Stepping Into the C-Suite: What Actually Changes

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Not simply a bigger version of the previous role

Many executives expect the move into a C-suite role to feel like an extension of what came before, more scope, more budget, more people. In practice, the nature of the work changes as much as its scale. Success is now judged less on functional expertise and more on enterprise-level judgement, influence with a small group of powerful peers, and comfort operating with far less certainty than the role below it typically required.

What genuinely changes

The audience for your thinking shifts. Decisions now need to be explained and defended to a board, to peers with competing priorities, and sometimes to shareholders or the public, not only to your own function. This requires a different kind of communication: more concise, more comfortable with ambiguity, and more attuned to organisational politics than most functional roles demand.

Functional excellence becomes necessary but no longer sufficient. The expertise that earned the promotion matters less day to day than the ability to make sound calls across areas outside your original specialism, working with genuine humility about what you do not know.

Isolation increases. Peers become fewer, and some information no longer flows as freely once you hold real organisational power. Many C-suite leaders describe feeling more alone in the role than they expected, which makes external relationships, a coach, a peer network outside the organisation, more valuable than before.

Preparing well for the transition

Build genuine breadth before the promotion, not just depth. Seek exposure to functions outside your own well before stepping into an executive role, since the credibility to make enterprise-wide calls depends partly on having engaged seriously with areas beyond your specialism.

Invest early in peer relationships across functions. The trust needed to work effectively as an executive team is built well before the stakes are highest; waiting until the promotion to start building these relationships puts a leader at a disadvantage.

Get explicit with your own manager or the board about what success looks like. Expectations at this level are often less codified than at earlier career stages, and assuming shared understanding, rather than confirming it directly, is a common and costly mistake.

The honest picture

The C-suite is not simply a reward for good performance at the level below; it is a different job, requiring a different set of muscles. Leaders who treat it that way, and prepare deliberately rather than assuming past success will automatically transfer, tend to navigate the transition with far more

confidence and far less unnecessary struggle.