

# **The Uncommon Executive**

Breakthrough to the C-Suite  
as a Minority

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The events and conversations in this book have been set down to the best of the author's ability. Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

First paperback edition January 2024

ISBN: 979-8-87-102717-2 (paperback)  
LCCN: 2024900246

Published By Yue Zhao LLC  
Weston, Florida

[www.pmcoach.me](http://www.pmcoach.me)

## **Dedication**

*For my father, Zhao Hongchao.*

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## INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book to help aspiring executives, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, grow from managers to executives. With so few resources out there that focus on this difficult step in the career journey, I believe this book is incredibly needed.

As one of the few Asian female product leaders, I received many requests for mentorship and career advice from those looking to transition into management or, later, into VP and C-suite. I didn't truly comprehend how confusing or daunting working in product management and leadership felt to many until I began having conversations with people who were stuck or lost. As a result, in 2016 I decided to spend my nights and weekends coaching aspiring product managers and executives. Since then, I've had hundreds of career growth conversations through my coaching work and with my direct reports. I've seen many types of career journeys play out among friends, former colleagues, and classmates. Over and over, one of the most challenging and emotional topics that come up in my career coaching conversations is how to break through from middle management into executive levels: VP or C-suite. Many hardworking and intelligent people see their careers stall once they reach middle management, and the same topics come up repeatedly in conversation:

“I feel stuck. I've been in this job for years without getting promoted. What am I doing wrong?”

“The women I see at the top have abrasive, aggressive styles, and I don’t want to be like them. I can’t find anyone I want to role model at the executive level.”

“I’m swamped and nearing burnout right now in middle management. How can I even think about the VP role?”

“Do I need to get an MBA or a brand-name resume? Do I need to golf and know football?”

“I don’t know how you did it. How do I balance family and getting into leadership? It feels just impossible for me where I am.”

This book provides a path to executive leadership through that doubt and confusion. First, we’ll look at how to adopt an executive mindset and develop skills that are critical for success. Then we’ll discuss off-the-beaten-path (e.g., not white-male-centric) ways to demonstrate executive potential and land stretch assignments. We’ll dive into the challenges minorities tend to face more often: overcoming biases and stereotypes, finding a role model, and developing their superpower. And finally, we’ll wrangle with how we influence luck and create opportunities with sponsorship, networking, and making smart job changes.

And so, I’ll share what I’ve seen, struggled with, and learned in the process of breaking through to the C-suite as a double minority in technology. I hope these learnings and experiences will help you chart your course to the executive level.

# PART I

## THE EXECUTIVE ROLE

*“The future belongs to those who believe  
in the beauty of their dreams.”*

— *Eleanor Roosevelt*

Most executives know, with the logical side of their brain, that diversity is good for business. However, in the past 10 years, we’ve made only incremental progress toward truly diverse teams, particularly at the executive level. In this section, we explore how a combination of implicit biases compound over time, leading to very little diversity in highly competitive environments. We also analyze how an executive’s mindset and skill set differ from a middle manager’s approach, narrowing in on the increased importance of people and relationships. If this is something you’re already familiar with and you want to dive into how to combat these biases, please skip ahead to Part II!



# CHAPTER 1



## WHY DIVERSITY IS SO DIFFICULT



**I**n the United States, the typical executive remains a white male, who continues to hold the vast majority of director and executive positions. As an Asian woman, a double minority by gender and race, I've had to overcome more challenges than my white male colleagues to become chief product and technology officer. While higher education institutions and some entry-level jobs are meritocracies, the further up on the career ladder, the more the biases we face as a minority lead to an outsize impact on our chances of success.

Diverse teams spend more time discussing the facts, discover unforeseen pitfalls, and come up with more innovative solutions.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that companies with more than 30 percent women executives are more likely to outperform companies where this percentage ranged from 10 to 30. In turn, these companies are more likely to outperform those with less than 10 percent of women executives.<sup>2</sup> A substantial difference in outperformance—48 percent—separates the most gender-diverse companies from the least gender-diverse companies.<sup>3</sup> Ethnic diversity leads to similar improvements in business performance and innovation.

However, in the United States, white males still account for 70 percent of C-level and 86 percent of CEOs in Fortune 100 companies. Women account for roughly 48 percent of entry-level employees, but only 33 percent of the VP and C-suite.<sup>4</sup> In the technology industry specifically, women account for 25 percent

of the technical workforce,<sup>5</sup> but only 5 percent of the executive roles overall.<sup>6</sup>

In diversity by race, Asian women have the lowest Executive Parity Index (percentage of executives as a percentage of total professionals) at 0.3 percent<sup>7</sup>. White men are six-fold higher at 1.83 percent. White women and Asian men are at roughly 0.6 percent.<sup>8</sup> Less than 1.5 percent of Fortune 1000 board directors are Asian women, and 72 percent have no Asian directors at all.<sup>9</sup> The story is similar for other underrepresented ethnic groups like Hispanics and Blacks.

While the statistics are discouraging in aggregate, they can also be viewed as an opportunity to make a difference. One of my mottos is: If it's easy, someone would have already done it. Rather than focusing on the statistics, focus on your value proposition and your will to succeed. Don't let them limit or hinder your thinking. You are not a statistic. You are a unique individual who has something unique to bring to the table. Focus your energy on finding that one path through the battlefield to success for you because that's all you need: one chance, one spot, one opportunity.



## **The Trifecta of Affinity, Confirmation, and Negativity Biases**

The three types of bias that stand out in terms of the highest impact on minorities trying to advance their career are affinity bias, confirmation bias, and negativity bias. These three combined create a self-fulfilling loop that promotes more of the in-group (e.g., white males with roughly 80 percent representation) and further excludes the out-group (e.g., non-white males or females).

Affinity bias is the very human tendency to trust and favor people whom you view as more similar, often based on common experiences, backgrounds, or interests. Affinity bias leads executives to give their “mini-me” more opportunities, less critical feedback, or more benefit of the doubt when it comes to mistakes.

