

FORGE

The CEO Operating System

Bill Canady

Day Zero

Set the clock, assess your readiness, write the plan in one sentence, and name what you still need to know.

A complete working section from the released fillable PDF edition.

Download and save this sample before filling it in. Use a PDF reader that supports forms, save your answers, then reopen the file to check them.

The original page numbers are retained. This sample includes the copyright page and pages 11-14 of the guide.

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Day Zero

Where you actually are, before you decide where you are going.

Everybody is at Day Zero until they have a plan.

That is not a motivational line. A CEO without a written plan is not on day four hundred of anything. They are on Day Zero, and they will stay there — collecting information, attending meetings, managing the noise — until they decide where the business is going and write it down.

The clock is the other half of it. It did not start when you took the job. It started when the investment was made, or the day somebody first said out loud that something was wrong, and it has not stopped since. It will not stop while you get up to speed. **Getting up to speed is your problem, not the company's.** Every day you spend at Day Zero, the company spends too.

The good news is the part people miss. Day Zero is a condition, not a date. You can leave it whenever you decide to. First week or eleventh year, it does not matter.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT IS MISSING

Your calendar is full and you could not say what any of it decided. Your leaders are working hard on things you did not choose. Three versions of the priority list exist and all three are defensible. Somebody asks what the plan is and four people answer differently, and everybody in the room hears it and says nothing.

The tell is the answer to *what are we trying to do this year*. If it takes more than one sentence, or a slide, you are at Day Zero.

IN THE PROGRAM

F1, *Welcome to the Journey*, sets the rules of the road: block the time, treat it as non-negotiable, decide who else on the leadership team goes through FORGE with you. Consistency beats intensity. This chapter is the page you fill in before F2.

WORKED EXAMPLE — HARROW AT DAY ZERO

Dana's first page, 8 September 2026.

QUESTION	DATE	HOW DO YOU KNOW
When did this company's clock start?	1 Jul 2025	Close of the Ashgrove acquisition
When does it end?	26 Mar 2028	Day 1,000. The sponsor's model assumes a sale process opens in the spring of 2028
What is the first date after today that somebody outside the company expects something from me?	21 Oct 2026	Q3 Board meeting
Days already spent, and by whom	434	159 by the interim team before I arrived; 275 by me

Dana scored the Day Zero assessment below at **three**. She could name her top twenty customers by revenue but not by profit. Nobody could say what it cost to serve the smallest thousand accounts. The Monday staff meeting reported activity and decided nothing. Her one sentence, first attempt, took forty-one words and a semicolon.

After the cut: **"Harrow earns \$22 million a year by March 2028, from the customers and products we are best at, with a team that runs without me in every meeting."** Sixty days later it would get a number the Board had signed. That day it was a sentence nobody else could say back to her.

WORKSHEET ONE — THE CLOCK

Dates, not feelings. If nobody has told you, write what you believe and mark it as a belief.

QUESTION	DATE	HOW DO YOU KNOW
When did this company's clock start? The investment, the acquisition, the covenant, the day somebody named the problem.		
When does it end? The exit window, the maturity, the refinancing, the day the money runs out.		
What is the first date after today that somebody outside this company expects something from you?		

Days already spent, and by whom.

Days remaining. Write the number, not the phrase.

WORKSHEET TWO — THE FORGE READINESS ASSESSMENT

Score 1 for yes, 0 for no or not sure — and not sure is a no. Score it alone, before you show it to anyone.

	STATEMENT	1 / 0
1	I can state where this business is going, and by when, in one sentence.	
2	At least three of my direct reports could say that sentence back to me today, unprompted.	
3	The Board's number is written down, with a date on it, and I have seen it in writing.	
4	I can name my top twenty customers by profit — not revenue — without asking anyone.	
5	I know what it costs to serve our smallest thousand orders.	
6	Fewer than six initiatives are running in this company right now.	
7	More than half of last week's hours went to my top three priorities.	
8	There is one person, other than me, whose job is to run the operating cadence.	
9	Every recurring meeting on my calendar has a scorecard and ends with decisions written down.	
10	I know what we are going to stop doing this year, and who owns stopping it.	
	TOTAL	

Eight or more: you are past Day Zero, and FORGE will sharpen what you have. Four to seven: you have half a plan, which is the most dangerous number, because it feels like one. Three or fewer: you are at Day Zero, whatever the calendar says. That is not a judgment. It is the most common answer.

WORKSHEET THREE — YOUR PLAN IN ONE SENTENCE

Where the business is going, and by when. Write it badly first. Then write it again.

First attempt.

Now cut it. Remove every word that could appear in any other company’s sentence.

Who could say that back to you today, unprompted? Names.

What are you spending your weeks on that is not in that sentence?

WORKSHEET FOUR — WHAT YOU DO NOT KNOW

Every blank you left above goes here, with a name and a date against it. Nothing on this list is allowed to still be blank when you sign the goal in Objective.

WHAT WE CANNOT ANSWER	WHO FINDS OUT	BY

RUNNING THIS WITH A TEAM

Ninety minutes, after you have scored the assessment yourself. Everyone scores it alone, on paper, before anybody speaks. Read out the totals with no commentary. The spread matters more than the average: if your CFO scores seven and your VP Sales scores two, you do not have a scoring problem, you have two companies.

Take the statements one at a time. On every split, the person who scored zero speaks first. They are almost always right, and they are the reason you are running this.

Close by filling in Worksheet four together. Nobody leaves the room without a name and a date on every line.

THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK ON MONDAY

1. What is the date that is actually coming for us, and who else in the building knows it?
2. What have I been calling a plan that is really a goal?
3. What is on my calendar this week that does not appear anywhere in my one sentence?

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

You have written the date the clock started and the date it ends. You have a one-sentence plan, however rough. You have a list of what nobody here can answer, each line with a name and a date. **Focus starts when those three exist. Not before.**