

## Executive 2.0



Photo: Getty images

# How to work out what your next executive career step should be

If you feel you have reached a ceiling in your current role, you can start the process of defining your new direction with a period of reflection. Analysing the elements of your career that are most important to you – your essential ingredients <[link to Blog 5 Career Analysis](#)> – is a vital step in the journey to your next executive position.

Part of that methodology should include recalling your leadership qualities, which you can do by looking back at assessments and feedback sessions with peers and managers. There are three types of experiences you need to think about here: functional, geographic and industry.

### Transferrable functional experience

Your functional experience is a mix of your skills and overall experience to date. To position yourself for your next career step, it's important to consider how you can transplant that functional experience into a future role.

The risk in moving from one type of environment to another – for example, going from being a director at somewhere like Shell, to becoming a director in a hospital setting – is incredibly high. So, it's important to ask yourself, 'Where can I deliver the largest contribution?'



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Authenticity and honesty should come first. Consider the facets of your current leadership and be realistic when you weigh up which elements are analogous to a potential new role – a leader in a large retail organisation can become a leader in an express delivery company because each van is a store in itself, and each driver has consumer contact when they deliver a product.

The same applies for top marketers in fast moving consumer goods. Some of them make a successful step into marketing roles in business-to-business environments because the principles of marketing – influencing, creating, empathising with the client – remain applicable and are transferable. It's possible to transition to different industries but there must be several elements of your functional experience that fit the new environment.

### Broad geographical experience

I once spoke with the CHRO at Unilever, who said that if people are to be successfully transferred across the world, two of the three elements of their experience – functional, geographical and industry – must stay the same.

So if a laundry marketing director in Europe moves to Thailand, (s)he must first remain in laundry and marketing until (s)he has put down roots and got to know the market in the new location. Only (s)he is able to switch to a different industry.

P&G achieved their European success by realising that to launch their US-created brands in Europe they needed to recruit Europeans as well as Americans. They recruited Europeans from Day 1 and then promoted them to leadership roles. They adapted to the retail environment and regional consumer habits by mixing the geographical experience of their employees.



Cultural factors play a tremendously important role in business negotiations – in Germany, it is polite and respectful to address people using ‘Sie’ (rather than ‘Du’) in formal settings whereas in English ‘you’ is always appropriate. In Italy it’s culturally acceptable to start a meeting 15 minutes later than scheduled, while in Germany it’s expected that everyone will be on time.

I once had a client in southern Italy with €0.5 million of outstanding invoices that urgently needed to be reduced. As sales director, I decided with my salesmen to visit the client whose office was surrounded by beautiful olive fields. For five hours we drank coffee, ate lunch and talked socially, with no mention of the invoices.

Two weeks later, the issue was resolved. I was lucky to have been well briefed on local business culture by my general manager. Taking a whole day to give the client attention was a signal of respect and the problem was solved without requiring an awkward conversation. To be successful in global leadership roles, you need to understand cultural differences and have experience in at least two different countries.

## Varied industry experience

If you want to become a CEO you need expertise in different functional fields. It’s vital to create the opportunity to gain that variety of experience early in your career – if you’ve been in one industry for 25 years, it’s often too late and you should ask yourself, ‘Do I have the DNA, the essential ingredients [<link to Blog 5 Career Analysis>](#), to make the step into multi-functional leadership?’

Be aware that some people are fantastic in a functional role but are not suited or don’t have the ability to transition into broad senior leadership – a great researcher might not be a great leader.

There are roughly 10 indicators of young talent and one of those is natural leadership. This is a skill that presents early and can be drawn out through certain scenarios.



Historically, leaders would place potential talent in “a non core setting” like the post room because there they would have to manage a mature team, giving guidance to people who may have worked there for 30 years. A natural leader would succeed not just because they were the boss, but because they were authentic and won the respect of their teams. My advice to young leaders is to gain leadership experience early in your career – in a minimum of two different functions and industries.

Want to know more? Get in touch<[link to contact](#)> with me to enrich your leadership performance with executive branding coaching — and bring your way forward into focus.

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