

# Rising to Power

---

*The Journey of Exceptional Executives*

Research Executive Summary

---

## *Executive Ascent – A holistic look at the rise to the top of organizations*

Executive transitional failure isn't a new phenomenon. Today, executives are moving into senior and C-suite roles at an alarmingly fast pace, often under extreme circumstances and with less-tenured experience than ever before. Prepared or not, organizations are placing bets on younger leaders in an attempt to achieve better strategic results. And with opportunity coming well in advance of the experience, knowledge, relational, and emotional maturity necessary to sustain success, failure rates are astounding but predictable.

**NAVALENT** set out to identify the key factors that influence executive success and failure and to identify effective solutions.

### THE PROBLEM:

Corporate Executive Board research estimates that 3% of executive transitions “fail spectacularly” while nearly 50% “quietly struggle” in the first 18 months, leading to either a slow demise or sub-optimal effectiveness. **Between 50–70% of executives fail within the first 18 months** of promotion into an executive role, either from within or coming from outside the organization.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

**RISING TO POWER** found 76% of respondents indicated the formal development processes of their organization were not, or at best minimally, helpful in preparing them for their executive role; 55% indicated that they had minimal, if any, ongoing coaching and feedback to help them refine their ability to perform in an executive role; and 45% indicated they had minimal understanding of the challenges they would face in an executive role.

**RISING TO POWER** revealed a disproportionate percentage of executives were unprepared to inspire and lead themselves and others to achieve higher levels of performance in an increasingly complex and demanding global marketplace. Powerful executives are those who consistently produce excellent results while maintaining personal energy and enhancing their relationships as well as the skill and commitment of those they lead.

Performance is an outcome that is both driven and measured at multiple levels: Organization, Group, and Individual.

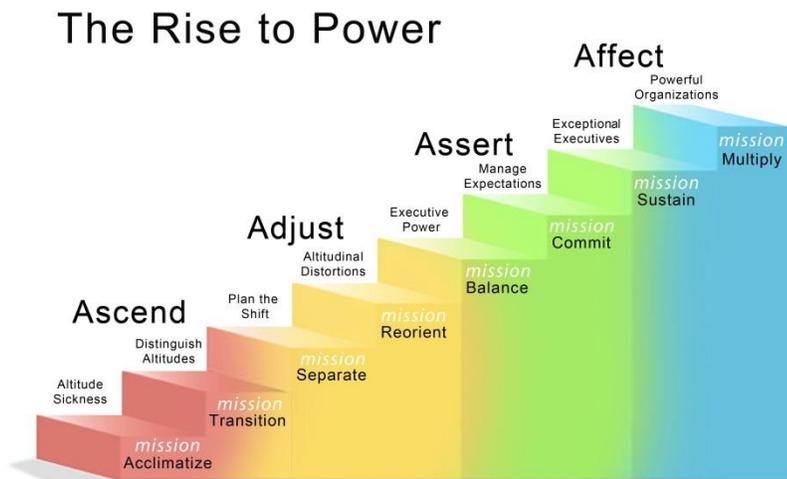
### WHO DID WE STUDY?

- Ten-year longitudinal study of executive performance for business results and behavior
- 2,600 in-depth qualitative interviews with F1000 executives on a broad array of organizational challenges
- 1,800 of the interviews were focused on the individual performance of over 100 executives
- Identified and compared the 25 best- and worst-performing executives based on their business results and behavioral effectiveness
- Identified and compared the 25 best- and worst-performing executives to highlight specific traits that lead to success
- Research included a comprehensive survey of 100 leaders who transitioned into executive roles within the previous 36 months

*Executive Ascent – A holistic look at the rise to the top of organizations*

**TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE ASCENT:**

Executive preparation and performance must be viewed as one continuous journey with predictable phases, each of which has addressable challenges that, if viewed collectively, more holistically and sustainably prepare executives to assume increasingly broader levels of responsibility and succeed along the way.



The four phases of executive ascent require deliberate, thoughtful attention for executives to successfully arrive and contribute at the highest levels of organizations.

***Ascend: Treat executive preparation as an evolutionary journey, not a series of disparate and disconnected events***

Sixty-one percent of our respondents said they were unprepared for the roles they assumed. As we isolated the factors that determined success, it became clear that the complex transitions to higher executive altitudes were being treated as discrete events rather than an ongoing adaptation to increasingly complicated organizational challenges and opportunities. To effectively navigate the ascent to higher altitudes, aspiring executives must:

- Proactively anticipate and address the symptoms of “altitude sickness” and acclimatize to higher altitudes; manage “summit shock”
- Resist the “myth of the mandate”
- See current and future roles in the context of the entirety of an organization – transition from the Coordinating to the Strategic system
- Identify and differentiate the expectations at each altitude; consciously contribute to both

