By displaying a few core competencies, you can maximize your chances of advancing to the C-suite and learn how to help others get there as well.

De-Coding the Unwritten Rules of Career Advancement

By John Beeson

You may play a critical role in identifying and developing your organization's next generation of senior leaders, but that doesn't mean you're not interested in advancing to the executive level yourself. So how can you maximize your chances of making it to the C-suite, and how can that knowledge strengthen your ability to develop executive talent for your organization?

Your first step in creating a game plan to advance to the C-suite involves de-coding the factors that senior-level decision makers in your organization use to make executive-level promotion and placement choices. That in turn requires differentiating between the skills that allow someone to become a candidate for an executive position and those that ultimately determine who gets the jobs at that level. One of my clients refers to this as the "table stakes"—those skills and abilities needed to get you in the game for promotion to the executive level.

There are certain non-negotiables that are required to get on the candidate slate for C-level jobs, including a consistently strong performance in your current job; ethics, integrity, character, and a willingness to place the needs of the organization above your own; and a drive to lead—to assume higher levels of responsibility and make the difficult decisions that go with the territory at the executive level.

Keep in mind, however, that the requirements of executive positions are fundamentally different than those of lower-level positions. You can't simply rely on excellent performance in your current job or the skills that have made you successful at your current level.

The perfect candidate

So what are the skills and abilities that make the difference when senior-level decision makers discuss future candidates? The selection factors typically employed in large organizations relate to five fundamental tasks of executive management and one sometimes subjective quality that serves as a "preview of coming attractions" about your ability to succeed as an executive.

By demonstrating these capabilities to the satisfaction of the senior-level decision makers in your organization, you put yourself in a position to emerge from both internal and external competition for the C-suite job you've targeted. These core factors are:

- Demonstrating strategic skills—not only long-term, big-picture thinking, but leading the creation of a winning strategy for your organization and motivating others to follow that new direction.
- Building a strong management team—surrounding yourself with

strong, talented people who, collectively, form a strong team.

- Managing implementation—ensuring the predictable execution of major priorities without getting unduly involved at too low a level of detail.
- Creating the capacity for innovation—identifying significant changes to existing ways of doing business and skillfully leading the organization through major change.
- Lateral management—getting things done across organizational borders. Not simply being collaborative with others, but demonstrating knowledge of how the organization operates and the ability to work with and through others to get things done.
- Projecting executive presence—and, in the process, conveying to others your ability to take control of difficult situations, make tough decisions in a timely way, and engage constructively with other talented and strong-willed members of the executive team.

Most organizations do a poor job of defining and communicating these critical selection factors. What's worse is that the majority of organizations are woefully inadequate in providing aspiring executives with "the feedback that really counts"—candid feedback about where they stand in the eyes of senior-level decision makers.

Since most organizations do such a poor job of communicating this kind of information, you need to be skillful in ferreting out this feedback to know where to focus your development efforts.

Based on this feedback, you can begin to craft your career development strategy. Your first question should be: "Am I in a position to demonstrate the selection factors most important to my success." More often than not you are, but there may be times when you need to engineer a move into an assignment where you can display new skills—for example, leading the creation of strategy as opposed to skillfully

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implementing the strategy of others.

Consider the breadth of experience you've had in the course of your career. Have your job assignments allowed you to develop a perspective on the industry and business necessary for strategic thinking as well as given you a thorough understanding of how the organization works? If not, try to move into new assignments, such as with a market- or customer-facing group, to expand your perspective.

If that's not possible, work with your boss to join a major cross-functional or cross-business initiative that can help you build a broader set of relationships and expand your knowledge of the business. Often, such projects have the added benefit of helping you increase your visibility to a broader range of senior executives, which is a major plus when it comes time for a possible promotion to the C-suite.

Competencies for executive development

When I introduce the concept of "the feedback that really counts," it usually prompts managers to ask two questions: "What 'make or break' skills do my organization's senior leaders consider in determining executive promotions?" and "How do I learn how I am perceived by those decision makers so I can identify the skills I need to develop and get noticed?" More often than not, managers realize they don't have a firm grasp of the critical skills they need to develop to continue their career progression.

Use this realization as a starting point for your efforts to support executive development in your organization. Work with your senior leaders to specify the factors they use in executive placement and promotion decisions, and, in the process, make the "unwritten rules" explicit within your organization. Promote forums

within your existing executive group that encourage a "multiple points of view" discussion of an upwardly aspiring manager's strengths, development needs, and career potential.

If properly orchestrated, such dialogue yields several benefits. It helps senior-level decision makers crystallize the manager's key development needs and often prompts steps to move the manager into the kind of stretch assignment that builds new skills and allows them to demonstrate new capabilities. Based on such a collective discussion, the manager's boss often becomes more comfortable with the manager by providing direct and candid feedback about the capabilities he needs to display to be a strong candidate for future promotion. Such constructive feedback allows the manager to take greater control of her own career development.

As an aspiring executive, you'd like to know where you stand in terms of C-suite promotion, and you'd like to exert greater control over your career. By promoting the steps suggested, you allow other managers to take increased ownership of their careers as well, and by helping others who seek to advance to the executive level get the right kind of feedback, you'll find that your organization's executive development efforts will become more targeted and effective.

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