

SYST3M


**DIFFERENT ROLES,
DIFFERENT DECISIONS:**

**RETHINKING
CEO SUCCESSION
PLANNING**



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	Page 3
Why Leadership Behaviors Matter in Succession	Page 4
What the Data Reveals	Page 5
The Succession Risk	Page 6
From Successor to CEO?	Page 7
Conclusion	Page 8
Sources	Page 9



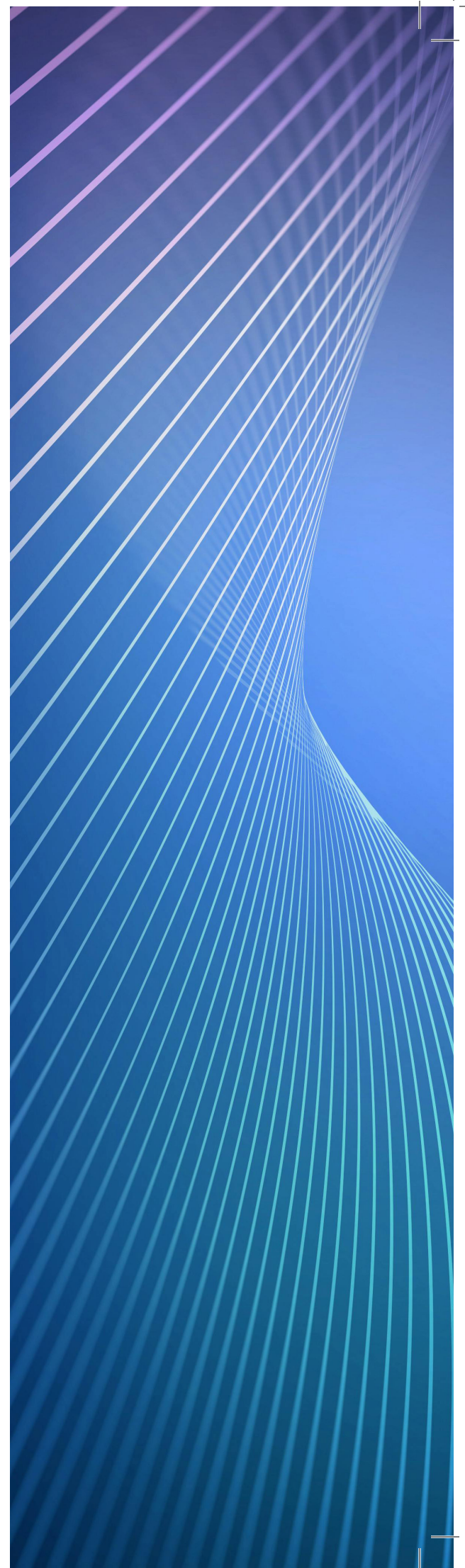
Executive Summary

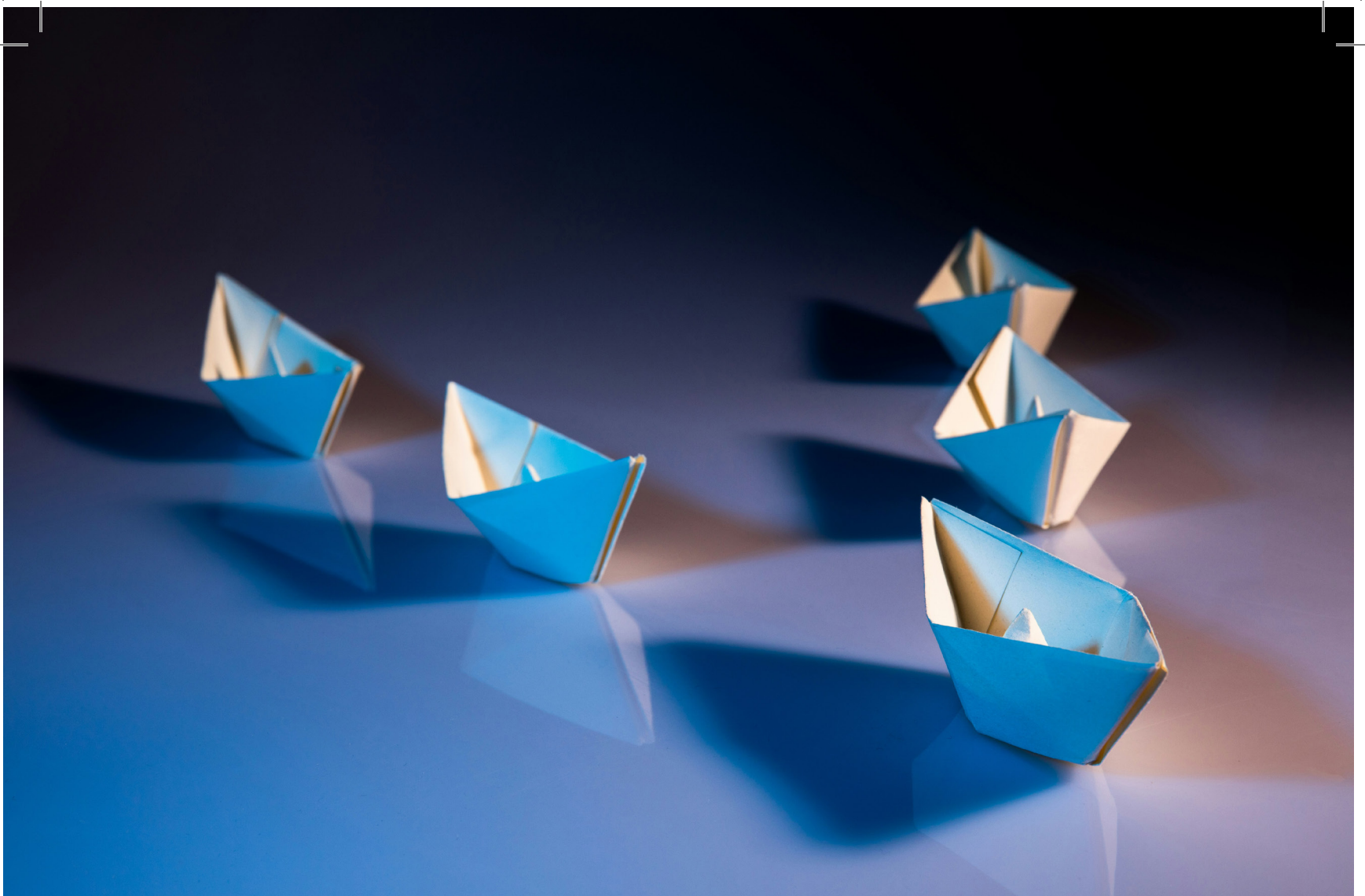
System-3™ has analyzed hundreds of executive data points through our **System-3™ Leadership Simulation**. The findings reveal a clear truth: different roles create different patterns of behavior.

Boards often look to Chief Operating Officers (COOs) and Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) as natural successors to the CEO. They know the business well and work well alongside the CEO and the team every day. Yet many leaders can struggle when they step into the top role.

Why is this? Because each role shapes different decision habits and behavioral patterns. The **System-3™ Leadership Simulation** reveals behaviors by showing how leaders make decisions under pressure. This helps boards see the habits that matter most for succession. It also shows where coaching and development can prepare successors to thrive.

By understanding these differences, boards can make sharper decisions, and CEOs can actively develop successors in line with the behaviors that matter most to their organization.





Why Leadership Behaviors Matter in Succession

- Boards often over-index on track record and experience.
- **System-3™** data shows that roles shape how leaders make decisions.
- These behaviors reveal readiness for the CEO role and highlight where development is needed.

What the Data Reveals

Current data from the **System-3™ Leadership Simulation** points to differences across CEO, COO and CFO roles.



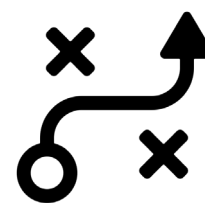
CEOs stand out on vision and persuasion.

Compared to the broader leadership population, they set clear direction, connect choices to the bigger picture, and mobilize others with influence.



COOs and CFOs both lean into strategic planning.

They work to keep efforts aligned to plans, linking today's actions to long-term goals and organizational vision.



COOs lean into process,

driving structure and accountability, while **CFOs bring adaptability**, adjusting plans to keep the organization on course through changing conditions.