---

## *Executive Ascent – A holistic look at the rise to the top of organizations*

the technical and leadership expectations of each role

### ***Adjust: Be very intentional with how transitions are guided and planned for***

Sixty-seven percent of executives struggle deeply to let go of the work of their previous roles yet lament they spend time dealing with the performance shortfalls of others. To intentionally guide one's transition to a higher altitude, executives must:

- Anticipate and practice letting go of the aspects of your current job ahead of the timeframe for your next transition
- Build a learning plan that first targets gathering disconfirming data
- Synthesize learning into a shared set of “vital few” priorities
- Size up talent and build their team
- Build authentic relationships (vertical and horizontal); allow people to get to know you
- Blend without going native
- See the whole; diagnose without indicting
- Solicit and act upon personal feedback at key intervals

### ***Assert: Effectively balance the exercise of positional, relational, and informational power, and carefully manage follower expectations***

Sixty percent of executives struggle with the realization that others ascribe more power to them than they actually believe they have. The spate of executive failures in the last two decades has caused followers to raise the bar that much higher on executive performance and what it takes to earn their trust and credibility. To effectively employ the power that accompanies executive roles and win the support of followers, executives must:

- Understand and master both the abuses and perversions of organizational power
- Anticipate follower expectations and work to build credibility by making and keeping commitments by:
  - Living up to the standards you set
  - Leading equitably without promising “equality”; righting organizational injustices
  - Providing decision-making transparency
  - Being a student of those you lead – anticipation of needs through “knowing” them
  - Giving reasonable accessibility
  - Inspiring hope through personal passion and honest assessment of setbacks

### ***Affect: Build “exceptional executives” who harness the power of breadth, context, choice, and connection***

Distinguishing the “best of the best” from the “worst of the best” executives in our research, we isolated four

---

***Executive Ascent – A holistic look at the rise to the top of organizations***

consistent patterns of executive practice that directly enabled sustained, positive impact on performance. Those dimensions are breadth, context, choice, and connection. To sustain impact at the highest altitudes, executives must:

- Consciously develop an understanding of the organization as a whole and actively exploit the knowledge of how the various parts work in concert to manage complexity and create value.
- Seek and apply intricate knowledge of your business to emerging competitive threats by constantly scanning and looking for trends, patterns, and emerging possibilities on a multi-year horizon.
- Hone your ability to identify and construct the choices needed for the organization to advance. Develop a healthy balance of instinct and analysis, and consciously blend your ideas with the voices of others into focused choices that align others to a common direction and priorities.
- Cultivate positive connections with stakeholders at all levels. Meet with them regularly and listen deeply to discover what motivates them and what their priorities are, as well as understand the challenges they may be facing – especially at key points of intersection with your areas of responsibility to align on mutual direction and expectations.

We are confident you will find *Rising to Power* and its impacting findings to be a deeply relevant and practical look at the common challenges associated with executive transitions and assignments and will be readily able to apply the insights and solutions to their context regardless of where in the executive journey they find themselves.

## WHAT DID THE EXECUTIVES SAY ABOUT THEIR ASCENT?

### PREPARATION/DEVELOPMENT:

#### Were you prepared for what the role required?

- 69% were minimally prepared; only 31% of respondents indicate they were only slightly to moderately prepared for what their executive role required.
- 76% indicated the formal development processes of their organization were not at all, or only minimally helpful, in preparing them.
- 55% indicated they had minimal, if any, ongoing coaching and feedback to help them refine their ability to perform in an executive role.
- 45% indicated they had little foresight into or understanding of the challenges they would face in an executive role.

### MY EXPECTATIONS/ASSUMPTIONS:

#### Did you find that decisions were more complicated and involved than you'd expected?

- 57% of respondents indicate moderately to strongly that decisions were more complicated and involved than they expected.

#### Has your experience of being an executive tested your abilities more than you expected it to?

- 60% of respondents indicate moderately to strongly that their experience of being an executive has tested their abilities more than they expected.

### OTHERS' EXPECTATIONS:

#### Did the people you lead want more of your time than you had available?

- 61% of respondents indicate moderately to strongly that people want more of their time than they have available – *impacting their ability to lead at the right level.*

#### Have you felt that you were held responsible for problems outside your control?

- 54% of respondents feel moderately to strongly that they are held responsible for problems outside of their control – *helplessness.*

### CONTENT OF WORK/PERFORMANCE:

#### Did you find it difficult to let go of the work you used to do?

- 59% of respondents indicate they feel strong to moderate challenge letting go of work they used to do – *leading at the right level.*

#### Do you spend your time dealing with the performance shortfalls of others?

- 65% of respondents feel strongly to moderately that they spend their time dealing with the performance shortfalls of others – *leading at the right level.*

### POWER AND POLITICS:

#### Does politics at the executive level undermine your ability to trust your peers?

- 50% of respondents feel strongly to moderately that politics at the executive level undermines their ability to trust their peers.

## Executive Ascent – A holistic look at the rise to the top of organizations

### Is the amount of power people ascribe to your position greater than the amount of power you actually have?

- 59% of respondents indicate people ascribe more power to them than they actually have to a moderate to strong extent.

