires. Prioritize the next three to five hires, with the reasoning and timing.

Board narrative. Prepare a short story for the board: what you found, what you decided, what you will deliver and how progress will be measured. Boards respond better to a clear diagnosis and a few commitments than to a long list of initiatives.

Documents to produce

Document	Due	Audience	Length
90-day scorecard (agreed targets)	Day 10	CEO	One page
Discovery memo	Day 30	CEO, then leadership team	2-4 pages
Strategy draft	Day 50	Leadership team	Up to 3 pages
Portfolio review	Day 55	CEO, CTO, CFO	One table plus notes
Roadmap and metrics	Day 80	Whole company	1-2 pages
Operating cadence and hiring plan	Day 85	Leadership team	1-2 pages
Board narrative	Day 90	Board	5-8 slides

Warning signs

Some signals tell you early that the role is harder than it looked. None is fatal on its own, but each needs a conversation with the CEO.

- The CEO describes the product role as "execution" while also expecting you to own the strategy.
- Sales commitments to named customers already fill most of the next two quarters.
- Nobody can produce basic metrics like retention by cohort without a week of manual work.
- Your predecessor left recently and nobody will say clearly why.
- Engineering and product report into different leaders who do not meet regularly.
- Every interviewee names a different top priority, and the CEO thinks there is alignment.

Worked example: joining a Series B fintech SaaS

This example is hypothetical. A VP Product joins a Series B company that sells accounts payable automation to mid-market finance teams. The company has around 300 customers, a product team of five PMs and three designers, and an engineering team of about 40. The CEO hired a VP Product because growth has slowed and enterprise deals keep stalling.

In the first 30 days, the interviews show a split. Sales believes the company is losing enterprise deals because of missing approval workflows. Customer success says the bigger issue is that mid-market customers struggle to connect their ERP and quietly churn in the first six months. Support tickets back up customer success: integration problems are the largest ticket category. The data team can produce churn by cohort, but only by hand. The CTO explains that the integration layer was built quickly for two ERPs and every new connector takes a full quarter.

The discovery memo frames the core question: is the company an enterprise product with a mid-market problem, or a mid-market product chasing enterprise deals it cannot yet serve?

In days 31 to 60, the portfolio review shows that enterprise features absorb about half of engineering capacity while enterprise customers are a small share of revenue. The strategy draft proposes focusing the next two quarters on mid-market activation and retention, rebuilding the integration layer so new connectors take weeks rather than a quarter, and pausing two enterprise features with no signed customer behind them. Quick wins include an integration health page for customers and a weekly churn-risk report for customer success.

In days 61 to 90, the roadmap is built around two themes, integration platform and first-90-day activation. The north-star metric becomes the share of new customers processing invoices through a connected ERP within 30 days. The hiring plan adds a platform PM and an integration engineer lead. The board narrative explains why the company is deferring enterprise expansion for two quarters, and what evidence would reopen it.

Common mistakes

Changing things in week one to look decisive. Early changes made without context often have to be reversed, and reversals cost more trust than waiting would have.

Listening only to leadership. Senior people give you the official story. Individual PMs, engineers, support agents and customers give you the real one. You need both.

Treating the strategy as a deliverable rather than an agreement. A strategy the CEO and CTO did not shape will not survive the first difficult quarter.

Inheriting the roadmap without questioning it. If you adopt the existing roadmap by default, you become accountable for decisions you never made.

Ignoring the money. Product leaders who cannot discuss margin, runway and revenue concentration lose influence with the CEO and the board quickly.

Over-relying on AI summaries. They are a fast first pass, not evidence. Quote customers, not the model.

When not to use this

This plan is built for a senior hire into an established product organization. If you are the first product person at a seed-stage company, the 30-day listening phase is too long; you will be shipping within weeks and the "team" may be two engineers. If you are joining a company in crisis, such as a failing launch, a security incident or a runway under six months, compress the phases and agree with the CEO which two or three decisions cannot wait. And if you are promoted internally, skip much of the mapping you already know, but still run the interviews: people will tell a new boss things they never told a colleague.

Editable template: First 90 Days Plan (Word), available at ratomir.com/resources/first-90-days-product-leader

© 2026 Ratomir Jovanovic. Free to use inside your team. Please link to ratomir.com/resources/first-90-days-product-leader when you share it.