

Starter Pack: the first evening

Checklist + 3 templates + Chapter 10 “The 30-Day Diagnosis”.

You just accepted the role (or you're about to). Spend one evening here instead of in the codebase. This pack gets you through the first 72 hours and hands you the book's Chapter 10 in full, so you can see exactly how the 30-day diagnosis works.

What's inside

- A first-evening checklist (hours 0–72).
- 3 fill-in templates to use in week 1.
- Chapter 10 of the Playbook — “The 30-Day Diagnosis”, in full.

First-evening checklist

Hours 0-24 — Listen, don't fix.

- Ask the CEO & peers 3 questions; take notes; promise nothing.
- Resist commenting on code/tooling/process — you're mapping, not judging.
- Write down what people repeat. Repetition is signal.

Hours 24-48 — Map the terrain.

- Find where decisions actually get made (not the org chart).
- Separate the loudest fire from the deepest risk.
- Find the thing quietly broken that everyone tolerates.

Hours 48-72 — Send one signal.

- Ship one small, visible, low-risk win.
- Put exactly one expectation in writing.
- Lock a weekly slot with the CEO and with the team.

Three traps to avoid

- Announcing a reorg before you understand the terrain.
- Promising a big rewrite to look decisive.
- Taking a side in a conflict you haven't mapped.

3 templates

Template 1 — 30-Day Diagnosis worksheet (pairs with Chapter 10)

3 outcomes the CEO actually cares about: _____

The loudest fire: _____

The deepest (quiet) risk: _____

Hidden work the roadmap ignores: _____

One quick, visible win: _____

One risk I will name and accept: _____

My one-line ask to the CEO: _____

Template 2 — Stakeholder & decision map

Real decision-makers (not the org chart): _____

Allies I can rely on early: _____

Skeptics to win over: _____

The one person to align with first: _____

Template 3 — Decision Log (starter)

Date	Decision	A/B/C	Owner	Revisit

Chapter 10. The 30-Day Diagnosis

GOAL	PRIMARY RISK	KEY ARTIFACT
Turn three weeks of interviews and the baseline into one document that changes the conversation at the C-suite level.	The diagnosis turns into a safe list of complaints with no decisions made.	30-Day Diagnosis Memo

Meaning of the chapter

The 30-day diagnosis is **not a status report**. It is a document that physically changes the conversation with the CEO. Before the diagnosis the conversation ran on hopes, impressions and politics. After it — only on hard facts, concrete risks, and decisions the C-level must make right now.

Why it breaks

The diagnosis often fails catastrophically because it lacks a hard “decisions needed from leadership” block. **Without that block you get a pretty but politically safe slide deck**. The CEO nods politely, thanks you, and moves on calmly.

Working procedure

Step 1. Firmly structure the diagnosis into 5 management blocks: mandate, baseline facts, key risks, safe quick wins, decisions needed.

Step 2. Present each risk strictly as: hard fact → business impact → real owner → checkpoint date.

Step 3. Frame decisions **only as A/B/C options** — never as an open question.

Step 4. Always include at least one unpleasant systemic observation.

Step 5. End the document with a section “what I **deliberately did not understand** in 30 days.”

Executive decision matrix

DIAGNOSIS BLOCK	WHAT MUST BE INCLUDED	WHAT MUST CATEGORICALLY BE ABSENT	TARGET ARTIFACT
Mandate	How exactly you understood the task, the sensitive zones.	A retelling of the job description.	Mandate Contract

DIAGNOSIS BLOCK	WHAT MUST BE INCLUDED	WHAT MUST CATEGORICALLY BE ABSENT	TARGET ARTIFACT
Baseline facts	Delivery, reliability, cost, people, security.	A list of meetings held.	Baseline Inventory + Scorecard
Key risks	Top 5: fact → impact → owner → return point.	Drama or complaints.	Risk register
Decisions	A/B/C with my direct recommendation.	Open questions without options.	A/B/C Decision Request

RED FLAGS

- The diagnosis physically lacks even one unpleasant observation.
- There is no hard “decisions you need” block.
- Empty words “efficiency,” “optimization” appear without a hard fact.
- There is no honest “what I didn’t understand in 30 days” section.

Do-tomorrow checklist

- Assemble the diagnosis on one page plus appendices.
- Cut to the five main risks.
- Verify each risk against hard facts.
- Prepare three decisions with A/B/C options.

Chapter completion criterion

- The diagnosis follows: strengths → risks → decisions.
- The CEO, CPO, CFO understand their decisions.
- There’s at least one unpleasant observation.
- There’s an honest “what I didn’t understand in 30 days” section.

Practical artifacts of chapter 10

Artifact 10.1. 30-Day Diagnosis Memo — skeleton

SECTION	CONTENT
Mandate and context	How you understood the task, sensitive zones, red lines.

SECTION	CONTENT
Baseline facts	What delivery, reliability, cost, people and security physically show.
Key risks	Top 5: fact → impact → owner → return point.
Safe quick wins	Three initiatives with a metric and a rollback condition.
Decisions needed	Three questions with A/B/C options and my recommendation.
What I deliberately did not understand in 30 days	Where data was missing or access denied.

This is the first evening. The next 90 days are a system.

Securing your mandate, modelling real capacity, winning your budget and killing reliability theatre — the full operating system is The 90-Day CTO Playbook.

Get the Playbook → the90daycto.com