> The 4 Forces of Executive Pressure

Why Your Executives Are Drowning

> "I lead the way I lead,
> because until now,
> I have not questioned it."
>
> — VP, Operations,
> Large Engineering and Manufacturing Corporation

When Good Leaders Become Struggling Executives

A disorienting shift happens when leaders become executives. With strong track records behind them, they find themselves abruptly facing a far more complex and difficult landscape. Whether self-aware or oblivious to their own leadership gaps, most find the sudden ambiguity vexing and stressful, and struggle in ways they never anticipated. Our research shows that 36% of internal executive hires fail; that number rises to almost 50% for external hires.

It's a tough transition even in the best of times. But in disruptive and fast-changing business environments, those transitions are getting faster and executives get even less support. Although mid-level leaders through C-suite told us it's critical for them to have targeted feedback and coaching for their transitions to be successful, less than a quarter of these leaders actually received a coach to aid their transitions.

As the global pandemic in 2020 abruptly altered markets, organizations made radical changes to their business models. They asked many less experienced and less prepared employees to step into executive roles or take charge of different business units and teams.

But the risk of executive failure has long been incredibly high. Even prior to 2020, about half of executives were considered failures within two years into the new role. And that risk jumps dramatically in tough times.

We interviewed more than 50 HR executives about what happens when new executives transition, and heard things like, "strategic confusion," "a step back in performance," "teams fall behind," and "turnover at the level below them is bad."

We then went to our own reservoir of experience and data from thousands of executive assessments and coaching engagements to isolate the common struggles of executives. We know that new executives are more than twice as likely to be capable of building relationships than shaping strategy.

We also know that with each step upward from mid-level leadership to the C-suite, execution skills increase while the ability to engage employees decreases.

But failure at the executive level is only partly about leadership skill. What chance do executives have of succeeding if they fail to grasp how their roles have changed? As simple as it may sound, executives frequently share with coaches that they never had the chance to sort out the real nature of change in their roles as executives.

As essential as leaders are in connecting business strategy to frontline execution and setting the tone for a company's culture, executives are at the fulcrum of an organization's ability to succeed. And of course, it's these VPs, directors, general managers, and other executives who form the talent pool for the future C-suite.

If these roles are so crucial to a company's livelihood, why are companies allowing them to fail so often?

In this eBook, we'll explore what's causing executives to struggle in what we've identified as the "four forces of executive pressure." We'll discuss the forces in detail and serve up three simple development approaches to help your executives overcome the forces and transition more quickly and successfully.
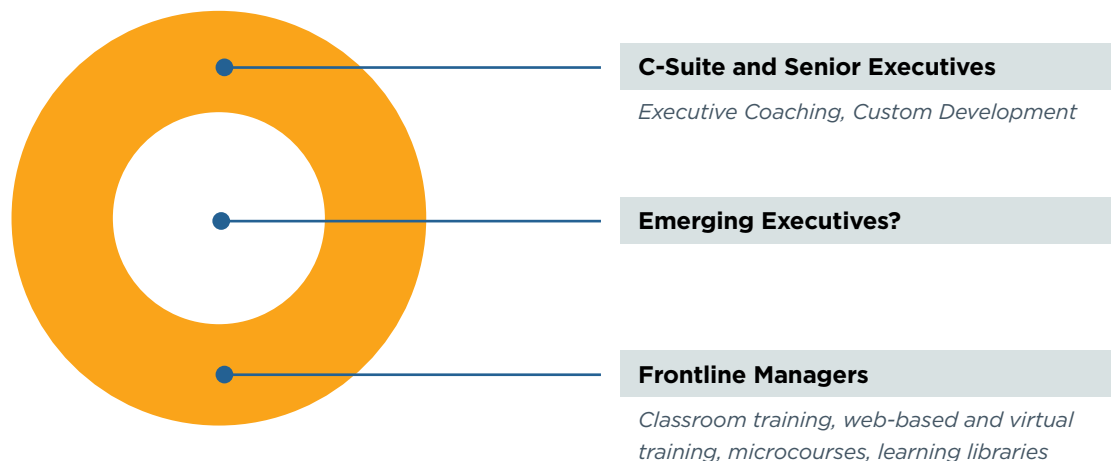
The Doughnut Hole of Development

So, why are emerging executives consistently unprepared for the demands of executive-level leadership? Part of the answer is that this group is often left out of development.