It was in my first job out of college that I saw the affinity bias based on gender and race at play in the workplace at play in the workplace. I landed a business analyst role at McKinsey & Company, where I was the only person not from an Ivy League school to be accepted that year. Shortly after starting, I noticed that although half of my interviewers had been women, most of the partners at the firm were white men. Often, a white male partner would ask a white male associate to take on a part of the presentation and introduce them to the clients. They would go off and plan for future meetings, leaving the rest of the team to do follow-up work. Over time, I noticed that non-minority managers were more frequently given opportunities to work

closely with partners and that the senior non-white-male managers would have to explicitly ask for similar opportunities. This is what affinity bias looks like.

The second is confirmation bias, which is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories. This means that when we receive new information that does not fit our current beliefs, rather than altering our beliefs to incorporate the new information, we do the opposite. We alternate our interpretation of the information to fit our beliefs. This is why two very smart people looking at the same set of data or observing the same set of events can come to two very different conclusions. From a career perspective, this shows up in many different places. When hiring, a CEO may interpret interview results in a way that confirms their preexisting beliefs (subject to affinity bias) about a candidate. During performance reviews, managers may subconsciously inflate the performance rating of those who are more like them or be more willing to overlook mistakes. In decision-making, leaders may prefer to hear, and pay more attention to, information or perspectives that match their own. It's easy to see how this leads to a disadvantage for minorities, who are more likely to have a different perspective and a different approach than their (usually) white male leaders.

Third is negativity bias. This is where executives over-index on negative actions of people who are unlike them and more readily perceive a mistake as a repeat pattern. For example, I would often receive feedback for being "intimidating" or "aggressive" if

I spoke harshly in just one meeting, while my male peers were considered “persistent” and “confident” in similar scenarios. If I missed a launch date once, it was considered a pattern of missing timelines; whereas, for my white male peer, it was viewed as an exception for someone who generally delivered on time. This tendency to over-index on negative action was the reason one small failure of the team would damage my performance review but not that of my white male peer.

### **Bias Shows Up in Actions Not Taken**

Sometimes bias is explicit and easy to recognize, but it also often presents itself in actions not taken or skills not taught. It may not be an action someone takes against you or something someone tells you directly. Rather, it shows up as opportunities given to someone else, an implicit discount on your work impact, or a lack of progress over time. Rarely will someone tell you that they gave an assignment to another person because he is a white male. This makes the bias more difficult to identify for both the person with the bias and the recipient.

Here is a situation I have seen and heard about often: There’s a large group meeting, and the organizer, a white male, is trying to limit the number of attendees. He leaves a minority manager off the invite to “save her time.” At the same time, he invites another white male manager who is his friend and is a go-getter, because

he knows his friend would appreciate being in the room. The minority manager will likely not notice that she was left out of the meeting. If she does notice, the organizer could easily explain it away by saying that they had to keep the invite list to the most relevant people. This decision of whom to invite took probably 10 seconds and didn't even truly register in the organizer's mind as a bias. However, these types of reflexive biases add up over a person's career to meaningful differences in opportunity and rate of promotion.

I experienced this unintentional aggregation of implicit biases firsthand after business school. I joined as a product manager at Thumbtack, a 12-person Sequoia Capital-backed startup working out of a garage in San Francisco's Mission District. Coming from the business school bubble, I was unprepared to walk into an office of almost all white men on my first day. The space was small, and everyone sat in an open floor plan. Everyone there, except the office manager who greeted me, was a man. I had heard stories about the male-dominated startups in the valley, but this was the first time I experienced it.

When the company was small, the culture felt closer to a meritocracy. However, as the team grew, it became more and more opaque as to why certain people were promoted or let go and how key company decisions were made. While the leaders made solid efforts to promote diversity in the company, most of the senior leadership were white men. I had proved consistently that I could ship products that impacted business metrics, growing

our suppliers in the marketplace more than tenfold. The team grew from 12 to 100 people and raised hundreds of millions in venture funding. I wanted to be (and felt that I deserved to be) one of the senior leaders at the company.

Unfortunately, no matter how explicit I was about my career goal to be a VP, I was stuck at the “head of” level. It was much later that I realized I had let a combination of affinity bias, confirmation bias, and negativity bias hinder my leadership trajectory. Often, my work and impact were more readily discounted, attributed to the task being “easier than expected” or “overall company growth.” Not only did Thumbtack’s leadership not recognize the implicit biases, but I also didn’t fully recognize them myself. We all let its effect compound over time. It took working with an external career coach to help me realize the tremendous value I had brought to the company and learn how to articulate and advocate for recognition of my impact. Hopefully, the examples from my experience in this book can help future aspiring leaders to learn from my mistakes, recognize and tackle bias early, and get ahead in their careers.

### **Small Biases Compound**

Schelling’s model of segregation, developed in 1971, analyzes the creation of racially segregated neighborhoods. It shows that very minor preferences for same-group people in a neighborhood can

lead in the aggregate to distinct segregation over time.<sup>10</sup> For example, even though white people in a neighborhood prefer some level of diversity with Black people at a roughly 80/20 split, the lack of desire for a 50/50 split leads a neighborhood to become polarized over time.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, small, often implicit biases can lead to an executive team that lacks any diversity. In most cases, no one is intentionally trying to hold minorities back. Most people hiring executives are simply looking for the best person for the role and the business. However, the further you climb up the career ladder, the more competitive it becomes. At the director level and above, most of your peers are well-spoken, intelligent, and ambitious. This high level of competition means that tiny biases that were previously easy to ignore now have an outsize impact on who can break through and get promoted.

Interestingly, hiring at the senior levels also tends to be more subjective, further allowing bias to influence the race for a heavily sought-after role. The more subjective hiring decisions are often masked as looking for cultural fit. But in practice, it leads to increased personal bias and subjectivity. Over time, with increased similarity of people at the executive level (e.g., more white males), it becomes increasingly difficult for someone of a different gender or race to break in. The effects of biases compound upon themselves, role after role, until there is no diversity in critical decision-making roles at the executive level.

This is why it is so critical for both executives and aspiring executives to be aware of these biases and actively combat them. Competition for roles at the executive level is fierce, so it is more important than ever to be intentional and transparent with everyone about how hiring or promotion decisions are made and what merits or skill sets are being rewarded in the process.

