



# Book The Next Level

## What Insiders Know About Executive Success, 2nd Edition

Scott Eblin  
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2010  
[Listen now](#)

- [play](#)
- [pause](#)

00:00  
00:00

---

## Recommendation

Scott Eblin's book offers valuable advice to the newly arrived member of the management team about how to navigate in unfamiliar, executive territory. He argues that your success will depend on how you operate at your peak level, and how you reach and maintain that optimal state, rather than on the actual nuts and bolts of getting projects done. He provides transcriptions of coaching sessions with executives in transition and each chapter ends with "ten tips" – a useful summary of the ideas and behavior you'll have to learn to succeed in your new role. *BooksInShort* recommends this manual to managers who want to move up in the ranks, and to executives new and old – for whom its tips will still be useful.

## Take-Aways

- The top level in any company is the executive team.
- At the executive level, the accomplishments of the group are more important than those of the individual.
- Focus on the goals of the company as a whole, not just those of your department.
- Move away from your area of "functional" expertise toward a company-wide view.
- Relinquish control by building an extremely capable team.
- Use influence rather than power to get things done.
- Your way is not the only way to accomplish tasks and reach goals.
- Foster collaboration among your executive peers just as you do within your team.
- To maintain peak performance, build renewal routines into your schedule.
- Work against any tendencies toward self-sabotage.

## Summary

### From Manager to Executive

When managers are promoted to the executive level they often receive no guidance about what the organization expects from them. They must abandon their old habits of thinking and behavior, and develop "executive presence," which consists of these attributes:

- **"Personal presence"** – Developing confidence, energy and communication skills.
- **"Team presence"** – Working cooperatively, defining tasks and becoming accountable.

- **"Organizational presence"** – Relying on peers, seeing the big picture and leading.

## Developing Confidence

Being promoted to the executive ranks means making big changes in your attitude toward yourself and your work. You are bound to feel uncomfortable – if you don't, as the saying goes, you're not paying attention. However, try not to let the new experience undermine your confidence. Timid people make poor executives; they micromanage and dither, or they overcompensate and push people around.

“It's not just about you and your to-do list anymore.”

Thus, you must develop "grounded confidence." As Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." Decide what you wish to achieve, and choose the habits and personal attributes that will help you reach your goal. At the same time, identify and let go of traits that block your progress. Minimize self-criticism, negative thoughts and self-deprecation.

“Identify the key tactical behaviors that, if regularly repeated, will lead to a transformation in the level of confidence you project with your fellow executives and in the organization as a whole.”

Some of the behaviors that were strengths in your previous position may now drag you down. For example, your technical expertise may have led to your success, but now you have to become a leader and delegate the "functional" work to others. Resist the "pull of the comfortable."

## Renewing Your Energy

Many executives think they should be like marathoners, who can run for as long and as fast as possible. In fact, though, they should be more like sprinters, who put everything they've got into a short burst of speed and then recuperate. When you schedule time in your calendar away from work, you'll not only be calmer but you'll also have a chance to refocus on the big picture. Find the zone between being overwhelmed and being apathetic – the state that athletes call "flow."

“Most of us know we're operating at our best when we feel comfortable, engaged and effective.”

Follow the steps of the "Life Goals Planning System," or Life GPS, to keep your energy and productivity at their highest:

1. List your strengths and favorite activities – your actual ones, not the "shoulds."
2. Identify a few behaviors to repeat regularly in each of four areas: "mental, physical, spiritual and relational."
3. Set goals for your home, work and community life. What would your life look like if you were always performing at your best?
4. Review and "recalibrate" the first three steps of your Life GPS regularly.
5. Maintain perspective. "You are not your job. You are who you are."

## Communication Skills

What you say as an executive has a great impact. Martin Carter, president of Hydro Aluminum North America, remarked during a visit to one plant that its maintenance budget looked a little high. The next thing he knew, the plant managers had made drastic cuts – which wasn't at all what he had intended. To encourage dialogue, some executives deliberately present themselves informally to subordinates. They adopt an "affiliative" communication style, in which they acknowledge errors and ask employees questions.

“As an executive, you are now expected to contribute to defining opportunities and solving problems for the organization as a whole, not just within your functional area of expertise.”

Senior executives like your boss probably have even less time in their schedules than you do. Don't wait for your boss to tell you what he or she wants. Use the following three questions to structure your communication:

- **"What"** – Which information is most important, in what level of detail and in what format (voicemail, e-mail, memo, etc.)?
- **"So what?"** – Why is this information important?
- **"Now what?"** – How should you act on it? What are your goals?

“At the executive level, you are playing on a bigger and broader field, but with less information and control than you had as a functional leader.”

Promote your team to other executives – don't assume that good work will speak for itself. Warning: Promoting your team is not the same as promoting yourself, which is a turn-off. When you have the opportunity to meet with senior executives, ask open-ended questions to find out about their priorities and how you can address them. To make a good impression do the following:

- **"Keep it crisp"** – Practice an "elevator speech."
- **"Speak in terms of solutions, not problems"** – Avoid "catastrophizing."
- **"Establish the context"** – Explain your metrics, the economic environment in which you're operating and other relevant information.
- **"Focus on what, not how"** – Your superiors are less interested in the steps you took to accomplish something than in what you actually achieved.
- **"Tell a story"** – People enjoy stories about challenges and how those on the frontlines overcame them, something you do every day as an executive.