In most organizations, investment in leadership effectiveness tends toward the top and bottom of the leadership structure. At the top, the senior executives and C-suite members often receive executive coaching, business education, rich assessment and development experiences, and attend high-powered executive retreats.

Meanwhile, the lower levels of the organization receive development through more scalable options geared toward cultivating the leadership essentials that are foundational to all roles. That leaves a "doughnut hole" of development where early executives are left to sink or swim.

As budgets get tighter in many organizations, the doughnut hole is likely to get even bigger. The temptation is to assume that these are smart folks, and that they'll figure it out while the organization tends to other acute needs. But leaving this group without support sets the conditions for failure for many of the most critical new projects your organization is embarking on as it pivots to meet the needs of the new economy.

C-Suite and Senior Executives

Executive Coaching, Custom Development

Emerging Executives?

Frontline Managers

Classroom training, web-based and virtual training, microcourses, learning libraries

At a conference of HR executives, we asked an audience of 40+ HR leaders, "How many of you would say that your organization is doing enough to support the success of new and emerging executives?"

No one raised their hand. Asked why they do next-to-nothing for emerging executives, CHROs and business leaders share several common themes:

Go figure it out

The "go figure it out" mentality perpetuates history in which managers of new executives were left to figure out their roles on their own, so why should it change? There may also be a belief that it's a test of whether an executive can really cut it. As a result, "they give what they got," which is often nothing. But this approach ignores the steep cost of letting an executive fail.

Coaching is the only solution

Often, the only type of development considered at this level is executive coaching, which can be very effective, but difficult to scale to larger audiences. With tight budgets and schedules, an assumption forms that the organization simply can't afford development for any executives except the C-suite.

You can't train for this

Each executive faces a highly unique situation, even among those with the same title. Traditional methods of development at lower levels are usually inappropriate at the executive level. But the resulting assumption that executives will learn on the job will inevitably leave gaps, and runs the risk that ineffective leadership approaches will creep into performance patterns that may be difficult to undo. The reality is that group development can be very effective, and help executives bond as teams. But it needs to be done in the right context.

These are legitimate barriers to the crucial development that executives badly need. Getting past them requires first getting to the roots of the pressures of the executive experience. With a better understanding of what is actually happening to executives as they navigate their transitions, we can better personalize support to these unique needs.

The Point of No Return

There's a point in the careers of people who are on the path of leadership advancement that we call the executive transition point. At this pivotal career moment, the road forks and the proportions of leaders who succeed are not what any business leader would expect, and far from what they could (and should) be.

But what are emerging executives doing at this transition point that causes so many of them to end up in the mediocre or failure categories?

Executives say they feel intense pressure and stress as they step into their new roles. And everything is thrown at them all at once. We've identified four distinct areas of pressure for executives around leading **the business**, **their teams**, **their networks**, and **themselves**. These pressures are sudden, surprising, and often have extreme consequences. And they may become particularly heightened in times of crisis and accelerated change. Whether executives perceive these forces, and how they respond to them, ultimately determines where their respective paths will lead.

4 Forces of Executive Pressure

Force 1	Force 2	Force 3	Force 4
1 Leading the **Business** requires more complex decision making and analysis	**2** Leading **Teams** requires more varied people skills	**3** Leading across a larger **Network** requires more forethought and proactivity	**4** Leading **Self** requires more introspection and adaptation

Force 1 | **Business**

Leading the business requires more complex decision making and analysis

For executives, leading the business becomes far more complex, and fraught with heightened risk. Most at this level are either responsible for profit and loss directly, or they're managing more constituents and larger accountabilities. Decisions are not only higher-pressure, they are more numerous, and are often a source of fatigue and stress for even the most sturdy leaders.

Business leadership isn't like team, project, or program leadership. It brings executives face to face with the challenge of becoming *strategic* leaders, thinking beyond current demands to mobilize action toward a new and different future. This requires shifting one's criteria for what is urgent. Short term, operational challenges must be subordinated to a broader strategic intent. But this is a heavy lift for leaders who were promoted precisely because of their operational excellence. So, many simply "go with what they know" and remain mired in tactical matters while the long range business plan lies unattended.

