

Rethinking Executive Transitions:

What really drives success when
moving into the C-Suite

When senior executives transition into new C-Suite roles, organizations typically focus on strategy briefings, financial reviews, and technical onboarding. Our research reveals this approach misses the mark.

Through in-depth interviews with seven recently transitioned C-Suite executives across diverse industries—from retail and healthcare to private equity and automotive—we discovered that successful transitions depend far more on relationship architecture, cultural intelligence, and what we term the "inner game" of leadership than on technical expertise.

Why This Research Matters

Executive transitions represent some of the highest-stakes, highest-cost decisions organizations make. C-Suite hiring costs easily reach seven figures when factoring in search fees, compensation, and opportunity costs: the price of getting it wrong is enormous. Yet despite this investment, research consistently shows that 40-60% of senior executive hires fail to meet expectations.

We designed this study to test our hypothesis about what drives transition success. Our hypothesis laid out three dimensions executives need to be prepared on as they enter new roles.

1. **Environmental Forces:** broad, global factors that are affecting the organisation, e.g. Economy, Politics, Technology, Sustainability, Society
2. **Content:** leadership of what is done and the results that follow, e.g. Strategy, Business Model, Expertise, Capabilities, Customers, Partners, Competition
3. **Context:** leadership of how it is done and conditions to reach the results, e.g. Organizational Dynamics, Transformational Requirements, Stakeholder Engagement, Peer Teaming, Team Leadership

We interviewed executives who had recently moved into new C-Suite roles to understand what actually mattered most in their early months and what support they found most valuable.

What We Discovered

1. Context trumps content.

Our original framework proposed three critical domains for executive to be prepared and focused on as they take on a new role: Environmental Forces (global factors affecting the business), Content (strategy and business knowledge), and Context (organizational dynamics and culture). We expected these to be roughly equal in importance, but our interviewees corrected us.

Firstly, every single executive ranked Context as the most critical factor, with several explicitly stating it matters more than technical expertise or strategic knowledge.

Secondly, history matters. A strong theme emerged around the importance of understanding organizational history. Things happen for a reason. Understanding why decisions were made in certain ways and how they led to certain outcomes provides powerful insights about the context you are entering in.

Finally, stakeholders and stakeholder dynamics are vital to your success. That is at the board level, with peers and within the new team. And it is not just about building relationships—it's about understanding power dynamics and potential resistance.

"I would say: #1 is context, #2 is content, and #3 is environmental factors... if a person is a candidate for a senior role, it goes without saying that they are aware of the environmental factors... The content is also, by default, there... But I think the extremely important thing is context. When the context is missing, there's a risk of starting on the wrong foot."

- Selin Can, Executive Vice President Bikes, Accell Group

"I think one very important thing in my roles in the past and also today, are the past experiences. I do not mean my past experiences, but rather the past experiences of the company, of the function, of the leadership team... Things happen for a reason... Learning of the past needs to be embedded in the future direction."

- Ozlem Fidanci, Chief of International Region at Philips

"Most important is the people. Who are the stakeholders? No matter what function you do there are different stakeholders that you have to deal with. And no matter what stakeholders, there are people behind them, individuals behind the stakeholders. Understand who the stakeholders are. Frankly, this is top of the list."

