

Driven to lead: Is the executive track right for you?

Before you make it your mission to break into the executive ranks, take the time to assess whether such a role is a good fit for you.

Let's start with the characteristics predictive of executive success: a high degree of self-assuredness and mental toughness; a collaborative nature with a background reflecting strong team and service orientations; a willingness to confront and to be confronted; the ability to work successfully with other strong egos; resilience in the face of your own errors and a solution orientation toward the errors of others. Have them all? Good for you! But even more is involved in deciding whether an executive position is right for you. Use this checklist to determine whether the executive track is actually a good fit for your skills and temperament.

• **Assess the function.** Determine the challenges inherent in the job, and vigorously assess what it will take to be successful. As an executive, you'll need to generate significant, measurable outcomes, and it's going to take a while before you begin to feel successful. Be realistic in your assessment of what it'll take to sustain success over time. Sheer force of will is not enough.

• **Assess your tensile strength.** Be

clear about what you're facing; this isn't a popularity contest. The stronger and more accomplished your associates, the greater the chance for friction. Severe conflicts will be inevitable, and you must be willing to stand your ground, even with an exasperated CEO, confronting as needed. For executives, being flameproof is a prerequisite.

• **Assess your ability to build trust.**

Executive success is largely dependent on the ability to build trust with multiple key audiences: the CEO, peers and subordinates. Doing so requires extremely well-honed interpersonal skills. If managing people exasperates you, you're probably not well suited for an executive management position.

• **Assess your energy level.** Be realistic about the learning curve you're facing, despite which and concurrent with which you'll need to recognize and grab any and every opportunity to take initiative. All this takes a tremendous amount of energy. Be honest with yourself regarding whether you have the necessary reserves.

Once you're among the executive ranks, your next challenge will be to ensure that you quickly become a meaningful, contributing member of the team. Here are some valuable tips to accelerate that process.

• **Learn from incumbents.** Dedicate yourself to learning from those already in the organization. Consult them before you suggest changes or launch new agendas. Rather than trying to impress others with

what you know, actively create opportunities for others to tell you what they know.

• **Feature others.** Be fluent with the past accomplishments of others. Seek opportunities to accentuate their contributions in front of key audiences.

• **Focus on rallying opportunities.** Identify the most important issues in your industry, and engage your direct reports on specific next steps relative to these. Instill a sense of urgency regarding targeted accomplishments.

• **Identify key influencers.** Don't assume you can neutralize opinion leaders with position power. Instead, use them constructively. They can help you overcome resistance, and accelerate your ability to secure commitment to your ideas.

• **Ask for help when you need it.** Nothing is more disarming than a senior executive who acknowledges the resident brain trust. Demonstrate the belief that your own success is dependent upon collaboration with others committed to the success of the organization.

Enter the executive ranks because it's a good fit for you — not because you were seduced by money and title. Then stay there by building success collaboratively — not by building a fiefdom.

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