Whether they realize it or not, new executives are often not ready to transition into a world where they are now responsible for creating their own business strategies. In our research with over 15,000 executives, we found only 37 percent were prepared to handle this challenge.

Key aspects of the BUSINESS force:

- Larger-scale business management
- More complex decisions
- More information and inputs
- More competing priorities
- Escalating P&L responsibility
- Longer planning horizon
- Disruptive business threats
- Multiple time horizons

Force 2 | **Teams**

Leading teams requires more varied people skills

With more people to lead and more inputs, executives are significantly more dependent on the performance of people on their teams. Giving away a new level of trust and accountability can be difficult for leaders accustomed to demonstrating their own personal strengths.

Add in the fact that with more accountabilities comes less one-on-one time with people. We hear this again and again. After being promoted, co-workers remark, "I don't get to spend time with you anymore like I used to." And direct reports will say, "If I could change one thing about my job, it would be to get more time with you."

And executives themselves want more time with their people. On average, we found that leaders prefer to spend almost half (46%) of their workday interacting, but currently only do so 29% of the time.

Often by necessity, companies spread executives thinly across many responsibilities—so much so that managing a team begins to require a much broader range of skills, including: communicating with more diverse audiences, engaging people in varying scenarios, providing inspiration, creating strategic clarity, sharpening role expectations and accountabilities, and more.

Key aspects of the TEAMS force:

- More inputs
- More relationships of less substance
- More dependence on team performance
- Broader span of influence
- More cultural impact
- More people
- Larger team accountabilities
- Less one-on-one time

Leading across a larger network requires more forethought and proactivity

The nuances, opportunities, and landmines across one's network are frequently overlooked among new executives. A financial services VP remarked, "I feel like I have a hundred bosses now." The necessity to recognize, account for, and align competing agendas across a matrix of functions, businesses, and teams can be as subtle as it is overwhelming.

Many learn by mistake, often missing an important communication or involvement opportunity, or worse, failing to account for key constituents in the process of executing a strategy. These mistakes can have lasting impact far beyond the individual executive, and can affect organizational dynamics that cross boundaries and significantly impact long-term business success.

A common story we have encountered on many occasions goes like this: A bright, focused executive digs into a critical initiative, bent on succeeding in this big challenge. Six months in, she's presenting a status update in a quarterly review. Midway through her presentation, like a lightning bolt, another executive, raises her hand, "I don't like where this is going at all. This totally flies in the face of some work that my group is doing."

Moments like this are common, and more so among leaders who fail to engage proactively with their networks to build and sustain mutually reinforcing alliances. For some executives, "blindside" moments are experiences from which they learn and grow, while others may need several more blindsides before enacting change.

Like all four forces of pressure, however, engaging in one's network is far more manageable if one has the opportunity to explore and understand this aspect of the executive transition before encountering the common pitfalls.

Key aspects of the NETWORK force:

- More stakeholders
- More dependency on trust capital
- Political battles
- Competing priorities
- Fewer resources
- More dependence on network strength
- More complex constituents
- Competition for organizational focus

Force 4 | **Self**

Leading self requires more introspection and adaptation

The spotlight shines on executives for a much greater proportion of their workdays than in previous roles. Some don't flinch at the change, while others find themselves reflecting inward. But whether they are self-aware or not, the impact of each executive's style, tendencies, dispositions, moods, and behaviors are all heightened upon arrival into the role. As one executive put it, "Your personality is going to become public, whether you like it or not. The question is what impact is it having, and what do you need to do about it?"

As executives encounter the public discovery, harsh scrutiny, and often surprising impact of their individuality on their leadership effectiveness, it is essential to engage in appropriate levels of introspection and adaptation. Balancing one's unique nature with the need to adjust to new and different circumstances is one of the quintessential and most difficult aspects of what it means to be an executive. Candid feedback is a precious asset that is more difficult to obtain with each step upward in the hierarchy. And executives understand the importance of feedback. They told us the number one thing they want most to help them develop is external coaching.

Those who learn to gather and use feedback early in their leadership careers are far more likely to accurately read the organizations they lead as they advance upward. Of course, the reverse is true as well.

In general, as leaders progress upward into executive roles, the need to take the journey inward to fully understand oneself becomes ever more imperative. For most, this is difficult to do without assistance from trusted advisors and objective sources of input. But the effort is far easier in the earlier phases of executive leadership, as opposed to later when structure, hierarchy, and risk figure more prominently into communications and the gathering of honest feedback.