- Rafa Oliveira, CEO at JDE Peet's

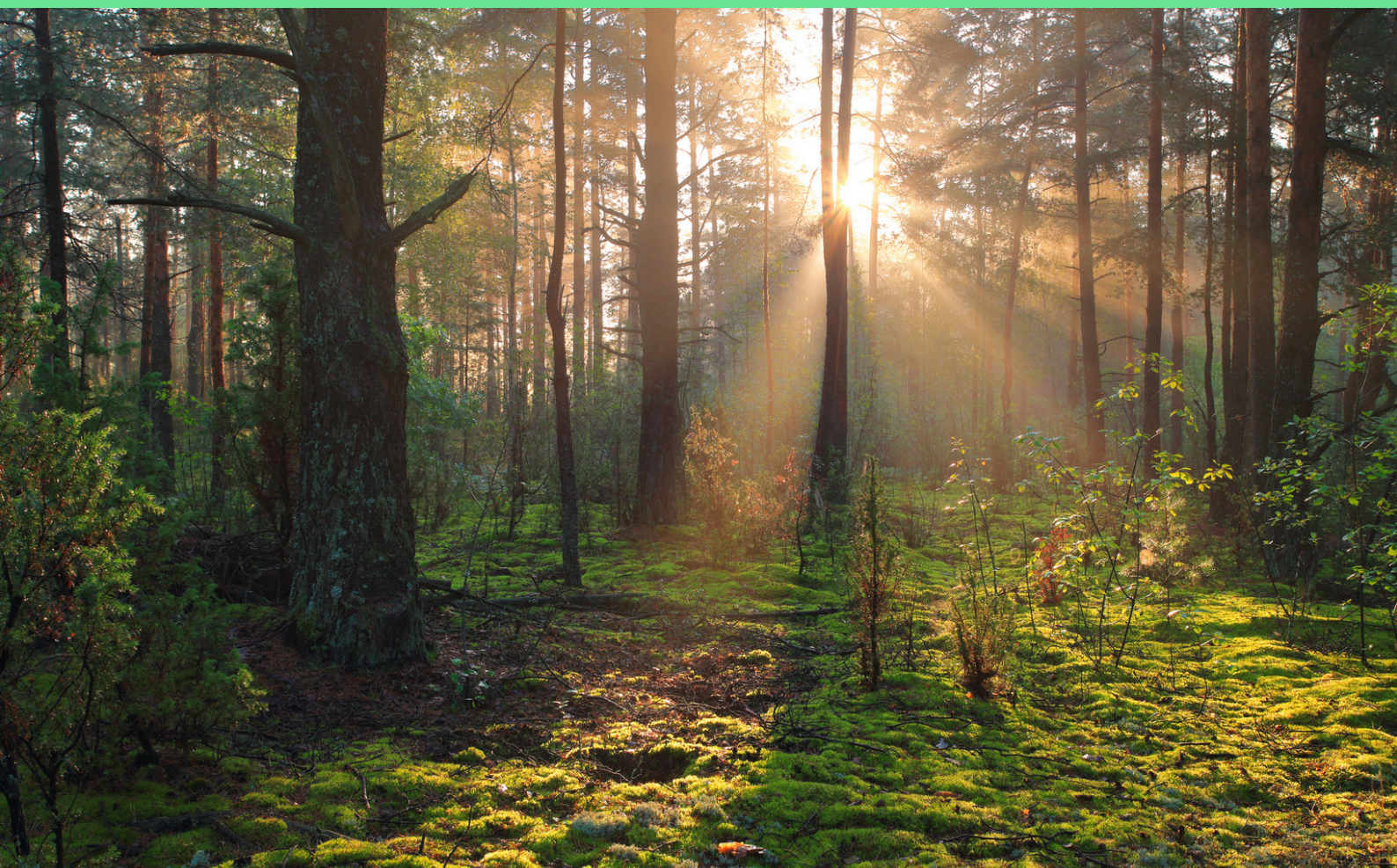
2. There was a missing fourth dimension: The Inner Game

Perhaps our most significant discovery was what we weren't measuring at all—the inner game, the personal dynamics of the leader. What emerged was how important it is to prepare for your role as an executive, potentially to include your family and loved ones, but especially to bring the right levels of energy, connection and authenticity.

Self-awareness and connecting with your purpose are seen as vital by our interviewees, as that would be the basis for why you chose to take this role at the first place. It is also the basis for how you would show up, build relationships and lead with impact.

"I felt though that something was missing and what I think is missing is your inner game... how you show up, what kind of energy you create, how you author who you are and your leadership story. I think this was the biggest learning for me."

- Natalia Wallenberg, CHRO at Ahold Delhaize



3. Some leadership behaviours have differentiated impact on successful transition to C-Suite roles.

Five behaviours (Contextual Intelligence, Strategic Stakeholder Orchestration, Authentic Adaptability, Proactive Onboarding Ownership, and Early Trust-Building) emerged as top 5 most critical behaviours across all leadership transition experiences.

Contextual Intelligence ranks number 1. Participants described it as the ability to deeply understand organizational culture, history, informal networks, and stakeholder dynamics before implementing changes or solutions.

Strategic Stakeholder Orchestration is a close number 2, which suggests systematically identifying, prioritizing, and building relationships with key stakeholders (boss, direct reports, peers, board, external partners) based on their influence and support levels. As well as listening and learning, all of our interviewees recognized that they were already in role; they interact and lead in a dynamic and balancing manner pursuing collective performance.

Adjusting leadership style and approach to fit the new environment while maintaining your core values and authentic self is described as **Authentic Adaptability**.

Leaders consistently took charge of their own transition success and showed **Proactive Onboarding Ownership**.

