



The Pathway to Executive Leadership

Perspectives from an executive recruiter and a leadership consultant on preparing for executive leadership positions

A Leadership Shortage?

Even in downturns, good leaders are in strong demand. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, a crisis of confidence has raised scrutiny and expectations on leaders. In this high-pressure environment, many leaders burnt out, never to return.

We get caught up defining and debating the essence of leadership and leadership theories, yet, a true leader is easy to spot: people follow them.

The desire to be a leader is common, yet not many become true leader. Leadership requires a certain type of thinking that is not natural for most people. It is sometimes counter-intuitive to what has made us excel at our work in the past.

It is increasingly difficult to find willing and capable leaders, especially in a global resources sector marked by volatile boom and bust. Our clients engage us to find and assess the highest quality leaders from three broad groups:

- those who have a proven leadership track record in a specific domain
- those who have a proven leadership track record in a transferrable domain
- those who have proven themselves in a functional management role, and are ready for the next step.

Inherent to each of these groups are various risks. Reflecting on his experience, John Prescott, BHP's former CEO identifies four reasons executives fail:

- not understanding the context,
- not understanding the strategy,
- not having the right skill set and
- having the wrong attitude.

As recruiters we go to great lengths to identify and mitigate these risks for our clients, by considering the context of the appointment and the candidate's suitability across four dimensions:

- career: aspirations, intrinsic motivations and current trajectory
- competence: skills, learning agility, experience and knowledge
- character: personality, mindset and behaviour
- connection: strength of relationship or potential rapport with key stakeholders

A Development Perspective

The adage 'what got me here won't keep me here' is very true for executives. Senior managers who are struggling to break through into executive leadership are often competent functional and technical managers, yet the attributes that have made them successful to date are now impeding their way forward.

Traditionally, many managers have been promoted on technical competence: a good mining engineer would become a mining manager, a general manager and so forth. Many have struggled as executive leaders because the very behaviours that helped them to excel are now the same behaviours that interfere with the senior leadership role. They have not successfully transitioned from managing things to leading people. Or they have not been able to make the change from managing a business unit, where they have expertise, to leading multiple business units where they cannot have expertise in every area.

Rob Papworth, Group Manager Talent at MMG Ltd, oversees careers, succession planning and recruitment for over 5000 employees around the world. Rob's team draws from the ranks of the majors and has observed that:

Great technical wisdom and personal achievement will often get you to a functional management position, but it is the ability to bring out the best in people and align them to a purposeful objective that gets you to a leadership position.

As the leader moves into increasingly complex roles, gear changes are needed from 'doing the work' to 'leading people who are doing the work' to 'leading leaders'. This involves a changed mindset, which does not come naturally to the diligent manager. For example, it can be difficult for a manager to not step into work that has been delegated and allow people to make manageable mistakes.

An executive general manager of a mid-tier miner recently described how much he loved doing the technical work, and how hard he found it to restrain himself from stepping in and correcting those team members in his area of expertise. He learnt to ask very good 'steering questions' that ultimately empowered his team to find the best solution themselves.

If you are interested in moving into executive leadership positions, consider what it will take to shift your thinking. A useful framework to consider in building your skills is to think about the competency required as you move up the levels, the connections you need to make and maintain, and the character traits that will sustain you.

The Career Stages from Graduate to Board level
Graduate -> Supervisor -> Management -> Executive -> Board

Plan Your Career

It's important to think ahead a couple of steps to where you'd like to be. The focus should be on intrinsic motivation: what am I good at, what do I enjoy doing, what environments do I enjoy working in, rather than extrinsic factors like reward, remuneration and recognition. Find someone you trust who's in a role you would like in the future. Ask them what it's like and how to get there. Always be prepared to leave your 'comfort zone' and keep your sense of adventure. The resources sector is global, enterprising and full of surprises, twists and turns. Those who navigate this and prioritise their families at the same time will excel.

Choose Your Company

Rising to the top of the corporate ladder is like a flotation circuit (sorry for the non-metallurgists out there): stick to someone who's full of hot air and you'll rise to the top. Bad jokes aside, who you choose to work for and work with will have a serious bearing on your future career; it is here that your leadership mindset is formed.

