

Objective: Making it to CEO

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Everyone wants to make it to the top in their chosen career, but not everybody achieves that goal. This article takes an in-depth look at the different stages an executive must go through to become a CEO.

Many executives aspire to the position of CEO, which they see as the pinnacle of their careers. However, the authors of this article, IESE professors [José Ramón Pin](#) and [Guido Stein](#), warn that before starting the climb to the top, executives should ask themselves one question: "Is it worth it?"

To answer this question, the authors refer to an annual survey conducted by IESE's International Research Center on Organizations (IRCO) in collaboration with the public relations and communications firm Burson-Marsteller. The survey of 1,000 Spanish executives and business leaders includes a question that focuses on the reasons for and against becoming a CEO.

Based on the responses given, two main reasons for becoming a CEO can be identified: the possibility of putting one's own ideas into practice and the challenge and responsibility that go with the position.

On the downside, respondents cited two main disadvantages: the difficulty of reconciling personal and family life with one's professional activity, and the fact that a CEO must sometimes take decisions that are difficult from a human perspective, particularly in relation to dismissals that affect people close to the chief executive. All things considered, however, for many the advantages outweigh the drawbacks.

The achievement syndrome

Potential CEOs are characterized by what has been called the "achievement syndrome":

- They accept reasonable challenges that are neither very easy nor very difficult. The goals they pursue are ones they have an acceptable chance of achieving. They are not interested in anything that is either too simple or impossible.
- They have an original vision of reality, which sometimes generates arguments until they realize their vision.
- They work toward results in the medium and long term, not just the short term. Short-term results are a means of achieving long-term objectives.
- They need to have indicators to provide them with information about whether or not they are achieving planned results.
- They are interested in modifying the environment in which they operate. This involves more than just pursuing personal interests: they also seek to improve the living conditions of those around them.

This syndrome — while in principle one with positive effects — can end up becoming a "power syndrome" if the broader motivation is lost. When this happens, CEOs focus exclusively on their own interests and no longer concern themselves with what is good for the organization.

CEO competencies

Once one has decided it is worth fighting to reach the top, the next step is to determine whether one has the competencies required.

To define the core competencies of a good CEO, the authors of this article refer to the list of competencies published by IESE Prof. Pablo Cardona. According to Cardona, executives generally have three types of competencies: strategic, interpersonal and intrapersonal or self-leadership competencies. The core competencies of CEOs include their strategic business vision; some interpersonal competencies, such as the ability to delegate; and four intrapersonal competencies that relate to self-management, namely decision making, emotional balance, self-control and integrity.

The first competence of a good CEO — business vision — is the ability to take an imaginative, original approach when it comes to identifying opportunities that allow the business to survive and grow.

The second competence — the ability to delegate — is just as important. This skill can be learned through training and coaching.

Finally, with respect to the intrapersonal competencies a good CEO needs to have, it is important to note that anyone should be able to develop these virtues.

The four career stages

Over the course of his or her professional career, an executive passes through four stages before becoming a CEO.

1. *Starting work at the executive level.* At this stage, the aspiring CEO must make the right moves by occupying positions in the company's lines of future development and economic activity. This phase can be described as the "eagle stage" because it is during this period that executives must acquire a series of skills that will serve them well later on. Key skills include: knowing how to distinguish between power and influence; being able to manage people with more experience than oneself; learning to delegate; specializing in a specific area; and finding a good mentor.
2. *Developing executive competencies.* The authors refer to the second phase as the "spider stage" because this is when executives need to weave an internal and external web of relationships and interests.
3. *Consolidation.* At this stage, executives jump from one position of responsibility to another. It is essential that future CEOs make friends in each position they hold and progressively build a team of trusted allies. This is stage at which the plans of many who aspire to the top job are derailed; executives must be able to persevere, remain optimistic and hold onto their hopes for the future despite adversities.
4. *Getting to the top.* Pin and Stein draw a distinction between internal and external selection processes. If the process is an internal one, it may be either a "horse race," in which various candidates compete either explicitly or implicitly, or a "relay race," in which there is only one formal candidate. In the latter case, the situation may also be either explicit or tacit.

In their closing thoughts on the subject, the authors stress the enormous responsibility that being a CEO entails. This is why they consider it so important that executives take an efficient, effective approach as they prepare themselves for the top job.

Nevertheless, just as in sports, they insist that the most important thing is to participate. The competencies acquired by those vying for the CEO position will serve them well and help

them better understand how the organization works.

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