Key aspects of the SELF force:

- Lack of role clarity
- More at risk
- Less personal recognition
- Greater risk of personality derailers
- Less time and ability to focus
- Frequent new and daunting assignments
- Confidence struggles
- More pressure
- Greater consequences of failure

Help Executives Transition Smoothly

A review of the four forces of executive pressure may leave one less shocked at the rate of executive failure—they are daunting indeed—but perhaps more alarming is that so few organizations have found ways to meaningfully support their emerging executives as they transition into these business-critical roles.

Three successful approaches are discussed next. In practice, they are not mutually exclusive, as hybrid solutions are often ideal. They do, however, represent ways of efficiently addressing the doughnut hole of development, and heightening the speed to effectiveness and success of your emerging executives.

APPROACH 1: **PRESSURE POINT DEVELOPMENT**	APPROACH 2: **ROLE IMMERSION (SIMULATION)**	APPROACH 3: **SHARED DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES**
Unique personalized coaching that prepares executives to hit the ground running	Customizable executive assessments that give candidates a preview of what they'll experience in executive roles	Executives learning together and from one another in high-impact live sessions

Pressure Point℠ Development

Prepare emerging or early executives to hit the ground running

How is it different than executive coaching?

Pressure Point Development is very different from traditional executive coaching. Faster, more direct, and aimed at shorter-term adaptation and development instead of long-range career development, coaches are laser-focused on rapidly helping a new or soon-to-be executive explore the four forces of executive pressure, and what those pressures mean to them personally.

With a personalized understanding of the forces of pressure, coaches then facilitate an exploration of executive pitfalls. These are common but ineffective responses to the forces of pressure. These pitfalls include tactical obsession (staying too close to details), being politically passive (avoiding political pressures so assertively that one fails to perceive critical organizational dynamics), and many others we have identified based on decades of assessing and developing executives worldwide.

Participants in this form of coaching are prone to frequent smiles of recognition or "a-ha" moments when they find words and definition for something they may have vaguely understood before, but now can take action to address.

But the most important thing is what they take away from the coaching engagement. After a self-assessment and personal reflection, the executive and their coach together identify likely pitfalls and create a plan for development priorities.

An individual development plan includes actionable next steps to help them overcome specific challenges and avoid the common traps that lead to failure. With Pressure Point Development, executives gain deep insights and a clear roadmap so they can hit the ground running and succeed.

Role Immersion (Simulation)

Customizable executive assessments that give candidates a preview of what they'll experience in executive roles

What is role immersion?

In an in-person or virtual role immersion, the participant is presented with a business simulation in which they are appointed as an executive. The role they would play would be based on the level the participant aspires towards. For example, leaders being developed toward C-suite roles would participate in C-suite simulations.

Then, they are immersed in the short- and long-term challenges associated with that role, such as creating a business strategy, leading an organizational change, influencing key stakeholders, or coaching talented members of their team.

These experiences are deeply engaging, sparking participants to reflect on their own leadership approaches both during and after the experience. Because these simulated immersions are heavily layered with business and organizational data and context, they can be handled in almost any way the participant chooses. As such, leadership "reflexes"

and unique personal tendencies can be observed and fed back to participants for discussion in light of their new or emerging challenges.

From a development perspective, role immersions provide holistic data that shows a clear view of an executive's strengths and struggles. From there, personalized development plans are crafted to anticipate opportunities and likely pitfalls to accelerate growth. In addition, aggregate data is useful in evaluating bench strength, including where gaps exist that could create business vulnerability or opportunity.

These data and insights can form the foundation of a deeper succession plan. Objective data and behavioral observations highlight readiness to step up, and where more support may be needed. When finalists are being considered for promotion into key positions, simulation data supplies an unparalleled aspect of objectivity and predictive validity, ensuring fair, unbiased decisions.

Shared Development Experiences
Executives learning together and from one another

Why develop together?

It can be challenging to develop all your executives if you do it one leader at a time. In fact, some of the most memorable and relevant learning happens when experiences are shared among leaders. Shared learning can also contribute to networking and relationship building.

These experiences can take many forms and may include both of the approaches discussed earlier—Pressure Point Development and role immersions—along with live high-impact sessions or formal courses.