### How important is having irreproachable integrity to distinguishing your leadership and gaining others' trust?

- Our executive study revealed only a strong positive correlation with the absence of integrity of character but no significant positive correlation with its presence. In other words, you get no extra credit for being honest. But, absent strong moral character, the results conclude that a leader is 73% *more likely* to undermine business performance.

### WHAT DOES “EXCEPTIONAL” LOOK LIKE?

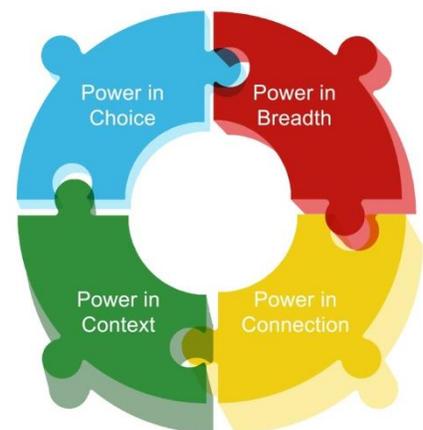
Statistical analysis revealed consistent patterns of effectiveness among the best-performing executives. The patterns are organized into a model of exceptional executive leadership (see below). It is the presence of these four dimensions in combination that separated exceptional executives from just “good” or “above average” executives. The exemplars were exceptional at *all four* dimensions, which are:

**Choice:** The ability to assemble the right information and construct complex decisions and solutions with the right balance of data, input from others, intuition, and analysis. In addition to a well-defined process for making and communicating decisions, exceptional executives sustain a clear and consistent focus on the critical few choices they have made to avoid overwhelming the system with too many priorities, driving unity of purpose and enhancing the potential for success of deployed resources.

**Breadth:** The deep knowledge of how all the “pieces” of the organization fit together, the value they create in driving results, and how to integrate the organization’s “seams” so that poor coordination, “silos,” and fragmentation are kept to a minimum while all of the capabilities of the organization are coalesced into competitively distinctive performance.

**Context:** Expert knowledge of the industry and marketplace dynamics in which the business competes, how it “makes money,” keeping abreast of competitive and industry shifts and trends on the horizon, and adapting in advance of the need to; the ability to adapt solutions and knowledge to particular business issues and opportunities that fix the context appropriately.

**Connection:** The ability to form deep and meaningful relationships with bosses, peers, and direct reports based on trust, commitment, honesty, and healthy dissent, in combination with clear and compelling messaging. Exceptional executives consistently maintained in-depth knowledge of all key stakeholders and their contribution to one’s agenda and how one contributes to theirs. The ability to form healthy attachment and generate successful outcomes with others in mutually beneficial partnership is a clear differentiator.



**HOW IS RISING TO POWER DIFFERENT THAN THE GLUT OF OTHER EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP CONTENT?**

<b>Conventional Executive Leadership Wisdom...</b>	<b>Rising to Power...</b>
Functional mastery helps you rise faster to a GM position; promoting the most technical or deepest expert in an area will proliferate greater leadership at higher levels	Breadth and deep knowledge of multiple aspects of the organization makes you rise “and stick” in a GM position; technical mastery in a singular area is more of a liability than an asset at higher levels
Empowering others and making them “feel included” in decisions is important to building ownership of decisions; ironically, 54% of respondents feel moderately to strongly that they are held responsible for problems outside of their control	Decisiveness – making choices and hard ones – and worrying less about how others feel – is more effective AND more respected; ownership is as much a factor of “inclusion” as it is “clarity” – so widespread ownership of “unclear and muddled” decisions is destructive, not effective
An effective GM is context-neutral – he/she can adapt her experience to multiple contexts; if they have “agility,” they can adapt; this is born out in the fact that 45% of respondents indicated they had little foresight into an understanding of the challenges they would face in an executive role	Context is CRUCIAL to success – the deeper your understanding of the SPECIFIC context you are in, the deeper and more sustainable your impact; agility is not a function of adapting from environment to environment but rather adapting your past wisdom and experiences in very particular ways to your existing context
Simple interpersonal techniques that make you appear gregarious, “authentic,” trustworthy, winsome and a “good communicator” will garner effective relationships; 50% of respondents feel strongly to moderately that politics at the executive level undermines their ability to trust their peers	The depth of your relationships with peers, bosses, and direct reports has direct correlation on your ability to make meaningful advances in performance. Authenticity is not a by-product of your “style” but rather of your aspiration and intent. Stakeholder relationships are not something you “get to” when you finish the “real work” – at the executive level, they are EVERYTHING
Integrity and character are defining features of great leadership	Turns out, not true – they are the expected “norm” they are only defining in their absence – and they define “failure” 73% more of the time when deemed not there
Being good in “some” or “most” of the above areas will suffice to help you rise effectively	Exceptional executives actually can, and must, do it ALL well to distinguish their leadership and their results; “Above average” is no longer sufficient