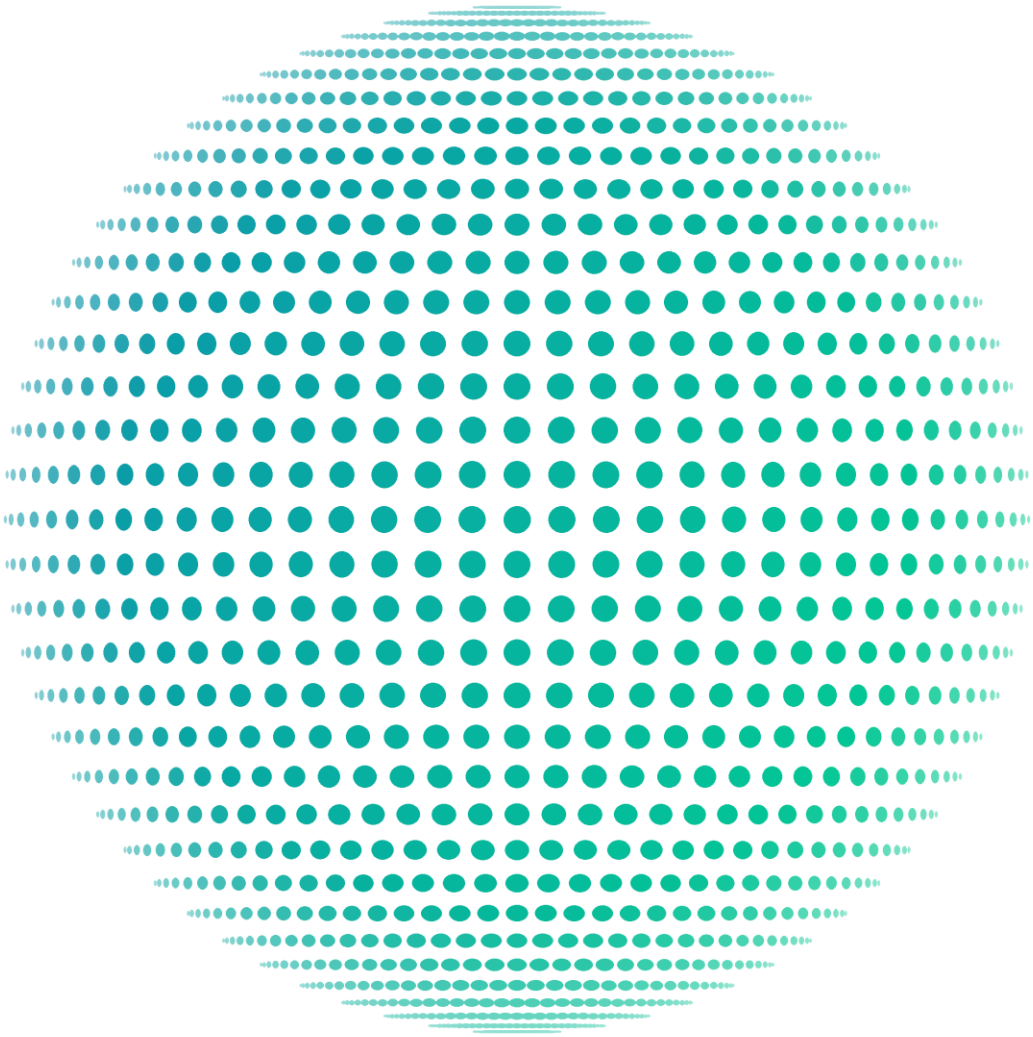
Deepsky



Are We Building Our Leaders **For What's Next?**

New research with CHROs and CPOs on why executive succession is getting harder, and a three-lens approach to getting ahead of it.

INSIGHT PAPER ON EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION

INTRODUCTION

Most organisations know where their leadership risk sits. Few are creating options fast enough.

WHAT CHROs AND CPOs TOLD US

70%

scored their executive team at the 'little to no capacity' end of the scale for capacity, time and headspace

80%

say they have a single point of failure sitting with a specific individual

Based on conversations held by Deepsky Leaders, part of Miramar Global Group, with surveyed Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) and Chief People Officers (CPOs) at large companies in technology, aerospace, science, private equity, industrial and other sectors.

Disruption is now constant, with each new pressure having a compounding impact. Commercial decisions happen within months, but governance and infrastructure take years to change.

Even so, companies must operate each layer of the business as fast as the market demands, with limited foresight on what lies ahead.

