



# Why Executives Derail

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When I originally planned this article, I was going to write about why people do not get promoted to executive level. I have seen this often. People rise, and sometimes rise quickly up the ranks, and then that is it. They somehow do not seem to break into the executive levels even though they want to. When looking through research on why people are not promoted to executive level I could not find much; most of the work done is on why people don't get promoted in general, or why people don't get promoted to manager level. So, I have approached this article slightly differently, because there is a lot of research done on why executives fail in their roles. Understanding why executives fail may help you understand if you are 1) suited for executive roles, and 2) what skills and experience you will need to move into those levels successfully.

Instead of giving a long list of reasons I am going to keep this to four of the core factors mentioned over and over again.

## 1. *Lack of Awareness of the Changing World*

This came up frequently in research. Many executives don't cut it because they are too stuck in what they know. They don't embrace the changing world and future trends. To function well at an executive level, you need to be good with change. In fact, most leadership is change leadership. You need to be good at leading change and you need to be good at initiating the right change. In organisations of any kind (not just conventional for-profit business, but also non-profit, religious and other) the doing is done by people in less senior roles. Managers reporting to executives are overseeing those doing the doing. As an executive a lot of your role is about setting direction. And you need to get the direction right. Which means you need to be comfortable with change, with new ideas and trends, and you need to be on top of

them. In some of the research they refer to executives “who are deaf to the changing world”. If you want to function well at an executive level, you need to like and embrace change. You need to notice and get excited about possible opportunities. If you are only good at the doing part in your company, or the managing of the doers, then that might be a reason why you are not moving up to the topmost ranks in the organisation.

## ***2. The inability to effectively think and operate at scale***

Not everyone has the ability to think big picture. Elliott Jacques, in his Stratified Systems Theory<sup>[1]</sup>, identifies different levels of work, largely according to the level of decision-making complexity required at that level. Some people are good at working with goals that may take years to achieve. Some people can only deal with short-term goals and objectives. Some people can understand and integrate global information from many different fields to understand the world we live in and may live in in the future. Some people can only deal with tasks that require limited information. Considerable research shows that one of the reasons executives derail, is because they cannot deal with scale. They may have been good at managing a unit or department. Once they move into positions that require regional and global understanding and directing, they are out of their depth.

## ***3. Difficulty dealing with politics, pressure, and expectations***

The higher you rise the more people there are who see you and know of you and can direct criticism at you. You need to be tough at senior levels. You need to know yourself well and be grounded. You need to be comfortable with who you are and have a high self-esteem as well as confidence. You need to be good at managing stress and managing yourself. Executive levels are not for the faint-hearted. You will get demands, which sometimes seem unreasonable from all quarters. You will be unfairly vilified. Everyone will want you to satisfy their needs. You will be expected to perform miracles. And you will be expected to deal with all of this in an exemplary manner.

## ***4. An ability to keep learning about yourself and keep working on yourself.***

All the above points demonstrate that if you want to operate at an executive level you not only need to be smart, you need to be psychologically together. Often assessments for executive levels involve in-depth psychological assessments. A reason many executives derail, frequently found in research, is that they don't take feedback and learn from it and apply it. In fact they won't take feedback. They have an “I always know best” view of themselves. Arrogance has no place in the arsenal of the effective executive. The best executives have usually spent quite a lot of time on getting to know themselves and work on their strengths as well as weaknesses. And they continue to increase their self-awareness all the time. They take personal responsibility for who they are and for the decisions they make. They stop, regroup,

learn, and carry on more effectively next time if they need to. Most executives need an executive coach, or someone else, who can assist them with their personal growth.

For many people, their career high point is to become an executive. The salary and other benefits that accompany the job is also a reason why roles at executive level are sought after. However, such roles are not for everyone. If you do want to move into executive positions, then you need to think a lot about what work you need to put into being promoted to that level. It is not just about being good at my current job. It is not just about being a high performer. It is not just about how long I have worked in the organisation. To be an effective executive requires traits and competencies that not everyone will have and not everyone will want to develop. No one likes moving into a job and not succeeding. If you are convinced you want to be in an executive position, then based on the above, ensure you do have the right skills and have what it takes to get the job done well.

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[1] *Requisite Organization: Total System for Effective Managerial Organization and Managerial Leadership for the 21st Century* (London: Gower, 1997)