Some research and careful consideration is required before taking a new role. Ensure you are never too hasty in making a decision for the wrong reasons. Talk to people who've worked on the team you are looking at, and see if you can spot patterns.

Where possible, it is important to surround yourself with people who you can learn from, who will challenge you and who will help you succeed. As you progress into senior roles, you will have the opportunity to choose your team. Almost every successful business leader cites 'the best people' or 'the A-team' as the key to success. While this is a truism, what matters is that you build the team that is best suited to you.

Unfortunately, every one of us must work with people who may not be the best for us. This is why industry networks are so important. These networks provide us with the opportunity to learn from others who have those desired traits that we are seeking to develop.

The Path for Parents

Our observation is that the majority of senior executives in the mining sector have come up through the ranks of frontline management roles. Many of these roles are remote, time intensive and incompatible with primary caregiving duties.

Women have traditionally borne the role of primary caregiver, taking them away from frontline management, which is the traditional path to senior management. A 2015 longitudinal study by the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, Sustainable Minerals Institute found that there were 'higher attrition rates, slower or more limited career progression to management ranks, and a greater outflow of females towards consulting, self-employment, or other industries that provide increased opportunity for part-time or flexible work conditions' (Pattenden and Brereton, 2015).

However, we are seeing operational roles evolving to accommodate primary caregivers, both men and women. Increasing adoption of remote monitoring, big data analytics and automation are providing opportunities for primary caregivers to stay closer to operational decisions during their early parenting years. This bodes well for their future and the future of our industry.

Build Your Skills

As you climb the career ladder, higher order skills are required in increasing complexity. Knowledge is important and perhaps you may need to go back and study to obtain this knowledge and perspective.

We are often asked about the value of an MBA or similar master's degree mid-career, and which qualification is best. The first question in response to this, is 'what do you want from the qualification?'

Some see an MBA as a ticket to the C-suite, and fall into the trap of leaning on the MBA to win them a promotion. There are many candidates with MBAs or master's degrees out there. The qualification only carries weight where it matches the career trajectory of the candidate, and is a likely 'tool box' for their next role; for example, if you are bound for a senior management career, a good MBA will enhance your candidature at this level. If you are a strong technical manager, struggling to break through to a leadership role, an MBA is unlikely to provide you the breakthrough you want; you would be better off investing in a leadership coach. There is value in the collegial network, the perspectives, subject matter and the qualification. It's just that these are not valuable in a vacuum without the context to apply them in.

Refine Your Character

Regardless of the skills that you acquire, the driver of good leadership is good character. Without good character, leaders burn out and derail. In our work with leaders we find that self-insight is a predictor of long-term success; it is a crucial and foundational character trait.

Self-insight is defined as understanding oneself accurately: one's capabilities, weaknesses, beliefs, values and personal goals (De Meuse, Dai and Hallenbeck, 2010). Lao-Tzu, a notable Chinese philosopher, states it this way: 'He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.'

Rob Papworth former Head of Talent at MMG observed that 'managers who invest early in themselves, particularly by learning to self-reflect and committing to their own development, are those that typically have a breakthrough to senior leadership.' Once the leader understands themselves, they understand their limitations and the people they need around them to succeed.

When interviewing executives, I never ask the question 'what are your weaknesses?' because I know I'll get a pat answer. Rather I ask the question 'how would you build a team around you?' This gives me two insights: firstly, does this person know themselves and secondly, do they value and utilise the capability of those around them. Another good question to gauge self-insight is 'can you talk me through the last conflict you've had?' Any avoidance or minimisation of the reality tells us the candidate is not ready for leadership.

It is never too early to build your character. The many menial jobs we do early on in our careers may not interest us, but they give us a character foundation that will pay dividends down the track.

Conclusion

The pathway to senior leadership is fraught with pitfalls for managers. Never fall into the trap of thinking 'I've made it'; rather, maintain a learning mindset to acquire new skills, experiences, perspectives and approaches as you move up through the levels of leadership.

Fight the desire to fall back into the comfort of old successful habits. Proactively focus on building enduring connections and relationships at the right level of business. Finally, remember that talent may help you advance, but character will determine whether you are a positive memory in the eyes of those you lead.

References

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