For example, in one group development experience, executives finetune their customer-focused growth mindset. They learn to set the stage for prioritizing new customer demands with example situations, shifts in thinking, and outcomes. These experiences are competency-based and include formal content, such as models, frameworks, individual and team exercises, and application tools.

They also include a leader debrief to review key themes and support as well as personalized, individual executive coaching after the group sessions.

Other group-based development options emphasize the four forces of pressure and the common executive pitfalls and how to overcome them. Cohort-based experiences can also provide a safe space for executives to explore how their personalities help or hinder how they lead.

In these virtual or in-person sessions, what happens is a series of shared "lightbulb" moments. Much of the learning takes place by listening to how other executives responded to similar challenges, or hearing from leaders who represent parts of the organization with which some are unfamiliar.

The dialogue and shared reflections carry immeasurable value to executives who are working to master their roles, or preparing to transition into new ones. We hear remarks like, "Wow, I didn't think about that," or, "It never occurred to me that another part of the company might have the same challenge."

Emerging Executive Development:
What's in it for the leader?
What's in it for the organization?

Each of these approaches has unique benefits for both the organization and senior management as well as for individuals.

Pressure Point Development is a more personalized, candid means of helping an executive anticipate the complexities of their new (or soon-to-be) role, from an experienced coach who can share the lessons and observations from many other executives. For management and HR, it provides a scalable way to give executives access to expert coaches that might otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Role immersions unfreeze thinking about how leaders might be inclined to react in a future role. While on the management side, it produces data to support decisions about promotions, special assignments, or developmental opportunities.

Group-based development options allow executives to learn quickly together in an engaging environment while helping them strengthen their networks. For the organization, this is a more scalable approach to developing a group of emerging executives, all of whom have very unique needs.

Pressure Point Development

Individual Leader Benefits

- Candid, direct expertise
- Efficient view into executive roles
- Clear and immediate next steps

Management/Organizational Benefits

- More scalable expert coaching
- Accelerates speed to effectiveness
- Personalized action plans for all

Role Immersions (Simulations)

Individual Leader Benefits

- Specific, behavioral insights
- Unfreezes fixed thinking
- Experiential, immersive

Management/Organizational Benefits

- Objective, validated perspective
- Benchmarking data analytics
- Accelerates growth and readiness

Shared Development Experiences

Individual Leader Benefits

- Engaging group experience
- Enables shared learning
- Boosts connections

Management/Organizational Benefits

- More scalable approach
- Builds engagement and visibility
- Strengthens networks

Fill the Doughnut Hole

It's not too late

Doing nothing to support your new executives may be the most common approach, but it leaves your leaders, and your company open to significant risks.

Strategic confusion. Lagging team performance. Turnover and difficulty attracting new talent. A weak bench. The list goes on and on.

These risks are particularly acute as companies put increasing pressure on their executives to perform under a new strategic direction or adjust to disruptions. Your executives' ability to manage their teams, networks, business units, and themselves is crucial for the success of your business strategy.

In the end, this is a choice between doing nothing, or doing something. The evidence is convincing that the risks are too great to justify the do-nothing approach.

It's not too late to give your emerging executives the development they need to succeed. Scalable, high-impact answers are available to help your executives thrive in their transitions, and you'll have the insights to know who is ready now to step up, and how to prepare those who aren't. You'll be left with a formidable executive bench, and the best chance at growing the business and culture your people and shareholders deserve.

Learn more about our development solutions for emerging executives at your organization.

ddiworld.com/executivedevelopment

About the Author

Matt Paese, Ph.D., is the Senior Vice President of Leadership Insights for DDI. He is a globally recognized leadership coach, consultant, author, keynote speaker, and pioneer of top approaches for helping leaders succeed. He has contributed over two decades of impact in growing leaders into skilled, self-aware, compassionate enterprise executives.

About DDI

DDI is a global leadership consulting firm that helps organizations hire, promote and develop exceptional leaders. From first-time managers to C-suite executives, DDI is by leaders' sides, supporting them in every critical moment of leadership. Built on five decades of research and experience in the science of leadership, DDI's evidence-based assessment and development solutions enable millions of leaders around the world to succeed, propelling their organizations to new heights. For more information, visit ddiworld.com.

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