

How to Start Your Role as a Plant Manager

Congratulations! After a transition period, or perhaps just a couple of weeks since you gave notice at your previous company, today is your first day as **Plant Manager** at a new organization.

If this isn't your first time in this position, you likely already have an idea of the steps needed to generate the expected impact. This article, however, is designed for those who have not yet had that experience. The objective is for these recommendations to strengthen your actions and confirm that you have what it takes to take the reins of an industrial manufacturing plant.

The following points are fundamental; you can expand upon them based on your specific situation and previous career path.

1. Know Your Team

Dedicate time to getting to know your direct reports. Ensure you schedule one-on-one meetings with every key person on your new management team.

- **Order and Time:** Do not overlook any position. It is recommended to schedule these in strict alphabetical order (by last name) to avoid hurting sensibilities regarding perceived hierarchies. Dedicate at least an hour and a half to each person.
- **Preparation:** Have a list of questions ready and record the answers so you can compare perspectives later. Use open-ended questions; remember you want to capture your collaborators' thoughts and their perspectives on the business situation.
- **Focus:** You will notice how the same problem looks different from different "trenches" and how priorities may be misaligned among your new team members.
- **Boundaries:** At this stage, avoid personal questions; these initial meetings should be very formal and focused on the business. There will be time later to get to know the team informally.

2. Know Your Plant: The "Gemba" Principle

"Gemba, gembutsu, genjitsu": the real place, the real thing, and the real data. This principle from the **Toyota Production System** dictates that the only way to understand a problem in depth is to go to the site where it occurs, observe the object of the problem, and analyze the data that confirms the deviation.

- **Exhaustive Tour:** In your first few days, walk through all areas of the plant without exception, from the offices to the restrooms in the production area. Including the exterior of the plant as well; you might be surprised by what you find.
- **Guided and Individual Walks:** It is suggested to perform walks with different functional managers to understand how aligned they are with the reality of the production floor, the cafeteria, or the compressor room. Don't worry if you walk through the same processes with more than one functional manager. The perspective will surely differ between the Quality Manager and the Production Manager.
- **Active Listening:** Also walk alone to greet employees in their work areas: ask how they feel, listen to their problems and proposals. Pay special attention to walking the production area. Remember that their work—transforming raw material into a finished product—is the only thing that represents value for the company's customers.

3. Recognize Weak and Strong Points

Now is the time to be exhausted in reviewing the numbers. Analyze:

- **Indicators:** What do the KPIs and financial results from previous periods say?
- **Voice of the Customer:** How is the plant's performance evaluated from the outside?
- **Internal Processes:** Review compliance with controls, absenteeism, and turnover.
- **New Product Launches:** Take special care with the new product launch process, as a poor product launch can lead to serious problems if not handled with discipline.

4. Prepare Your Plan and Communicate It

Keep a record of both positive and negative findings. Positive findings will help you reinforce strengths with your team and superiors. Negative findings should be grouped by category (Safety, Quality, Production, Launches, etc.) and classified according to their potential impact.

- **Collaborative Action Plan:** Share the first draft with your team and have honest discussions with functional leads. They must participate in creating the action plan to foster accountability and contribute their ideas.
- **People Management:** If you detect that a team member needs additional help, discuss it privately to avoid hurting sensibilities.
- **Resource Allocation:** Be careful with resource assignment; you don't want to drive someone to burn out, which would cause unfinished tasks and frustration.

- **30-60-90 Strategy:** The final deliverable is your plan for the next 30, 60, and 90 days. Doing this conscientiously will demonstrate to your superiors that you understand current conditions and know how to take the plant to the next level.

5. Align Your Findings

Your plan must be aligned with corporate, divisional, or plant objectives. These annual objectives determine where company resources will be invested. Ignoring this point could result in a lack of organizational support when you need external resources. Additionally, an aligned plan will facilitate the preparation of presentations for senior management.

6. Share, Communicate, and Follow Up

Finally, share the plan with the extended team. The Plant Manager should be seen as a **Change Agent** who arrives to achieve a positive impact.

- **Work Rhythm:** Create "momentum" with your direct reports and schedule weekly meetings to review progress. Be flexible regarding urgent problems that require immediate action.
- **Results, Not Just Activity:** You can use task management tools for tracking, but ensure everyone understands that the important thing is the final result, not just "closing" tasks to clear a list.
- **Celebrating Achievements:** Maintaining a good work environment is also your responsibility. Once milestones are reached, informally gather the team, a soccer match, or a bowling outing—to recognize their contributions.

These points are intended to help you create the impact organizations expect from a new Plant Manager. These steps are not only useful for the first time you take on a position; they can also be regular practice to create a roadmap and achieve operational excellence.