Early Trust-Building enabled them to establish credibility and build trusted relationships within the first 30-90 days through consistent actions, transparency, and delivering on small commitments.

"The shift from IQ to EQ is really hugely important... Empathy and the ability to adapt to the new environment... That's a very, very important skill at this level."

- **Mete Ekin, Group President EMEA at Bridgestone**

"Someone is staying behind - I push them. Someone is running too fast - I slow them."

- **Mete Ekin, Group President EMEA at Bridgestone**

"There is no 100-day honeymoon period—you have to build trust within the first 30 days. In my experience, that early trust becomes the foundation for everything that follows."

- **Lale Kof, CIO at Clariant**

4. The C-Suite onboarding must be intentional.

There's very little 'grace' period. Traditional onboarding assumes a learning curve, but C-Suite roles do not provide that luxury. Every day, week, month, quarter counts for creating expansion of impact ultimately covering all of the organization and the ecosystem. Continuous communication and an effective feedback mechanism with the key stakeholders is necessary.

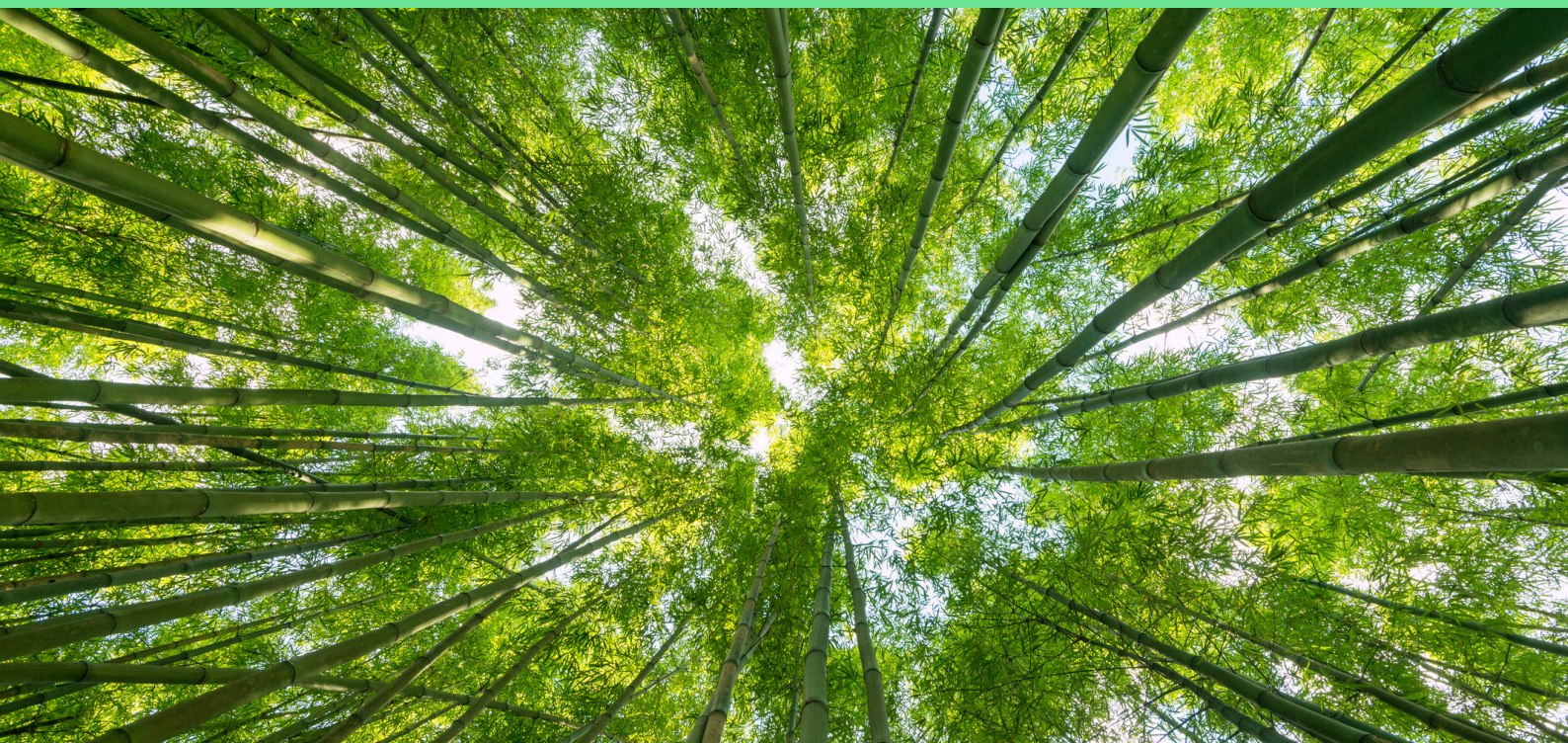
Within this, most of our interviewees talked needing to take control of their onboarding, ensuring that they got the access or understanding they needed, in addition and sometimes in spite of the formal support they received.