For a strong performer, facing these biases can be daunting and frustrating. After all, implicit bias is very difficult to abolish. For me, it felt like I was constantly pushing against a bouncy shapeless blob blocking my path to the executive level. It would yield a little bit when I asserted my strength but would bounce me back to where I had been every time.

I encourage aspiring executives to be very honest with themselves about why they want to become an executive and what they hope to gain from it. For me, it was the scale of impact on other people's lives and the financial flexibility. For others, it may be prestige, control, or legacy. Having your motivations in mind will help you persist in your battle against your shapeless blob and breakthrough to the other side.





## CHAPTER 2

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## THE EXECUTIVE MINDSET



**W**hen Thumbtack numbered around 120 people, we moved into a gorgeous new office in San Francisco's South of Market (SoMA) neighborhood. It was a charming old factory building made of red bricks, with silver oversized pipes and huge glass windows that let the morning and afternoon sunlight. The high-end natural white sit-to-stand desks were arranged in neat rows, and the meeting rooms all had floor-to-ceiling glass doors. On Thursday mornings, I would see all our C-level executives gathered in one large conference room and I would wonder what they talked about. Were their meetings run the same way as the way I run mine? What topics were on the agenda? How did they make decisions?

Now that I've been at those live edge redwood tables and in those high-powered rooms, the first difference I notice is how executives think. This difference in mindset shows up in the questions they ask and the data they seek. When they evaluate plans and problems with a different mindset, they come up with different options and priorities. When you adopt this mindset and think like an executive, even at non-executive levels, you'll begin to make decisions or take actions that are more in line with how an executive would approach a problem. This helps you build trust and credibility faster with your leaders and get ahead in the competition for executive roles.

## **Put the Company First**

An executive evaluates decisions in terms of impact on the overall company rather than impact on the team or product area. They do what is best for the company, not what is best for the team or themselves. This is counterintuitive for many who rose through the ranks by fighting for resources and making sure their team outperformed others. In middle management, the job more typically revolves around ensuring your team is moving ahead and doing well, with less consideration for other areas. However, at the executive level, it is critical to the success of the business to put the company first.

This affects how you prioritize projects, the breadth of work you consider, and the frequency with which you plan with other functions and teams. As a product director, I focused on working with my teams to make progress against a focused area and metric (e.g., increase new users to the website by 10 percent). As a product executive, I develop holistic strategies for launching new product lines: modeling with finance the impact on the P&L, with marketing on distribution and messaging, and with people ops on types of skill sets we need to hire for. As a director, I may prioritize projects that improve the sales of my product line but may hurt another team's product revenue. As an executive, I prioritize projects that improve the company's revenue overall.

When I first became a C-suite executive, the CEO would give me consistent feedback that I needed to build better relationships with the other executives and think about the company first. I was very busy trying to ramp up product development speed, get to know the team members, and ensure we were delivering impactful projects on time. So, I was not directly responding to his guidance. At one point, during a one-on-one, he emphasized the need again, and I asked, “But why? I don’t need them to build my team or launch the product. If I spend the time with them, my team will be worse off.”

But he said: “Yue, you’re an executive now. A manager is concerned with the success of their function or product. An executive is concerned with the success of the company. As an executive, you need to think about the company and not just about the product organization.”

This company-first mentality will make or break an executive team. It is detrimental to the business if an executive consistently puts their function first or is not proactively gathering feedback from others on how their teams work with each other. The decisions that an executive makes need to move the business forward together and ensure that every function is brought along for the journey. This is why, in some cases, a leader who has been successful by gathering the most resources for their area will fail to move into or succeed in executive leadership. An executive who “wins” by backstabbing, playing one side against another, or

hoarding resources may make progress in their area in the short term but hurt the team and company in the long run.

I was in a situation where the marketing executive at the company was very experienced and vocal. He advocated for an awareness-building campaign that included TV commercials, national radio programs, paid marketing, and more. The company and product were not at a stage where this would have generated revenue or customer growth, yet this executive pounded the table and eventually got approval. What resulted was not only millions of dollars spent with no significant results but a slowdown in other critical priorities like launching new features and scaling operations. This single decision greatly contributed to the company running out of funding and shutting down.

In contrast, I worked with a chief operating officer at the same company. The company wasn't profitable and needed to find ways to lower the cost of the service. So, the COO took it upon herself to analyze how the operations were run and found multiple ways to reduce costs: getting rid of a third shift where there were fewer customers, hiring a larger team in other English-speaking countries, and standardizing workflows. She ended up with a reduced budget and a smaller team. However, her decisions were overall better for the company and all the employees. She put the company's needs first, above her function and team.

## **There Are No Fixed Constraints**

At the executive level, there are no fixed constraints when it comes to finding an optimal solution to a challenge. In middle management, there are generally fixed constraints placed upon you by others: team budget, headcount, and scope of responsibility, for example. As an executive, while there are easier or harder aspects of a business to change, nothing is off-limits. You could change the business model or enter new markets. You could reorganize the teams and work with other executives to do the same. You could drive additional fundraising conversations. You could outsource or in-house certain talent. The changes vary in difficulty to get buy-in and execute well, but all are possibilities. A great executive doesn't limit her thinking to the current organization or strategy. Instead, when the benefit of making a large strategy or organizational change outweighs the disruption, effort, and risks, she bravely leads the team in that new direction.

Minorities tend to struggle more with actively working outside constraints because the path to becoming a part of the “in-group” often means following the rules. If they stray too far from the “rules” of the in-group, then they risk being an outcast or an outsider. In addition, many cultures outside the United States also emphasize rule-following more than Americans. As an aspiring executive, you may not have as much leeway as an established executive. However, you often have more ability to change the status quo than you think.

To combat thinking too small, start with identifying what constraints you are assuming and list them out. If you find yourself or others saying, “Oh, we don’t do it this way” or “Oh, we’ve never done it that way,” then you’re up against a constraint. Look for constraints related to processes, feature sets, monetization models, and resources. Then, one way to avoid micro-optimizations due to constraints is to start with small changes to the constraints, rather than removing them entirely. Perhaps it’s reallocating the budget or switching people across teams. Alternatively, try using a “no fixed constraints” mentality when initially brainstorming solutions, then explicitly adding back constraints that are difficult to change. This is a more executive-like way of tackling a problem and will often lead you to higher-impact solutions.