## Working Cooperatively

Although self-reliance may have served you well in the past, you will not succeed in your new executive role if you insist on handling all the details. Don't let ego prevent

you from delegating. Similarly, competitiveness may have moved you through the ranks – but at the executive level, you're part of a team. You add value by "either facilitating or interpreting the work of others." Make your team work by taking these actions:

- **"Get the team involved in shaping goals"** – If all of your team members contribute to goal-setting, they will each feel personally responsible and emotionally involved.
- **"Encourage team problem solving"** – Resist the temptation to resolve conflicts "off-line." The team needs the experience of working through problems.
- **"Cultivate a diversity of views"** – You're not the only one with good ideas.
- **"Promote honest feedback"** – Seek out and reward people who will tell you honestly what they think.
- **"Show respect and earn trust"** – Linguist Fernando Flores says that to gain trust you must cultivate "sincerity, credibility and competence."

## Defining Tasks

Learn about the organization's goals – as your boss interprets them. Communicate these goals to your team, so they understand exactly what you expect and what they must accomplish. The team members don't have the same opportunity you do to meet with senior executives, so you must perform "perspective transference," from the senior executives to the employees. This is your most important role on the team (since the members will be doing the actual work).

“Reframe your definition of what your daily contribution to the result should be: It should be about influencing others to create the result, not creating the result yourself.”

Explain to the team what your involvement will be, including at what stages you want them to present projects to you for review or advice. One executive uses the metaphor of a boat: His job is to navigate, while the team members run the engine. In addition, giving "good people the space to develop" will enable you to identify the next generation of executives.

## Becoming Accountable

"Responsibility" differs from "accountability." At the executive level, you supervise too many projects to be involved hands on with all of them. Still, you're accountable for them. Thus, you must be able to trust your team absolutely. If their work is poor, the blame is yours for having chosen them. And your boss won't care why the work is poor; he or she will just want it fixed. Making a team run smoothly is difficult. Problems arise. You must re-evaluate decisions and tweak processes. Establish systems and criteria for monitoring your team's progress.

## Relying on Executive Peers

Eighty-two percent of the respondents to a Corporate Leadership Council study said the reason executives fail is that they don't create relationships with their peers and subordinates. New executives tend to suffer from "vertical tunnel vision" – they look up to their bosses and down to their subordinates. They forget to look "to the left and right." As an executive, you are in two teams – your "functional team," whose work you direct, and the executive team. As well as managing up and down, you must learn to manage "sideways" – which needs quite different skills. You can't exercise authority; you must persuade.

“The work doesn't speak for itself; you have to speak for the work...[keep] the results of your team's good work in front of your boss and your boss's senior executive peers.”

Meet with every member of the executive team to become acquainted, and learn about his or her role. Ask open-ended questions, and demonstrate your sincerity and willingness to learn. Once you understand the people and the issues, establish your credibility by taking action to make your peers' work lives easier. For example, one new CFO reorganized his company's budgeting process, which had previously caused months of acrimonious debate. The new process saved time and gave each department what it needed.

“Determine what is most important to the big-picture strategy of the organization and then determine what contribution your part of the organization must make to that strategy.”

Your relationship with the members of the executive team is collaborative. You are all working toward the same goals. Collaboration is not the same as negotiating, in which one person wins and the other loses. Collaborations are "win-win," and the best executives constantly seek "opportunities to combine work, maximize relationships, and share information and ideas."

“If you don't yet have the right team, develop your people quickly or recruit new people who can meet the demands of the work.”

But collaboration is also reciprocal. One boss warned his new subordinate about a group of powerful administrators on the executive team. "If they lay four or five things on you to do, you come back and give them one or two things that they have to do," the boss advised. Using this tactic, the new team member developed an interdependent partnership with the big guys.

## Seeing the Big Picture

One of the most difficult transitions for new executives is moving from a "me" to an "us" perspective – focusing on the company as a whole. One senior vice president explained, "You have to be much, much more self-sacrificing as a VP." Subordinate your personal goals or those of your functional team to those of the company. Don't hoard resources or sequester a "star performer" in your department if he or she could do more for the company in another role.

“As an executive...you are going to be much more visible to all the stakeholders in your organization than you used to be...Because of your increased visibility, you will be expected to make a bigger impact in the organization.”

Even an "us mindset" is not broad enough. Focusing only on your own organization can make you oblivious to new situations and reluctant to change. Executive team

members must also keep an eye on the market environment in which their company operates – in other words, on "them."

## Leading

People's perceptions of you will change when you acquire an executive title – even though you are, of course, the same person you always were. Follow these rules of executive "celebrity":

- **"Act like an ambassador"** – You represent the company, not just yourself. Your words affect morale.
- **"Check your sense of humor"** – Irony and sarcasm can be especially inappropriate and even intimidating.
- **"Think before you speak"** – Thinking out loud isn't a good idea. Subordinates may take your half-baked ideas and run with them.
- **"Leave air in the conversation"** – Although you may enjoy debating ideas, if you push too hard, others will feel they have no say.
- **"Invite feedback"** – Visit with employees informally. Ask questions and demonstrate that the responses matter to you.

“Navigating uncharted terrain and making choices with incomplete information is no longer the exception but the rule in most aspects of life.”

You will often have to face the overblown egos of your peers who wish to engage in turf battles. Resist the temptation. Remain true to an inclusive, collaborative approach, and be aware of the next level ahead.

## About the Author

**Scott Eblin** works with *Fortune* 500 companies as an executive coach. He runs leadership workshops and helps companies develop management strategies.

---

---