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PROFESSIONAL TRANSITIONS

3 Transitions Even the Best Leaders Struggle With

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We love to read about the dynamics of success. We study it, celebrate it, and try to emulate how successful leaders rise to the top. I'm no different: I've spent my career helping executives succeed, either through coaching and development or assessments of their strengths and opportunity areas to identify the development work they need to do to take their careers to the next level. But even as I'm drawn to success stories, I have found that the greatest lessons come from examining failure.

For instance, my last research effort looked into how elite executives make a successful transition to the C-suite. As I worked through the interviews, I found that executives whose careers had been derailed shared many commonalities. Specifically, I found that C-suite executives are vulnerable to career failure when they are in the midst of one of three common transition scenarios.

1.The leap into leadership. The transition to the top team is demanding, with 50% to 60% of executives failing within the first 18 months of being promoted or hired. For instance, Gil Amelio was Apple's CEO for less than a year in 1997, and General Motors' chief human resources officer decamped in 2018 after just eight months in the job.

For some, this high-profile leadership transition is more than they bargain for. They are unprepared for the frantic pace or they lack the requisite big-picture perspective. (Sixty-one percent of executives can't meet the strategic challenges they face in senior leadership.) This is an especially common risk for leapfrog leaders — executives one or two steps down in the organization who skip levels when they are elevated a top spot. But even the most seasoned executives have little transparency into looming team dysfunction or insurmountable challenges until they are actually in the role.

One veteran executive I know accepted a job reporting to the CEO only to find that her functional area had been mismanaged and was in serious financial disarray. She started to turn around its performance in year one, but her reporting structure was altered mid-stream, and she found herself accountable to the CFO. The new situation left her feeling "micromanaged," and she moved on two years later.

The single best thing a new executive can do to avoid a brief tenure is to actively pursue feedback. Most undergo rigorous executive assessments *prior* to receiving an offer, but soon they are too occupied with the demands of the job to be introspective. Many benefit from in-depth 360-degree reviews at six to eight months and then again at 18 months. One division president I interviewed learned in her 360s that board members were skeptical of her abilities. To her credit, she did the difficult work of getting to know the board members better and put together a plan to actively win them over.

Overall, knowing the areas others think you need to grow allows you to get the support you need — executive coaching, finding a peer-mentor, or adjusting your team to round out your development areas. It also helps you assess whether you are fitting onto the culture or if you need to strengthen key relationships internally and externally.

2. The organizational transition. I would argue that nearly every organization today is either considering or enacting a transformation of some type. Even in this "change is the new normal" reality, high stakes transformations are highly risky for executives who fail to reinvent the organization or themselves fast enough.

Mergers, for instance, create instant overlap in executive roles, and redundant leaders can be swept out in waves. Just as often, leaders fail to read the tea leaves before a surprise executive succession and are left vulnerable when their allies exit. But by far the biggest derailer for executives during this transition is misinterpreting the need for change or getting on the wrong side of it. For example, Durk Jager stepped down as CEO of Proctor & Gamble in 2000, just a year and a half into the job, after roiling P&G's conservative culture by taking on "too much change too fast." More often, leaders are too slow to act or unwilling to get on board as a change effort gets underway. In 2009, for instance, GM removed its CEO, Fritz Henderson, because he was not enough of a change agent.

To survive organizational and industry shifts, leaders need to get ahead of change. They need to think about where they fit into the new order and find a way to have an impact. They also must overcommunicate with the CEO or board to make it clear where they stand on the need for change and how they will lead its implementation.

3.The pinnacle paradox. The last tricky transition that derails executives is the career pinnacle. C-suite leaders are at the apex of their careers. They have competed for years and achieved what they have been striving for: a spot on the top team. As a result, many experience a type of paradox: They are working harder than ever to succeed, but they don't know what's next in their career. In time, this uncertainty, combined with job stress, can lead to burnout. Executives I have coached sometimes hit the ceiling and feel "stuck" at the top. Whether they experience burnout or move on for another reason, the average tenure of C-suite leaders has been declining in recent years. According to one study, the median tenure for CEOs at large-cap companies is five years. The tenure for CMOs is even less: 42 months, according to Spencer Stuart.

Executives can take steps to either extend their tenure or prepare for what's next in their career. As part of that, they need to rethink their relationship with sponsors. At this stage in their career lifecycle they may not need sponsors to create new opportunities for them, but they do need advocates, supportive peers, and career role models. C-suite executives can move on to lead in other organizations or they may eventually retire and do board work. Others may find like-minded partners and investors to launch their own venture. I've worked with younger executives, as well, who accept global assignments or move down in the organization to gain new experience – they move down with a plan to move up again later in a different functional role. Regardless of their future plan, C-suite executives who surround themselves with support and have a clear vision of their future, are more likely continue to succeed.

The capacity for reinvention is the single-most-important career attribute for executives today. Successful reinvention may look different for each of us, but if we do not attempt it, we are sure to fail.

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