I once worked with a growth director who was given a mandate to double the number of customers in the business in the next year. She came to me frustrated, because her best ideas got her to a 50 percent increase in users, not double. I asked her about international expansion to other English-speaking countries, which would more than double their potential addressable market. It was an idea she hadn’t considered because she had taken it as a constraint that they were only operating in the US. By thinking outside the current country, she more than doubled the number of users in seven months, vastly surpassing her original goal. Within the next few years, she built out several successful new markets and eventually became the company’s new VP of international.



In revisiting her assumptions around what she could do to reach her goals and removing the constraints she imposed on herself, she was able to find a way to help the company reach a new growth curve, rather than optimizing for incremental improvements. This is the type of thinking and impact that leads to executive promotions, and I encourage minorities to do this more often than they are comfortable with to counterbalance some of the more inherent tendencies to stay within your lane.

### **It's All About Relationships**

Early in my career, I was focused on learning the hard skills of my job. I built financial models, wrote product requirements documents, and helped synthesize customer feedback and research. Some functions like engineering or data science require deep functional expertise that originates in school. However, while building a solid foundation and technical expertise is important early on, it's not enough as you move up the career ladder.

For executives, it's all about people and relationships between people. This shift first happens when you become a new manager when you need to recruit, delegate, and manage performance. As you move up the career ladder, there are a lot of those same tasks, but at a much larger scale and with more complexity. Executives are where the buck stops. They are responsible for resolving conflicts that teams cannot, stacking priorities when there is not a

clear choice, and keeping morale high within the teams through difficult times. Most of these activities rely heavily on relationships and trust from people in the organization.

From my observations, minorities tend to move away from building depth of expertise to building relationship skills later in their career than white males. It stems from a few factors: minorities tend to value functional expertise more as this is how they got ahead in their school years. Minorities are less frequently presented with opportunities to build relationships with senior leaders. And minorities may find it more challenging to find commonality with the “in-group” at more senior levels, leading to procrastination or avoidance that becomes self-fulfilling. Unfortunately, these tendencies to delay the uncomfortable set minorities back.

I began to see the importance of relationship management across functions in my early days at Thumbtack. When the company numbered 20 people, everyone was, in some ways, a jack-of-all-trades. An engineer would run customer support. A product manager (PM) would run the research. Engineers and PMs were their own data analysts. As the company grew to 60 people, it needed to specialize, and I was tasked with setting up functions until we were able to hire a “head of” for each function. Over the next 18 months, I became, temporarily, the head of customer support, head of analytics, head of product marketing, head of research, and more. With each role, the job was not to be the functional expert but to be a bridge for people and relationships to establish cross-team processes and hire great people who could

succeed in the company culture. This insight led me to double down on honing my ability to relate and empathize with all kinds of situations and people, rather than investing in a specific technical skill set in a single domain. I also returned to product management, where the day-to-day jobs require building relationships and influencing people across all functions.

Because the role of an executive is so relationship-focused, the executive is rarely the functional expert. A CEO is not the best lawyer, marketer, or engineer, but they can effectively lead those functions by creating a shared vision and strategy, as well as a strong culture of empowering functional experts. This is what enabled me to take on the CTO role at Fuzzy Pet Health despite not having a software engineering background and to lead design, research, or analytics despite not being the best designer, researcher, or analyst.

Relationships are so critical that many larger companies have formal rotational programs for those they are grooming for executive roles. This allows the future executive to better understand how each function operates and build critical relationships within each function. I encourage aspiring executives to pursue opportunities to build relationships in other functions as they can. Perhaps it starts with a regular coffee chat that evolves into partnering on a task. Then you might get an opportunity to work on a project in another team or do a formal rotation. The exact timing and scope of work will vary for everyone depending on their unique situation and aspiration, and career coaches are

often well positioned to surface trade-offs and help with figuring out a good timing.

In a way, the rest of this book primarily focuses on how to build relationships – with influential peers, sponsors, the board of directors, promotion committees, and teams large and small. The first two mindset shifts we discussed so far – think company-first and remove assumed constraints – help aspiring executives come up with more creative and impactful solutions to challenges. The third mindset shift underlies the reason for most successes or failures in getting to the executive level. If you “got lucky” for a promotion, it’s likely due to a relationship you nurtured. If you failed a stretch assignment, it’s likely because you didn’t build your relationships with the right people or in the right way. If you feel stuck, it’s likely because you haven’t found the right people to role model or person to pull you up. With that, let’s look at what skill sets executives need to be successful (hint: it has to do with leading and supporting people).

## CHAPTER 3

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## THE EXECUTIVE TOOL KIT



**A**s an executive, you need to build a different repertoire of tools to do the job. The ways of working that worked as a manager will no longer serve you at the executive level. The biggest difference is scale: of people, problems, and frequency. An executive leads more people and handles a more diverse set of problems at a higher frequency than other roles in the organization. To do the job well, executives need to be adept at leading through strategy and goals, iterative organization building, delegation, communication at scale, and staying calm during crises.

As a manager, one of the first pieces of advice I received when I told my VP I wanted to be a product leader was to “think more strategically.” At the time, I didn’t know what he meant. How do I think more strategically? As an executive, I now know that the combination of vision, strategy, and goals is how an executive effectively scales her time to lead large teams. It succinctly explains what the problem is, why it’s important to solve, how to solve it (among options), and how to measure progress. This gives everyone a consistent framework on which each action or decision is based. This enables teams to understand an executive decision more quickly and to collaborate more frictionlessly with each other toward a shared common goal.

## **How Vision, Strategy, and Goals Work Together**

A vision paints a picture of what the future looks like should we be successful. A strategy describes the paths we chose (and did not choose) to get there and why. Goals measure whether we are making progress along those paths toward our vision and whether those paths indeed lead to achieving the vision. For example, the vision may be “a happy, bonded family.” The strategy would be to travel to Hawaii (not Mexico) by airplane (not swim) and stay at a hotel (not a campground). The goal that measures success would be the “number of arguments among family members decreases”.

