I had a lot of “first day on the job” events in my life and got better at them as time went on. First impressions are important – my worst was showing up 3 weeks after my start date with full leg cast for a broken knee-cap, and the best was being “reassigned” back to a business I had left 18 months earlier and being greeted by a sea of smiling faces!

I always did as much research as I could about a company or operation before I showed up. Not just from formal sources, but local restaurant owners, taxi drivers, competitors, customers, suppliers and even employees. Just a simple question like “what can you tell me about the company?” was open-ended enough to learn a lot. I wanted to be informed, but not an expert, and was always amazed at how open people were to being asked for their thoughts. One great source of information was to get in touch with others who had been in the job before me. Here at HBS, I interviewed 5 previous Entrepreneurs in Residence to hear their impressions and solicit their advice.

I gave thought to lots of details beforehand like where I parked my car (far away from the door), when to arrive (15 minutes early), when to leave (after my boss), who to have lunch with (either my boss or someone from personnel), what people to meet with (staff and direct reports), when to talk with customers (it depends) and how much time to spend at my desk (not much, more time walking around). It was more often what I did and not what I said that was remembered and observed.

When I was running a business, I would always hand out paychecks to all employees. The Controller or HR department was happy to turn this assignment over to me, and it was a great way to meet everyone in the early days on the job. Another technique was to have a “facilitator,” generally someone from HR, conduct a session with my staff, without me present to develop answers to 3 questions. What do we know about Jim? What do we want to know? And finally, what do we want him to know about us? I would then gather them all together and respond, it was a great ice-breaker.

It was always important for me to have a good understanding with my boss about expectations and metrics. Within the first week, I would have a session to go over both my own and their expectations and how frequently we would get to talk again about them. I knew there was a “cycle” for reviews, but generally it was better to have these sessions more frequently than “policy.” I would dictate, I followed up with documentation, which would serve as a basis for the next discussion. I also used this as a framework to issue a monthly “status” report containing some of the metrics and quick bullet points on actions taken and plans for the next month - less than a page in length. I had learned early in my career at GE that not many got to page 5 of my monthly status report! I also remembered to “under-promise” and “over-deliver” and to avoid “surprises” for my boss. I looked for potential mentors and sponsors. I was quick to ask “how can I help you” in addition to asking their advice. Sometimes it was a senior technical person who had very little influence or power in the organization, but a wealth of knowledge about the technology, customers and more importantly the organization. Other times it was someone who took an interest in my career, either formally or informally to provide advice. Some lasted many years, others were short-term. I learned a lot from others and crafted my own personal style over the years based on little “snippets” of advice from each of them.

Finally, I looked for ways to be personable “diplomatic”, but not “outlandish”, in a variety of small things from wearing suspenders, the color of ink in my pen, bringing lunch from home, remembering names, anniversaries and birthdays, and regular walks through the operations.

This is my last column in the Harbus as an EIR, and I never imagined that I would end up with 18 “Lessons Learned” to write about over the past two semesters. In fact, this was my first writing experience, and I was concerned that I could get beyond the first 3 or 4. With support and encouragement from The Harbus editors and their team, it turned out to be easier than I thought it would be. This has been a wonderful opportunity for me to give back to HBS and to experience firsthand the commitment that the entire community has to supporting the great students who pass through those halls who are eager to learn lessons!

If you have comments…website or letters to editor. The Harbus and Jim would love to hear from you at letters@harbus.org, or comment online at www.harbus.org.

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Jim Sharpe (MBA ’76) is one of the HBS Entrepreneurs in Residence for the 2009-2010 academic year, who ran an aluminum manufacturing business for 21 years while working with his wife, Dobbie Stein Sharpe (MBA ’81) after both left careers at GE and large companies and sold the business in late 2008. Jim can be reached at: jsharpe@hbs.edu, 310 Rack Center, 617-495-6283 or sign up on his wiki for office hours or Brown Bag lunches at http://wiki.hbs.edu/emconference/display/Sharpe/Home.