Leaders are already paying the price. **70%** of CHROs and CPOs scored their executive team at the "little to no capacity" end of the scale, when asked about its capacity, time and headspace.

And while **60%** say they are actively scanning what is changing and shaping their position around it, only **40%** say their executive team's attention over the past year has leaned towards positioning for what comes next.

That pressure shows up in who stays. Executives who would once have stayed in role for **seven years** are now moving on after **two**, and in our experience the pace they are running at is often part of the reason.

With **80%** of respondents saying they have a single point of failure sitting with a specific individual, each departure can leave a vital gap. Every critical seat left empty, even for a few weeks, carries a cost in delayed decisions, lost momentum and strain on the people covering it.

Yet when executive teams are stretched, developing successors is often the first thing to slip. So, the challenge isn't just seeing the risk. It's creating enough leadership options before that risk becomes urgent, while the time to do it is shrinking.

Too often, succession planning looks through a single lens: the names on an internal plan. Getting ahead of the risk means looking through three:

01	**Depth**	Who is genuinely ready, and how do you know?
02	**Breadth**	Do enough of your leaders have the capabilities you need?
03	**Leadership stewardship**	How do you help executives develop the people they lead?

01 DEPTH

Who is genuinely ready, and how do you know?

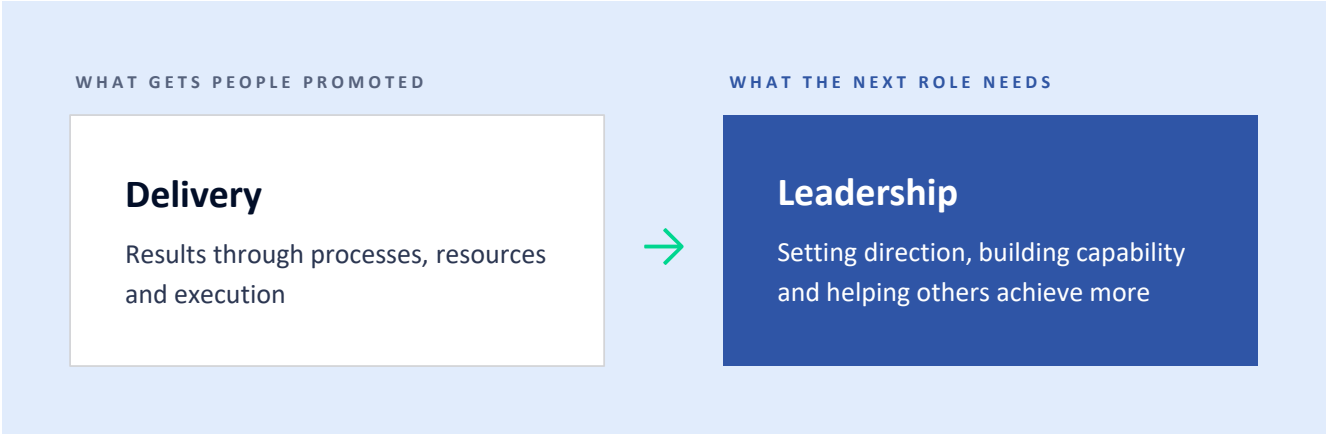
A business can have names on every line of its succession plan and still lack real depth.

The leaders in the layer below the executive team are the ones who execute strategy and own its delivery. They are also where most organisations look for future executive successors and, in our experience, the layer most at risk of burnout.

60% of CHROs and CPOs rated this layer just **2 out of 5** for turning an external shift, such as new tariffs, an energy price shock or a key customer changing its demands, into the change the business needs. At that score, leaders are closer to needing direction than driving change themselves.

Readiness is also getting harder to judge. In our search work, successors now typically move into senior roles after around **two and a half years**, where we would once have expected closer to **five** . And the roles they step into are far broader. Leaders must know when to trust AI and when to challenge it, navigate geopolitical risk and make decisions under sustained uncertainty, all at once.

At the same time, organisations frequently promote people for their ability to deliver results through processes, resources and execution, assuming leadership capability will follow. It rarely does without deliberate development.