Notice that the executive doesn't attempt to outline what exactly needs to be done, by whom, and in what order. It is not scalable or time-effective for an executive to try to get into the nuances of execution and give detailed directions. Instead, relying on vision, strategy, and goals will ensure that teams are moving in the same direction and held accountable for progress.

This way of working for executives is a critical change from how managers work. As a manager or director leading three to four teams, I wrote strategies that spoke to the why behind what we were building. But I was also involved in the execution, from design details to backlog grooming conversations. I might not have been in weekly design reviews, but I saw major releases before they went out. I didn't attend weekly grooming sessions for the



product backlog, but I knew which features were up for launch in a particular month and whether they were on time or delayed.

After I became a product executive, many features would launch without me seeing them. I would mostly find out whether certain projects were on time at quarterly reviews. I didn't value whether the team delivered 10 or 40 features (e.g., whether the happy, bonded family ate at Denny's or IHOP). Rather, I focused on whether the desired outcome was achieved (e.g., the family felt more bonded through the trip). It becomes about managing the output, not the input. Giving up the details of execution and focusing on the output is the only way to manage projects at scale. As such, an executive must establish the vision, strategy, and goals well for their teams, as these will have an ongoing impact on the success of the teams.

### **Creating a Strategy**

A solid strategy starts with the vision of the company and of the product. A vision describes what the world would look like or how it would be different if the company was successful. For startups, the vision may evolve relatively often as the founders and executives learn about customer needs. For established companies, the vision is mostly stable and has stood the test of time. Executives start from the vision as a north star that guides various trade-offs and choices in the strategy.

A long-term strategy for the company and teams is one of the most important artifacts an executive team will create and own together. For companies that are product-driven, the product strategy is usually a direct translation of the company strategy. The best strategies are created top-down and bottom-up. At the top, there are broad strokes that are dictated by executives. The teams come up with specific ideas and ways to execute for their area. Various functions then get together at the executive and team levels to align on priorities, draw common themes, and hash out a final strategy back with projects.

A helpful analogy for this bottom-up and top-down strategy creation process is a military charting a course on a map from point A to point B. An executive (a general) may broadly say, “Here’s how we get our land, air, and water troops from point A to point B and hit on key cities or landmarks along the way.” The land troops would get together and map out in more detail which exact paths they would take, where they would leave supplies, where they would camp, and how long it would take to travel each part of the terrain. A team might be responsible simply for a section of the route or all the logistics around supplies. Once that’s done, the groups would get back together and make any adjustments. If the land troops came up with a great idea that the air and water troops could also implement, it might become a shared strategy. Or, if one strategy required the support of another team, they would discuss that as well.

Importantly, a strategy also states, implicitly or explicitly, the paths not chosen. What were ideas that were considered and discarded and why? Why did we choose to ford the river here and not there? These decisions and trade-offs are important to discuss when developing the strategies. Often, when events do not happen as planned, the group will want to revisit the original assumptions made to develop the strategy and see where the mistake lies. Perhaps you wanted to ford the river, but the water levels were higher than expected. What's the alternative that was considered? What's the next best strategy?

This process of top-down and bottom-up development empowers individual managers and leaders and makes everyone involved feel accountable for the strategy and results. In addition, by going through the strategy creation process together, the group now has more shared context and is better able to adapt to unforeseen challenges. It tempers the lone-wolf leadership style that may lead to extremely impactful innovations, but also inevitably to blind spots and failures most humans are prone to in the long term.

### **For Aspiring Executives, Talk, Don't Write**

For aspiring executives, the process of building out a strategy that is beyond their usual scope may be viewed as stepping on the toes of other teams, as the aspiring executive does not yet have the official authority to influence the strategy of other teams. Taking our previous example, if you were responsible for handling the food aspect of the land troops' supply chain plan, it's not your

job to also optimize the delivery logistics of weapons and medical supplies and suggest changes to the plans of others. But in some cases, it's important to develop a cross-team strategy that works together as a whole. So how do you go about doing so without offending your peers or your superiors?

The first time I attempted to develop a broad cross-team strategy, I sat down for a week and wrote a five-page document. It was backed by research and data. It had a clear line of logic from goal to problem to solution. It detailed everything that needed to happen to ship a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). I showed it to my manager, the VP of product, and asked him what I needed to do next.

“Who has seen this?” he asked.

“Just you and me.”

“By showing this to me before anyone else, you've just made potential enemies of your peers on other teams,” he said.

“They will view this as a power grab or doing their job. Let's pretend this document doesn't exist. I want you to toss it in the trash, and just start by having conversations about your idea.”

He was right. For aspiring leaders who want to influence strategy across teams, the first step is to go out and talk to people, not shove a written document in front of them. These conversations

usually start with your immediate team, and then with the team leads of the other impacted areas, their teams, and so on, in an ever-widening circle. Prioritize talking with teams that are more affected or may have stronger opinions so you can head off those conversations early.

As you have these conversations, look for common problems that people face or similar approaches to solving a problem. You'll often find that there are either two or three disparate viewpoints or a few variations on a theme. After the first eight to ten conversations, start a draft that jots down the direction you think the teams should go in and why. Then go back to the same people and share the draft. Ask questions: Does this feel like what we talked about? Do you agree? How can it be better? If you're facing an environment with too many disparate points of view, start with those who more closely align with your thinking first and work your way outward. However, don't shy away from differing perspectives (this is exactly where diversity is valuable!). Instead, work hard to empathize and understand where your strategy has gaps, and use the differing perspectives to make it a more well-rounded solution. Then, when the strategy has general agreement from a small but important group of stakeholders, move to share in small group meetings. As you move to groups, begin to write down the strategy guides for conversation.

Over weeks and months, you'll find that people are talking about your strategy and your ideas at meetings and in the hallways. Often, I can literally "feel" the dynamic shift as people go from

being “too busy” to make time to talk to coming up to me in hallways or putting time on my calendar to talk. One of my favorite signals is when I start to hear complaints from others that they were not included early enough in the strategy conversation. This is when you know your strategy has enough traction and interest for official review forums to hammer out any final disagreements and nuances.