"I would say the 1st 90 days and 180 days are very critical... the 1st 90 days kind of set the tone, then the 1st 180 days kind of have a clear direction. Within one year, you want to have a direction already understood for everybody."

- **Rafa Oliveira, CEO at JDE Peet's**

"If there is no onboarding, demand some onboarding. Make sure there is in an edge to onboarding from yourself as well, because company will have a standard, but you also have to bring forward what is important for this role. You have to add your own expectations. And then follow it in a discipline way."

- **Ozlem Fidanci, Chief of International Region at Philips**



5. Should you neglect Environmental Forces and Content?

Our own sense is that whilst strategy, or content, feels a lower priority, it would be a mistake to neglect it outright. We also believe that after an initial onboarding period, this aspect will rise in importance. It is easy in this context to think that strategy is not important when so much depends on getting to know the people and the culture but ignore it at your peril. These roles will quickly become about how well they deliver the strategy.

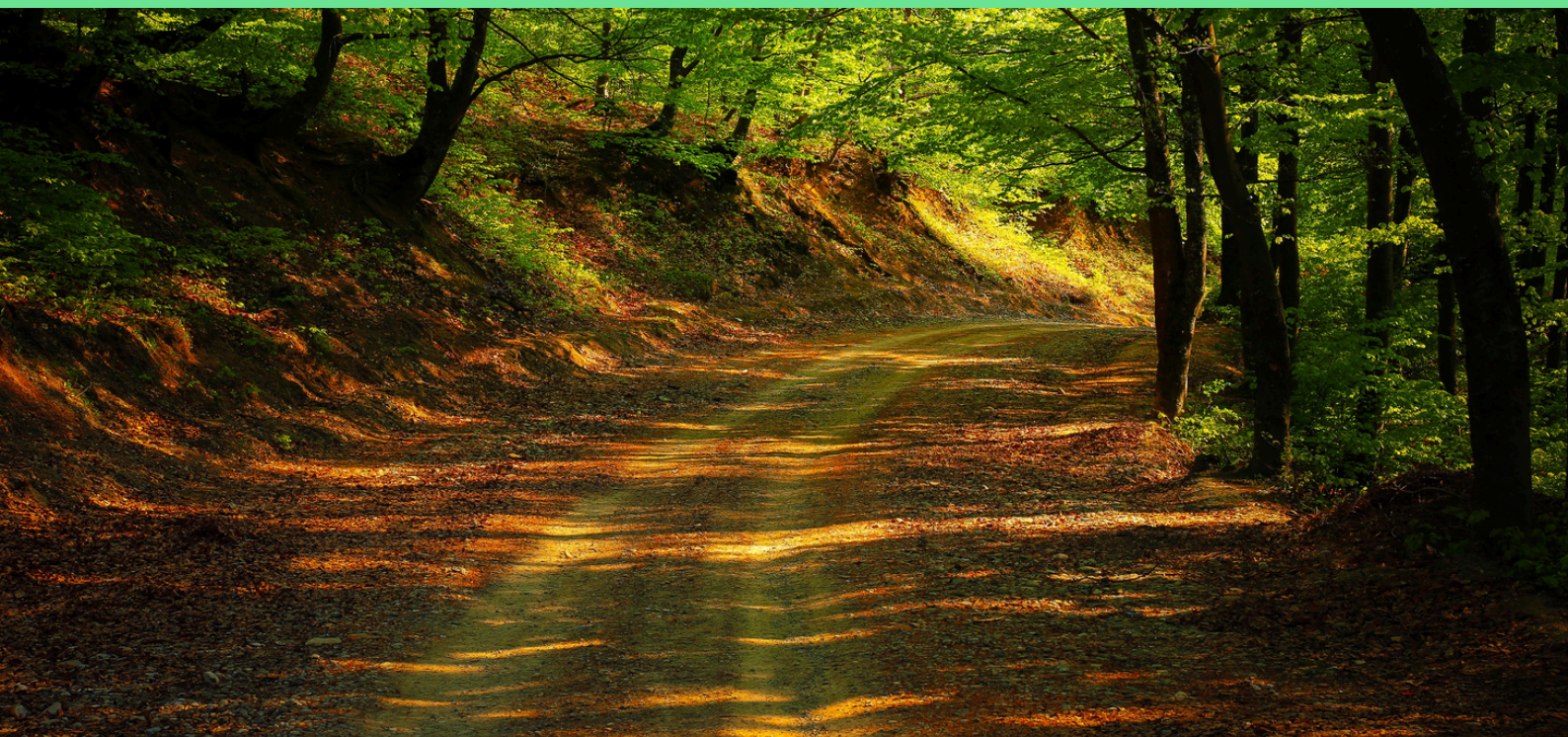
And in that sense, environmental forces will remain important too; what is going in the world, for customers, partners and suppliers, will be key anchoring points. These roles will in time guide new strategy, and their vigilance about emerging trends and opportunities, will be vital to the organisations long term health.

