

Member Communication Experience

Why Your Best Leaders May Not Be Ready for the C-Suite

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As a construction company owner, you already know this: the higher you climb, the more complex the problems get. Decisions in the C-suite aren't about one job, one cost center, or one crisis. They're about growth, risk, and resilience across the entire business.

That's why some of your most talented people — your sharpest estimators, your most reliable superintendents — may not be cut out for the C-suite. Their expertise built your company's success, but those very strengths can also hold them back from becoming true executives.

The danger is subtle. You may promote someone because they're the "numbers expert," the "operations guy," or the "safety champion." But once in the C-suite, their identity stays boxed into that one perspective. They advise, but they don't lead. (And in today's market, you need leaders who can integrate, not just specialize.)

The Three Shifts that Separate Experts from Executives

If you want to choose the right leaders for your company's future, look for these three shifts. Without them, even your most accomplished employees will struggle at the top.

1. Business Fluency

A project manager may be brilliant at controlling job costs, but that doesn't automatically translate into executive capability. True business fluency means tying every decision back to



the company's goals and needs - growth, resilience, market position, etc.

Ask yourself: When this leader explains their decisions, do they connect the dots to profitability and competitive advantage? Or do they stay locked in their narrow expertise?

For example, a CFO who talks about reducing overhead as a cost-saving approach is still a specialist. But one who frames overhead reductions as a strategy for winning bigger bids or buying a rival is operating like an executive.

2. People and Systems

Culture in construction shows up in how crews are managed, how schedules are enforced, and how accountability is built

into daily operations. At the executive level, culture isn't about teams — it's about systems.

The superintendent who inspires loyalty on one crew is valuable. But the leader who redesigns crew structures so projects run smoother across all sites — that's someone operating at an executive level.

Ask yourself: Does this leader understand how to hardwire culture into structure and accountability? Can they connect safety, morale, and productivity to real business outcomes?

3. Future Readiness

The industry is changing fast: digital tools, prefabrication, AI planning, labor shortages, and on and on. Future-ready leaders don't just adopt tools, they lead the charge to utilize new tools and processes to maximize output and profits.

The executive you want is the one who can show you not just how to implement a tool, but how it creates market advantage, attracts clients, and leaves your competitors wondering what happened.

Ask yourself: Does this leader show how technology, talent, and process intersect to position the company for tomorrow?

How to Differentiate a Great Leader from a Good Executive

Even strong leaders fail at the executive level if they can't wrap their arms around being responsible for the business as a whole. Here are a few signs that differentiate a great leader from a good executive:

Their language only speaks to “their lane.” Culture, costs, or safety don't matter unless tied to revenue, risk, and client confidence. For example, an acquisition isn't just a finance move — it's culture shock, workforce integration, and operational risk colliding. Narrow thinkers miss half the problems.

They wait for someone else to set direction, then act. Executives envision and shape the future, they don't (necessarily) execute.

The Language and Actions You Want to Hear and See, Instead

When evaluating the option of promoting someone to the

C-suite, don't just ask, “Who's the best at this?” Instead, look for the connector mindset:

They lead with business impact. They talk about margins, growth, and risks — not just project details.

They treat risk as fuel. They frame compliance and safety as enablers, not barriers.

They step up in crises. How they act during layoffs, accidents, or business disruptions shows more than steady-state performance ever will.

They don't “report” data, they interpret it. They frame numbers in terms of cost, opportunity, and market position. They add meaning to the data.

They work as a team of executives. They stop being the “safety person” or the “finance guy” and become a business leader who happens to have expertise.

Final Thoughts

The hard truth is this: not every great leader in your company will succeed in the C-suite. Their strengths, while invaluable, may actually limit them at the highest level.

Your responsibility as CEO is to look beyond technical mastery. Ask yourself: Can this person tie finance to people, risk to systems, and technology to strategy? If the answer is no, they may remain a valuable team player, but not a future executive. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is an expert in building ready and capable leadership teams for succession and exit.

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