Be prepared for it to take a few tries to get a strategy right and build momentum. When I was leading the small-business advertising team at Meta, there were many different perspectives and strategies across Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. It took multiple months and multiple revisions before I hit upon a problem that each stakeholder cared to solve and a strategy that resonated with that group. It’s important to try out your ideas on key stakeholders and teams early. And don’t be afraid to fail fast. If the problem or strategy was easy and critical, it probably would have been solved already.

As a last step, reach out to some influential people at the company who you may not have any direct working relationship with to get their perspective. Perhaps you could get an opinion from someone on the marketing team on how to brand this new product feature, someone on the operations team on how it might affect their workflow, or someone in customer support on what questions they anticipate customers asking. Their opinions will make the strategy more comprehensive, and by proactively

sharing the information, you'll be able to build your brand as a strategic leader in the process.

At some point, you may have a “final” strategy document that is shared in an official review forum or sent as a part of an official planning process. However, the more important result is that now you have relationships with more teams and influential people at the company. Those people now know who you are and that you have ideas about how to move a part of the company forward. It turns out, this is a common way to start building the network you'll need to become a senior executive at the company.

## **Goal Setting**

Now that you have a vision and strategy, it's time to set goals. Goal setting is the way to measure progress along a strategy. It is also the way the company communicates progress and expectations to critical external stakeholders: the board of directors, the investors, and the stock market.

For executives, goal setting is a process of understanding and making trade-offs. It is rare, if not impossible, for a single metric to be inspirational, quick to measure, and difficult to game. Do you want your team to move faster? Choose goals that can be measured quickly (e.g., daily users, not three-month retention). Do you want your team to invest in longer-term projects? Choose goals that are less time-specific (e.g., ship a product by the end of the year). Do you want your team to take big risks and swing for

the fences? Choose a big, round number (e.g., one million users). When a goal is tied to compensation or performance reviews, it mustn't be easily gamed.

As a mid-level director, I valued the process of goal setting, but it was never my top priority. I generally delegated as much of it as I could to the data analysts on my team and didn't spend too many cycles on getting the metric exactly right. I focused more on ensuring we had the right strategy and people in place, and that we were executing well together.

Executives spend much more time debating goals and metrics shared with the teams. For one, these goals serve as the starting point to cascade metrics for the rest of the organization. Second, goals become an important way of reinforcing the vision and the strategy: based on what metric is chosen, it tells the team what's important (e.g. speed vs quality) and focuses the team on a certain type of progress. Having well through-out goals will go a long way to set the teams up well to execute against the strategy and vision.

### **Build Teams Like You Build Products**

Another tool that allows executives to manage at scale is organization structure. As business priorities change, the organization also evolves. It is a complex puzzle of skill sets, career preferences,



processes, and collaboration tools. Designing an organization is a process of choosing where you are okay with misalignments and where you want to ensure seamless collaboration. The best setup for encouraging innovation is not the same as the best setup for growing a mature product line. Organizational models that work for a team of 50 do not scale to a team of 200.

Mid-level managers operate within a given structure, process, and set of cultural norms. When I was in middle management at a large organization, coming from a startup, I often got frustrated at many of the issues in the organization I wanted to take on but could not do so due to the amount of effort it would take. My VP at the time told me to separate issues that were “within my control” and what was “outside of my control” given my role and tackle them differently. Within my control to solve were problems with how my team was operating or conflicts my team may have had with other teams. These were problems I should own and drive and resolve. Out of my control were decisions made many levels above me, many compensation or recruiting policies, or how the teams were structured. These were elements of a large organization I wasn’t going to be able to change easily, so it was best to frame it up in a clear way and bubble it up to more senior leaders in the company for them to handle, rather than driving changes myself.

This distinction went away when I became an executive. Those problems that were “out of my control” are now some of my top priorities. And many among them are organizational needs:

changing cultural norms, adapting collaboration models, or managing star performers. Like a product, the organization has a vision (What do we want to accomplish as a team?), strategy (How do we best work together?), user problems (What is slowing us down? What skillsets are we missing?), and solutions (org structure, processes, documentation, and people). In the same way I iterate on products, I iterate on organizational fundamentals as the business evolves.

Some team changes are top-down due to changing business priorities or key departures. Others are processes and collaboration models that can be regularly improved. One of my go-to ways to evolve organizations is to run team process retrospectives, a way of looking back together and reviewing what happened and what could be improved. I typically run them every quarter and invite functions that work closely together (engineering, product management, and design, for example). Here's how they work:

1. The first session focuses on what is working well and what could be improved, including tools, processes, and ways of working. I generally ask people to write down their thoughts for 10 minutes, and then we share around the room, pulling out similar themes. This is also the time to air any tension and frustration that has been building up between teams.
2. The second session focuses on ideation: What are some ways to improve these issues? What are some things

teams are trying that we could adopt broadly? We also prioritize the issues we all want resolved.

3. The last session focuses on finding owners who will be responsible for driving these processes forward.

Each quarter, changes are adopted, trialed, and either kept or iterated upon, ensuring the organization is constantly adapting as it grows. These process retrospectives are also great forums for aspiring leaders on your team to work at a higher level.

A great executive pays close attention to these elements of an organization and ensures they are regularly updated to best serve the team's size and business priorities. The teams working well together on common strategy and goals provide the foundation for an executive to use the next tool in their tool kit: delegation at scale.

### **Delegate When You Don't Know the Answer**

When you first became a manager, you learned how to delegate tasks you had previously performed as an individual contributor to your team. Most managers still do some work that could be delegated, because it's faster, critical for success, or simply because they enjoy it. As mentioned earlier, as an executive, you are responsible for tackling the most complex issues of an organization

that no one else can. This means delegation of everything else becomes essential to making room for those challenges. Moving into executive leadership, you learn to do a harder form of delegation: to delegate entire problems that you have but don't yet have a plan for; to delegate to people who may take a completely different approach than you to get the job done.