“Enablers and barriers were the biggest input to the revised strategy... What is our executional capability, our commercial capability, prioritisation of markets, ability to get stuff done through the line and into retailers... So, I spent a lot of time with the commercial side of the business.”

- **Pedro Mendonca, SVP at Bacardi**

“In the end, my number one concern is setting up my team and then with the right team defining the strategy of the company.”

- **Rafa Oliveira, CEO at JDE Peet's**



Recommendations

This research confirmed the importance of onboarding for transition success and contributed to the development of the **Transition Accelerator Framework**, providing insights for its four dimensions – **Environmental Focus, Content, Context** and **Personal Dynamics**. We also captured some key practical recommendations for organizations and transitioning executives.

Recommendations for Organizations:

1. Redesign Onboarding Around Context, Not Content

- Prioritize cultural immersion and stakeholder mapping over technical briefings
- Provide comprehensive organizational history, including past "traumas" and change experiences
- Create structured programs for understanding informal networks and power dynamics

2. Invest in the Inner Game

- Establish intentional feedback on onboarding effectiveness and support through executive coaching on leadership impact
- Include family/personal life integration planning as part of transition support
- Create space for executives to communicate their authentic leadership style early

3. Support Stakeholder Architecture

- Facilitate introductions to informal influencers, not just formal reporting relationships, including external stakeholders (board members, key customers, partners)
- Provide proactive, committed and relevant buddy support who can help navigate cultural dynamics
- Help identify potential internal resistance, including unsuccessful internal candidates

Recommendations for Transitioning Executives:

1. Take Ownership of Your Transition

- Design your own stakeholder engagement plan beyond what is provided
- Invest in personal coaching and support systems
- Set your own rhythm for check-ins with key relationships

2. Listen Before Leading

- Resist the urge to implement solutions in your first 90 days
- Visit the stakeholders multiple times to build deeper understanding
- Ask "why" questions about existing approaches before proposing changes

3. Communicate Your Inner Game

- Be explicit about your working style, values, and expectations
- Demonstrate consistency between your words and actions from day one
- Address cultural adaptation while maintaining your authentic leadership identity



The Value of Getting it Right

A well-organized executive onboarding provides measurable returns:

- Faster time-to-impact: Executives build trust and begin driving results faster
- Higher success rates: Cultural integration dramatically reduces the risk of executive derailment
- Better stakeholder relationships: Systematic relationship building creates stronger organizational alignment
- Sustainable change leadership: Understanding organizational history enables more effective transformation

The executives we interviewed succeeded not only because they were technically superior, but because they also understood that C-Suite transitions are fundamentally about relationships, culture, and personal leadership.

They highlighted the importance of the early and continuous appreciation of the context, the impact of the inner game of the leader and the shift needed in leadership behaviours as they transition to C-Suite roles.

We heard loud and clear that a well-structured, timely and intentional onboarding is a game changer and is a joined responsibility of the organization and the leader.

The path forward requires a fundamental shift: from information transfer to relationship architecture, from knowledge acquisition to cultural integration, and from technical competence to emotional intelligence.

The executives who master these elements don't just survive their transitions—they transform their organizations.

The question isn't whether you can afford to invest in better executive transitions. It's whether you can afford not to.



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This research was conducted during the first half of 2025 through in-depth interviews with seven C-Suite executives across a diverse set of industries. They shared personal insights referencing their own transition experiences.



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