What deliberate development involves

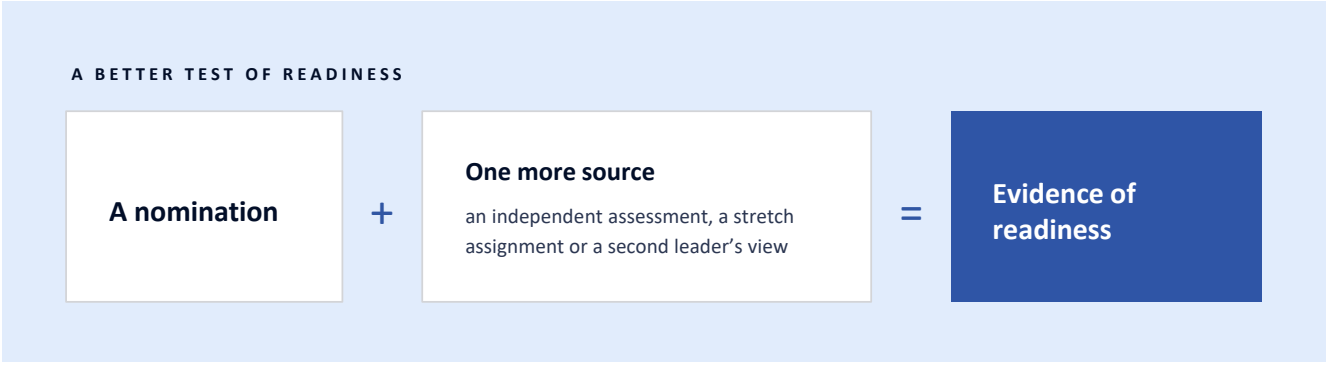
Deliberate development means coaching, building self-awareness, learning to think and act under pressure, and taking ownership of increasingly complex challenges. It also means building the behaviours that make people worth following, such as emotional intelligence, a willingness to show vulnerability, and the ability to build trust. With successors stepping up sooner, organisations need to be intentional about creating these experiences before people are expected to lead at the next level, developing future leaders as part of how the business runs today.

01 DEPTH · CONTINUED

Look for evidence, not nominations

A nomination or a strong delivery record no longer tells you enough. A more reliable test is whether someone has already been seen making the kinds of decisions the role will require.

That is why we challenge succession slates for evidence: alongside every nomination, we look for at least one more source. The organisations that get this right start building that evidence years before a role opens.



AI is adding a new pressure. It now handles much of the preparation, first drafting and checking that once built judgement, ownership and critical thinking, and under deadline pressure, managers tend to fix the work rather than coach the person who did it. A business can raise productivity today while weakening its succession pipeline **five years** from now.

What replaces that lost apprenticeship is a coaching culture: leaders who treat coaching as a deliberate choice even under pressure, and teams that routinely review what was meant to happen, what did, and what to change next time.

Readiness also depends on will as well as skill. **A successor can be capable of the bigger role and still not want it**, and we are seeing fewer people in succession pools who want the top job. In our view, watching leaders run without headspace is a large part of the reason.

Early, honest conversations about ambition, and about what the role would really ask of them, are the best way to know before the role opens.

IN PRACTICE

- ✓ Give future leaders complex challenges to own, alongside coaching, so they learn to lead under pressure before promotion.
- ✓ Develop the behaviours senior roles demand, such as emotional intelligence and building trust, not just functional expertise.
- ✓ Test every critical successor on will as well as skill, with evidence beyond the nomination, such as an independent assessment.

02 BREADTH

Do enough of your leaders have the capabilities you need?

Most organisations only start looking externally once the need has already arrived.

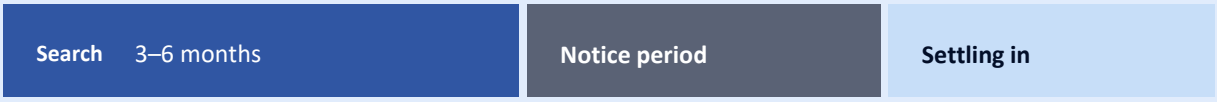
Some leadership gaps can't be filled from within. Sometimes the capability simply isn't in the business yet, for example when it is moving into a new market or taking on a kind of transformation it hasn't been through before. In other cases, it could be built, but not quickly enough to keep pace with the strategy.

Yet based on our experience in executive search, **80–90%** of C-suite searches still begin only when a role is already open or about to be, often because an executive is underperforming.

A C-suite search typically takes **three to six months** , and that is before any notice period. Add the notice period and the time a new leader needs to find their feet, and the gap is often far longer than the search itself. Throughout it, decisions wait, momentum slips, and the people covering the gap carry the extra load.

"It is worth asking what 3 – 6 months without a key leader would cost your business"

HOW LONG A CRITICAL SEAT CAN STAY EMPTY



The real gap is often far longer than the search itself.

Illustrative, not to scale. Based on Miramar Executive Search experience.