Early in my career, I felt like I had to have a fully thought-out answer before contributing to the conversation. Then as a manager, I felt like I needed to know how an individual would handle a project before I delegated it to them. When I first became an executive, I felt very uncomfortable delegating a problem or project that I didn't fully understand. In each example, these were mindsets I had to outgrow. So as an aspiring executive, learn to decipher quickly and effectively what each team member is good at and how to stretch their capabilities. Then, test your hypotheses by delegating early and often. With practice, you better understand the critical factors that determine whether a person will succeed at a task.

As an aspiring executive, start by learning how to delegate well to your current team, and then to people who may have a different approach or perspective than you. Practice the art of matching the task or problem to the skillset of the individual and knowing how much and when to stretch a person's skill set.

I've personally found that success in growth projects is often more about a person's relative level of determination, willingness to

learn and fail, and comfort and ability with asking for help from others than it is about hard skills or prior experience. However, it is rarely a good idea to stretch people on many dimensions at once (e.g., technical skill, scope of impact, pace of work, and risks of project). Instead, pick projects that challenge your team on one or two dimensions to start, and then increase the difficulty as you better understand their ability to pick up new skills and their speed in doing so.

Some of my go-to areas for delegation include running meetings or key decision-making forums (e.g., all-hands meetings, group check-ins, product or design reviews, and functional meetings), assistance with recruiting (e.g., doing first screens, improving interview formats, and running debriefs), and assisting with strategy development (e.g., writing a first draft or getting buy-in from stakeholders). These are great opportunities for an aspiring executive to get involved in higher-level forums and take on a leadership role in large group settings, while the final decisions remain with the executive.

After a task is delegated, the executive is not sitting on the beach chilling. The executive doesn't just walk away. They are still accountable for the results and need to regularly check in on progress, coach, and assist. With stretch assignments, they may also need to step in to guide when a project is not handled well or move the project to another individual when necessary. As business priorities change, an executive also needs to regularly keep

her team updated on the priority of various delegated tasks, so the team can also pivot as needed.

This can get very tricky, because a person on your team may not approach the task or problem in the same way you would. Newer managers often micromanage the process, preventing their team from learning or irritating those who have different approaches. While no one likes to be tossed into the deep end of a pool without help or assistance, each person may want to receive guidance differently. Some people like more direction and guidance upfront. Some people prefer to only come to you for help. Some are great at raising their hand when they're running into challenges. Some people will spin their wheels quietly until you chime in. Trust and open communication are good starting points to allow people to feel comfortable letting you know they need help. Asking them directly also works (some are glad you asked). Then, it comes down to practice in different types of situations to learn when your team needs your help, so you can dive in at the right moments in the right ways.

A strong executive is successful in delegating not just to their team, but also to people who don't report to them and people who don't have the same interests or priorities. This tends to be somewhat harder for minorities who are not as readily perceived by team members as strong leaders. However, I've found success through identifying common interests and looking for win-win scenarios. I spend time researching and understanding what their team does, what their goals are, what this individual's personal

goals are, and what might be a good incentive for them to help. It takes more effort than simply approaching and talking with someone about an idea but is generally effective at persuading those I don't have direct authority over to help with my work.

Some think that as an executive, you automatically have authority over everyone and therefore influence without authority becomes less important. In practice, executives need to influence entire other functions at the company without authority, as well as the board of directors. Moreover, while they may have authority over their teams, leading by command and control is rarely the best way to achieve the highest impact and build a strong, motivated team. Much of the skills critical to influence without authority—empathy, negotiation, creating incentives—are just as critical with the executive's teams.

### **Effective Communication at Scale**

Once the organization is set up well against its strategy and goals, with owners clearly defined through delegation, it's up to the executive to communicate progress and changes to the strategy clearly and in a timely manner. As an executive, not only do you have a plan, but you also need a communications plan for your plan.

Executives of different functions regularly work together to coordinate timing, messaging, and channel—all to minimize distortion and prevent hearsay. I've seen communication plans that are many times longer than the message that needs to be communicated. As an aspiring executive, rather than thinking of communication plans as an afterthought, or not making them at all, think of them as a primary component of any strategy, change, or idea you'd like others to know about or support.

### *Communicating with Large Groups*

When you are the manager of a team, you're regularly in touch with ten to twenty people who trust you and know you well. When you are an executive, you need to communicate with hundreds or thousands of people, the majority of whom do not know you personally. Unfortunately, there is a high loss rate with any form of communication, written or verbal. Even the most carefully crafted email sent to everyone at the company will leave important nuances up to interpretation. In a traditional hierarchical organization, verbal communication through the layers of management is a game of telephone, making the chances that what you say reaches any entry-level employee without distortion very, very low. The more layers of people there are between the executive and the frontline workers, the higher the distortion. As a result, five different people on five different teams will likely hear somewhat different messages and confirmation bias will further distort it to their own existing beliefs. The number of times someone will say "Yue said this," and when it gets back to me, my



reaction is “I never said this,” increases almost exponentially with each step up the career ladder.

In my experience, the most effective communicators are visual storytellers. Humans’ earliest forms of communication across time and space were stories narrated with drawings on cave walls, and we are wired to remember stories and pictures. Whenever I need to communicate a new strategy or change in strategy as an executive, I try to start with a customer story and a visual of the problem the strategy is addressing. I then use mock-ups or prototypes to show what a new experience could look like, without naming any specific details to prevent a prototype from being misconstrued as a final product. Even for somewhat dull material like process updates, it’s helpful to visualize the changes in a diagram. I’ve found that whenever I am struggling with how to visualize something, asking for help from a friendly designer almost always solves the case.

It’s also wise to avoid dictating any specific actions. Exact directions will get misinterpreted on the way down. Plus, executives are rarely in the day-to-day work enough for directives to be the best solution to a problem. Sometimes, when pressed for more clarity, I may outline high-level areas that will be impacted by a strategy change, but I avoid specifying exactly what the changes are. I leave it up to the teams, and their managers, to take the problems and the prototypes, and figure out exactly what is best for their areas.

