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FROM LEADER TO EXECUTIVE: YOUR ROADMAP TO C-SUITE SUCCESS

Think about the last significant leadership transition you experienced. Reflect for a moment: What was unexpectedly challenging? Were there responsibilities you weren't fully prepared for? Did the weight of decision-making feel heavier than you'd anticipated?

It's common to underestimate the complexities of stepping into an executive role. Last year, FMI interviewed over 30 industry executives to understand the challenges of transitioning into executive roles. Of those interviewed, 65% said their transition to the C-suite was "very or extremely challenging." In the apt words of one CEO in construction management: "The weight of the position cannot be felt until [you're] in the role. [Before that] you don't really understand the gravity, depth and the time constraints of the role."

The good news? Recognizing the challenges early on can equip you — and the leaders you develop — to navigate these transitions more effectively.

EMBRACING THE FIVE ESSENTIAL ROLES OF EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

According to FMI's 2024 research, 72% of newly appointed executives report that their greatest challenge is navigating both their expanded responsibilities and how others perceive them in their new role. Framing the executive title within a set of core organizational roles — drawn from participant responses to the question, "What is the role of an executive?" — can provide helpful perspective.

- 1. Chief visionary and strategist:** Shapes and communicates an inspiring vision and sets long-term goals for the business. As one executive shared, "I'm an organizational builder, not an organizational executor."

Making time for strategic thinking is one of the biggest challenges executives face. The ability to delegate decisions to your team allows you to focus on what one executive surveyed calls the “big hairy decisions.”



2. **Culture shaper:** Promotes and role-models organizational values to build trust and employee engagement.
3. **Talent cultivator:** Puts systems in place to develop talent and mentor the next generation of leaders.
4. **Brand ambassador:** As the face of the company, develops relationships internally and externally to maintain the company’s reputation and build strong networks.
5. **Operational maximizer:** Holds the team accountable to meeting financial goals and driving profitability.

Transitioning from execution-focused roles to strategic leadership is profound. Leaders must shift from directly engaging in projects to empowering others in operationalizing strategic initiatives. And as FMI’s study found, executives often struggle to relinquish direct control. One executive shared that “Giving up responsibility is humbling,” and another had to pause periodically to ask, “Am I doing my old job or my new job?”

Successful transition requires letting go — a challenging but essential step. Leaders must redefine the terms of their success, prioritizing strategic outcomes over personal execution.

TRANSITIONAL SHIFTS

In a [previous article](#), we introduced the concept of the leadership pipeline, noting that, as [Ram Charan](#) writes about in his book, leaders need to adapt in specific ways when transitioning into an executive role.

Charan explains that there are three key areas that require significant shifts:

1. **Skills:** These are the capabilities required to perform effectively at the executive level. Executives must transition from being the expert executor to a visionary strategist. In the words of one leader we spoke with, “You don’t think about the next project; you have to think about the market.”

At these higher levels of leadership, greater **financial acumen** and more nuanced **business planning** are required, as well as the ability to get work done through other people. Additional key themes that emerged in our research: the importance of **fostering relationships** and **communicating effectively**. “The weight of your words ... they matter.” Effective leaders realize they are constantly being watched and that, to shape culture, build talent and articulate vision, they need to be strong relationship builders.

2. **Time:** Moving from managing projects to managing the future of the organization calls for executives to reprioritize activities. One executive we interviewed noted the importance of reflecting on the question “How do I spend time now that I’m not project-based?”

Learning how to create space for strategic thinking is one of the biggest challenges executives face. Leaders must learn how to delegate decisions to their team, so they can focus on what one executive interviewed calls the “big hairy decisions.” Another respondent shared

that they split their time into three buckets: “50% is externally focused; 30% is internally focused; 20% is around innovation.” That’s a significant shift to many leaders in our industry.

3. **Mindset:** These are the attitudes and beliefs that shape how we think and where we focus our energy. Leadership skills and time prioritization are integral to a successful executive transition — but having the right mindset makes the first two shifts possible. Seventy-eight percent of the executives we surveyed say that mindset-related factors were key to the success of their transition.

Here are a few of the mindsets identified in our research as being critical to executive roles:

- **Curiosity.** Continually seek insight by asking key questions rather than relying solely on your own expertise.
- **Emotional intelligence.** Effectively manage your emotions and respond empathetically to others, particularly under pressure. As one executive said, “In the moments of panic, you need to be able to assure the team that everyone is going to be all right.”
- **Resilience.** Handle challenges with grit, viewing setbacks as opportunities for growth.
- **Energy management.** Prioritize self-care, role modeling the importance of taking care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally.
- **Humble confidence.** Be aware of your strengths while leveraging them strategically and with humility, knowing when to step back to empower others.

SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

So how can organizations best support the next generation as they prepare for and transition into executive roles?

1. **Exposure and stretch assignments.** Provide opportunities for leaders to tackle new, strategic challenges to broaden their experience. This could include having them lead a strategic initiative, inviting them to join you at industry events or owners’



forums, or giving them leadership responsibilities in a different part of the organization.

2. **Executive coaching and mentorship.** All of the leaders we interviewed highlighted the importance of coaching and mentorship during their transition. A coach can help raise a leader’s self-awareness and support the critical mindset shifts needed in a demanding role. External coaches and experienced mentors provide necessary guidance and insight. One executive noted, “[A coach can help you] understand it’s not about what you perceive about yourself but what others perceive about you.”
3. **Formal training and development programs.** Establishing structured internal leadership programs can help systematically prepare leaders in the context of your business. Identifying the shifts that leaders need to make at each level can aid the development of a framework of skills and experiences that should be included in such programs.
4. **Peer networks.** Building robust internal and external networks promotes shared learning and mutual support, and broadens leaders’ perspective of what’s happening across the business and the industry.

ASK YOURSELF

Making the transition to the C-suite is inherently challenging because executive roles fundamentally differ from less senior leadership roles. Here are a few reflection questions to help you assess your internal executive development processes:

- How effectively does my organization identify and prepare high-potential leaders?
- What structured opportunities do our leaders have to experience executive-level decision-making?
- How intentional are we about helping leaders shift their mindset from execution to strategy?
- What resources exist within our organization to support a leader's growth as they transition into a new role?

Transitioning to the C-suite is as much a personal journey as it is professional. Remember, the path to the C-suite isn't just about climbing up — but about growing into the leader your organization needs most. The move demands a significant shift in skills, mindset and understanding where to spend time in order to provide executive-level value to the organization. By thoughtfully preparing leaders for these transitions, you can help ensure the long-term success of your organization and create a culture that continually nurtures next-generation executive talent.



AUTHOR



TRACEY SMITH leads FMI's Organization Development discipline within the Leadership and Organizational Development practice, partnering with architecture, engineering and construction firms to build enduring companies through exceptional enterprise-level leadership. She approaches organizational challenges with a blend of up-front assessment and in-person collaboration to help clients solve their most pressing issues.

Tracey's extensive experience leveraging high-performing team concepts to align organizational structure and processes helps increase leadership capacity. Her clients have spanned the industry, from family-owned architectural firms to multi-billion-dollar contractors.

Tracey can be reached at Tracey.Smith@fmicorp.com.



CONTACT US



RALEIGH HEADQUARTERS
223 S. West Street
Suite 1200
Raleigh, NC 27603



919.787.8400

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OFFICES

Denver
44 Cook Street
Suite 900
Denver, CO 80206
303.377.4740

Houston
1301 McKinney Street
Suite 2000
Houston, TX 77010
713.936.5400

FMICORP.COM