Looking outside earlier changes this. **Knowing who is out there for your most important roles while the incumbent is still in post gives you options before you need them.**

It also gives you a more objective view of your internal successors. People who have worked alongside someone for years tend to see what they have always seen.

An independent assessment, benchmarked against the external market, shows where internal talent is genuinely ready and where the business may be expecting it to grow faster than it can.

The strongest succession plans use depth and breadth together. Rather than starting with "who's next?", they start with where the business needs stronger leadership, then ask whether the best way to get it is to develop people already there, hire from outside, or both.

IN PRACTICE

- ✓ Identify the two or three capabilities your strategy can least afford to lose. Then estimate what losing them would cost.
- ✓ Map the external market for those capabilities now, so you know whether to develop them internally, bring them in, or both.
- ✓ Independently assess your internal leaders for those capabilities against the market, so you know where to develop and where to hire.

03 LEADERSHIP STEWARDSHIP

How do you help executives develop the people they lead?

A leader can deliver strong results and still leave the organisation exposed.

Depth and breadth work best when senior leaders see succession as part of their own job, not something HR does for them.

A senior leader is measured on what they deliver now. But they also leave behind a leadership system: the people they developed, the decisions they handed over and the dependencies they removed. When that system is weak, the organisation is exposed.

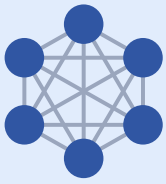
That exposure is common, with **80%** of respondents saying they have a single point of failure sitting with a specific individual. It tends to build up gradually: decisions start to pool around one person, or critical knowledge such as AI expertise, geopolitical insight or a key customer relationship ends up with a single expert, and nobody notices how much depends on them until they leave.

ONE PERSON HOLDS IT ALL



Decisions and knowledge pool around one leader

THE TEAM SHARES IT



No single departure leaves the business exposed

Stewardship applies to the team as much as the individual. The strongest executive teams we work with are defined by the blend of skills around the table. They share knowledge, make decisions together and are willing to get things wrong in the open, so when someone leaves, the team is far less exposed.

But stewardship takes capacity, and that is where it tends to break down. Sustaining high performance at this level means treating rest and recovery as part of the job and protecting time to think as deliberately as time to deliver. In our experience, a leader running on empty sets the pace for everyone below them, and their stress can pass to their teams without either side noticing.

The leadership teams we see perform best over time build recovery into how they work before burnout forces the issue.

Teams also copy how leaders use AI. Leaders who question an AI output out loud, admit when it got something wrong and stay accountable for the decision show their teams what good use looks like. That judgement is part of what they leave behind.

All of this is far easier when the CEO and board treat succession as a standing business risk, reviewed alongside financial and operational risks, rather than an annual HR exercise.

IN PRACTICE

- ✓ Give executives a development objective for growing people, not just a successor, and review it alongside their results.
- ✓ List the decisions, knowledge and relationships that sit with only one person or one function on your executive team, and agree who you'll develop to share each.
- ✓ Protect time in executives' diaries for recovery and for developing others, so neither is the first to go when pressure builds.

NEXT STEPS

Three conversations for your executive team

01	**Depth**	Which of our successors are genuinely ready for a bigger, broader role, and what evidence do we have beyond the nomination? Are they showing the leadership behaviours the role will demand, such as emotional intelligence, vulnerability and trust?
02	**Breadth**	Where are we relying on capability that doesn't exist inside the business today, or can't be built quickly enough? For those roles, do we know who is available outside, and how our internal successors compare?
03	**Leadership stewardship**	Where does the business depend on a single person or one function, and are our senior leaders measured on reducing that dependency?

If any of these are hard to answer, that is the place to start.

Where is your executive team's biggest succession risk?

In a 30-minute conversation, Cordelia Fyler, Partner at Deepsky Leaders, will work through these with you and help you pinpoint where to focus first.

Contact Cordelia at **cordelia.fyler@deepskyleaders.com**

ABOUT DEEPSKY LEADERS, PART OF THE MIRAMAR GLOBAL GROUP

Deepsky Leaders turns leadership potential into performance, using a method built on behavioural science and real-world pressure-testing. In succession, that means helping executive teams assess who is genuinely ready, develop those coming through and spread capability across the business.

Part of Miramar Global Group, which helps organisations close their leadership gaps, it sits alongside three other businesses: Miramar Executive Search, which identifies, engages and secures the people who will drive change; Miramar Interim Management, which places proven executives during transformation, M&A or significant change; and RISE, a membership and development platform for senior leaders.