Visual stories complemented with written and verbal communications create a stronger message. While each method has its flaws, adding them in allows those who missed initial conversations to have a written transcript or those with questions to verbally engage with leaders for clarifications. Whether you use visual, verbal, or written methods, the most critical thing is to just have a communication plan.

### *Getting Honest Feedback*

Communication is a two-way street. For an executive, not only does it take a lot of time and repetition to get the right messages out to the team, but it also takes a lot of time getting information back without distortion. What you hear as an executive is rarely the unedited truth. The level of directness and honesty with which people will tell you what's working and what's not working drops precipitously as you move up the management chain. They filter their statements because they might not want to unintentionally throw someone else under the bus; they don't want to be singled out from the group and put on the spot to defend their opinion; they might simply be intimidated and can't think of what to say; they want you to think highly of their capabilities, so they don't bring problems to you. When you carry around a VP or C-level title, people associate a certain level of formality and authority with it. As such, as an executive, you need to put in extra work for people to be comfortable and be more open and direct with you.

As a manager, I prided myself on being approachable, transparent, and friendly in the workplace. Whenever I brought a new topic or suggestion to the team, I received open feedback, and everyone on my team was excited to chime in and contribute. We debated with each other to get to the best solutions. A few months after I became a CPO, I summarized a group meeting with the next steps for each team as usual.

“Any questions or concerns?” I asked. Everyone shook their heads.

But a few days later, one of the directors approached me and said, “Hey Yue, I think what you suggested as the next steps for this team isn’t the best use of their resources.” She went on to give me the reasons and she was right.

“Why didn’t they bring it up?” I asked.

“Well, because you’re the CPO and they didn’t want to contradict you. And because you can be kind of intimidating to debate with,” she replied with some hesitation. I was shocked to hear this.

Understanding what is happening on the ground is critical for executives to make good decisions. To get to this point, it’s important to repeatedly invite dialogue, even if it feels like you’ve done it for the hundredth time. I take any questions I get asked in public forums seriously, then follow up with and thank the asker afterward when possible. I encourage open debate when I sense

disagreement: “You’re the expert on this, please tell me what you think.” I like to ask people who seem reserved: “If I were your work friend and we were at lunch, what would you say to me?”

In 2019, Google spent millions of dollars on Project Aristotle, researching what makes a high-performing team. It comes down to psychological safety, dependability, structure, meaning, and impact.<sup>12</sup> Psychological safety, the idea of feeling welcomed, respected, and accepted as oneself on a team, is critical for teams to provide an executive with direct feedback. And the best way to create a safe space is for the leader to show some vulnerability. A Google director involved with Project Aristotle got his team to open up by sharing he had battled with stage IV cancer. A VP shared about her struggles with balancing work with her family needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. My go-to is to share a piece of feedback I am working on. Some minorities struggle with this in fear of being unrelatable or too personal. To make it relatable, I recommend focusing on the emotion (e.g., I am frustrated that..., I am afraid that...) rather than the facts of the situation. To avoid being “too personal,” it helps to share a situation that has already passed, stick to work-oriented vulnerabilities, or something that doesn’t too drastically alter how someone might interact with you. Finally, I’ve found that how you share your stories is also how others will feel comfortable sharing their feedback and struggles. If you want to encourage open dialogue between your team members, sharing in a group setting rather than a one-on-one is more likely to spark that type of conversation.

Communication is so key because an executive mostly gets their job done through people. For aspiring executives, honing your communication skill set early and often will be a worthwhile investment as the returns tend to compound over time. The relationships you build early in your career will grow with you and create opportunities for advancement in the future.

### **Stay Calm During Crises**

Perhaps the most foundational of all executive skills is the ability to stay calm and lead through a crisis. It is in crisis situations that an executive's true leadership capabilities are tested. The executive sets the tone for the urgency, the collaboration style, and what is acceptable behavior. It is also when creativity is often required to solve problems effectively and quickly. It clearly separates the executives who are just there because they are "a buddy of the board" or "all talk" versus those who are real effective leaders who earn their stripes.

Successful executives are insightful and intelligent; they often possess an above-average ability to stay calm during a crisis. They're able to defuse emotions, listen with logic, and act with empathy. Without staying calm, one cannot rationally devise a strategy, delegate, or communicate. The only way I know how to build up this ability is through practice over many years. It's essentially a process of learning how to override your fight-or-flight system so

that your logical brain can take over and be in charge. You'll need to learn how to slow down your pounding heart, relax your muscles, and control your breathing. People who grew up with some constant level of stress or anxiety get practice doing this early on, as do people who have gone through difficult life experiences like divorces, moving countries, or unstable governments.

I am not suggesting that everyone immediately move to a war zone or volunteer with UNICEF in Africa. While it might be beneficial to improving your ability to maintain calm, you don't need to go to such extremes. It's easy to start improving by practicing small acts that put you just outside your comfort zone. I started early on; I was a shy kid, always nervous around new adults. So, my parents made it a point to get me to ask for directions on car trips (this was before Google Maps) and to be the one to order our food at restaurants (this was before ordering from the phone). It was a small but effective way to get me out of my comfort zone. Similarly, I push my team members who are afraid of speaking up to set agendas for meetings, do lunch-and-learns, and ask questions at all-hands meetings.

When you're ready to take bigger steps, try a new competitive sport, travel in a new country, or volunteer for a culturally different organization in your city. These are all ways for you to experience a large change in environment without too drastic a change in safety. By conquering your fight-or-flight response, you can stay calm more frequently in stressful, high-stakes environments.

Delegation, large group communication, team building, goal setting, and leading through crises are what I believe to be the most critical skills for an aspiring executive to begin to develop. They enable a middle manager to effectively scale their time, and through the process of developing these skills, build credibility and relationships with influential people across the company.

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Aspiring executives can gain an edge over their competition by understanding how executives think and what skills are most valuable to build. As you embark on this journey, shift your problem-solving approach to mimic those of an executive: Put the company first, focus on the relationships, and remove constraints where possible. Then, seek projects that build critical executive skills like delegation and company strategy development. But how do we find these projects and get the ability to do them? Next in Part II, we will cover how to build momentum in your career and land stretch projects to grow those skills