

From High Performer to Executive Leader

Why Leadership Transitions Are Harder Than They Look

9 minute read

There is a well-established pattern in how organisations build their leadership pipeline. They identify high performers, those managing complexity, winning clients, driving growth and delivering results and elevate them into senior roles. The underlying assumption is that if you can perform at that level, surely you can lead others who do the same?

It is a reasonable assumption, and it is frequently wrong. The skills that create a high-performing specialist are not always the same skills required for executive leadership.

The executives who are most vulnerable at this stage are rarely the mediocre ones. They are the high performers – the specialists and ‘experts’ who have spent years perfecting the skills that earned them their reputation, only to find those same capabilities have become the obstacle to continuing growth. Like mountaineers stranded at the plateau beneath the summit, they have not factored in the extra resources and skills required for the most demanding climb to the top – or they reach the top without enough oxygen in the tank and get career vertigo, losing the resilience and perspective needed to operate there effectively.

Rialto consultants have supported many executives whose transition into senior leadership has not gone to plan, affecting confidence, reputation and, in some cases, leading to leadership derailment. While such setbacks can be addressed and careers put back on track, structured preparation, executive coaching and honest assessment are always the stronger route.

Leaders who create space for objective advice, constructive challenge and candid conversations with a trusted mentor or coach before problems emerge are typically better prepared, progress more quickly and transition into leadership roles more successfully. Here, we explore how to step up and set up the first weeks of a new executive posting for lasting success.

Many successful executives are promoted for technical excellence, commercial results and operational delivery but the transition to an executive leadership role requires an entirely different mindset, capability set and level of self-awareness.

THE PROMOTION PARADOX: WHEN PERFORMANCE STOPS BEING ENOUGH

You have consistently delivered results, managed complexity and built a reputation as a trusted high performer. So why, when the executive role becomes available, does someone else get the opportunity? And when you do make the leap, why does it often feel harder than expected?

Success at one level is often assumed to translate naturally into readiness for the next. In executive leadership, however, the transition is rarely that straightforward and the issue is rarely ability. The best lawyer in the firm may not yet be equipped for the broader commercial and leadership demands of Partner status. A highly capable finance leader may excel operationally but find the transition to Managing Director requires a different level of strategic influence and enterprise thinking. The highest performing sales executive may struggle to shift from personal delivery to leading others effectively or apply their commercial acumen across the wider organisation.

Some need support bridging the gap – for others, a move into a more dynamic organisation or sector may offer better opportunities for salary progression and fulfilment than a move to a wider strategic position or gaining a seat on the board,

Those that do make the leap may find that their organisation has not adequately assessed capability and confidence gaps honestly, to understand the different demands of the new role, or to put in place the structured support needed for a genuinely challenging transition. Promotion is almost always granted on the strength of past performance, with an unstated expectation that the individual will grow organically into the role. Some do. Many do not.

Widely cited research suggests that close to half of all executive transitions are ultimately regarded as failures or disappointments – and these are senior leaders who had already demonstrated intelligence, initiative and results. According to the Chartered Management Institute, 82% of UK executives enter their roles without any formal management or leadership training. Promoted because they were good at something else, with no deliberate development for the role they now hold, they are what the CMI calls accidental managers. That oversight compounds with every upward move if it is not recognised and addressed.

The very qualities organisations reward, such as technical mastery, personal drive, high standards and evidenced delivery, can become liabilities at executive level if they are not consciously examined and, in some cases, left behind.

THE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS THAT HOLD HIGH PERFORMERS BACK

Most leaders who fall into this trap do not recognise it as a problem. They are simply doing what has always worked.

The most common pattern is continuing to solve problems personally rather than building the capability in others. After all, they are fast, reliable, good at it. However, in doing so, they limit the team's development and their own capacity to operate strategically. The next layer of leadership learns to wait for direction rather than take ownership.

Closely related is the pull towards operational detail: tracking execution, reviewing deliverables, monitoring progress, at the cost of the horizon-scanning and direction-setting that enterprise leadership demands. Operations can feel concrete and controllable in a way that strategy does not.

Leaders who built their reputation on exceptional individual output can also struggle to accept that their team will approach the work differently, and in some cases, less perfectly. They raise the bar through personal example rather than building a culture in which the team raises its own. The result is a group of capable individuals performing under close supervision, dependent on the leader's presence rather than genuinely self-directing.

And then there is the instinct to protect reputation rather than take strategic risk. High performers arrive at the senior table having rarely failed publicly. The habits that sustained that record - caution, thoroughness, waiting for certainty and sign-off before committing - served them well in functional roles. At executive level, those behaviours can be interpreted as hesitation or indecision.

WHY THE TRANSITION INTO EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP IS SO CHALLENGING

The difficulty here is not primarily about skills. Skills can be acquired. The transition into executive leadership requires leaders to shift from operational delivery towards enterprise leadership, strategic influence and long-term organisational thinking: a renegotiation of professional identity.

Delegation is one dimension of this. The discomfort of trusting others to execute complex tasks that a new executive would instinctively have led on confidently in their previous post must be tolerated and, at executive level, it happens at scale with a high risk factor and in plain sight of the board, the organisation and the market.

Influence without formal authority is another capability that many high performers have had limited need to develop before reaching executive level. Most have operated within a defined functional remit, with clear accountability and hierarchical authority. The executive environment is more fluid and politically complex. Outcomes depend on trust, alignment and informal influence. Navigating it requires a degree of self-awareness about how others experience you, and that is different from knowing whether they respect your results.

Ambiguity is perhaps the adjustment that catches most people off guard. The further up the organisation, the fewer clear answers there are. Time horizons lengthen, variables multiply and the operating cadence shifts from quarters to years. Leaders who have thrived on clear metrics and short feedback loops can find this profoundly unsettling. The instinct is to manufacture certainty rather than develop the tolerance for complexity that genuine strategic judgement requires.

Formal leadership programmes address knowledge and frameworks, and they have a role. The transition to top-level leadership involves behaviour, identity and self-perception, and those require a more personalised form of challenge.

Research consistently finds that training combined with coaching boosts productivity exponentially.

Executive Coaching provides the self-awareness work that allows leaders to understand how they are experienced by others and creates structured space to examine which behaviours are still serving them. It enables the kind of questioning that is almost impossible inside an organisation. A leader grappling with whether to delegate more, take a bigger strategic risk or push back on the board will rarely feel comfortable raising those questions within their organisation.

The confidentiality and objectivity of a skilled coach creates the conditions in which they can be fully and honestly explored. The coach-client relationship can become a trusted space for testing ideas, rebuilding confidence and addressing the anxieties that often accompany major leadership transitions.

THE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TRANSITION THAT SHAPES LONG-TERM CAREER SUCCESS

For most executives, the move from high-performing operator to enterprise leader is the most consequential inflection point in their career. It determines whether their capability continues to compound or begins to plateau.

The leaders who step up successfully may not be those with the most impressive track records. They are the ones with the self-awareness to examine what they need to leave behind, the intellectual honesty to confront what they have not yet become and the willingness to do the difficult work of development at a point when most peers around them feel they are already complete.

If you are navigating this transition, or leading an organisation where others are, Rialto executive coaching and leadership development programmes support senior professionals navigating complex leadership transitions and stepping into enterprise leadership roles. Contact us for a confidential conversation.

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