At-a-Glance Comparison

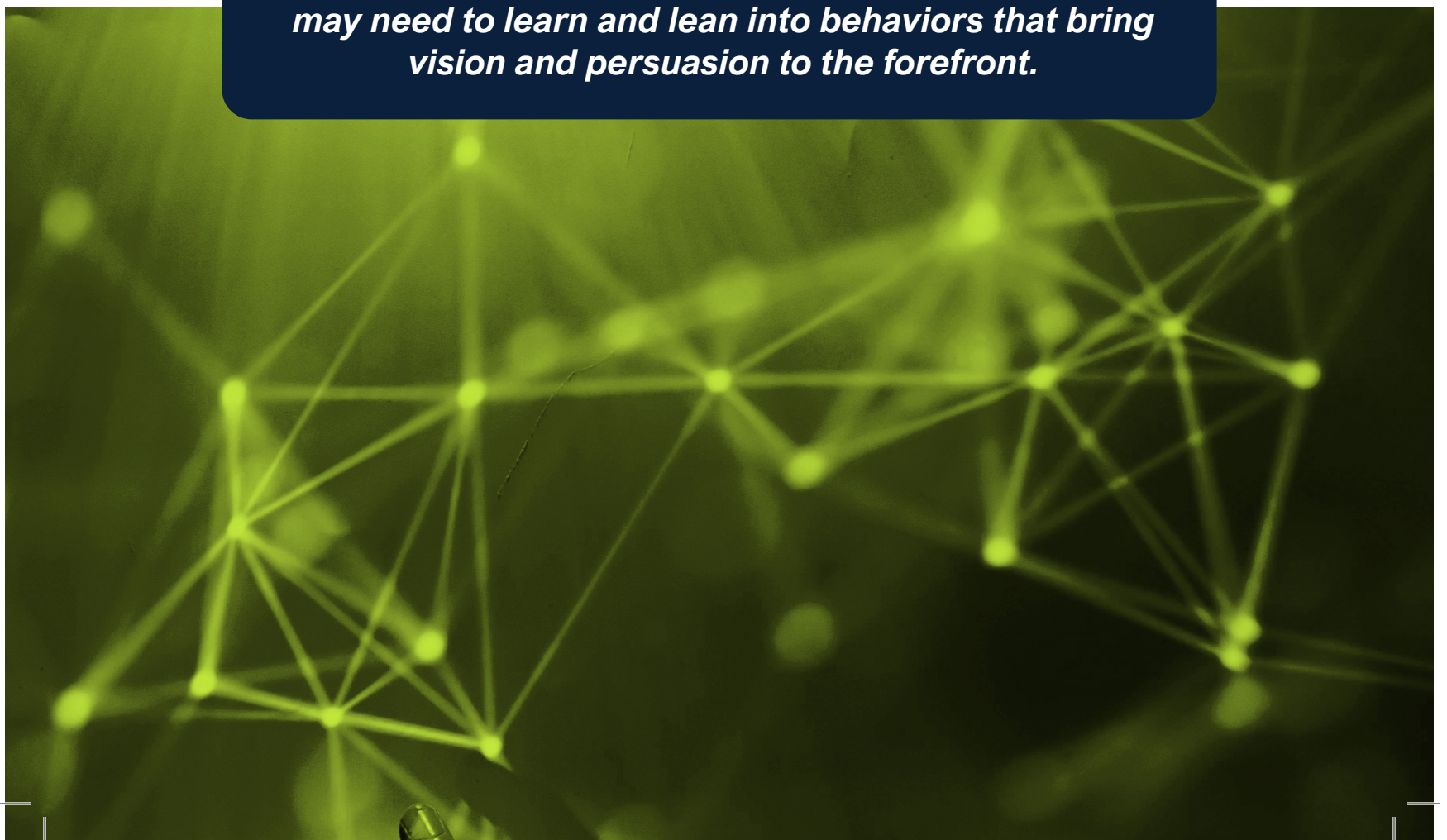
Role	Distinct Behaviors	Succession Implication
CEO	Vision, persuasion, mobilizing others	As CEOs, they set the vision and rally the team around it.
COO	Process, accountability, strategic planning	As CEOs, they can expand their vision-setting and influence.
CFO	Strategic planning, adaptability	As CEOs, they can build on their strengths by emphasizing persuasion and inspiration.

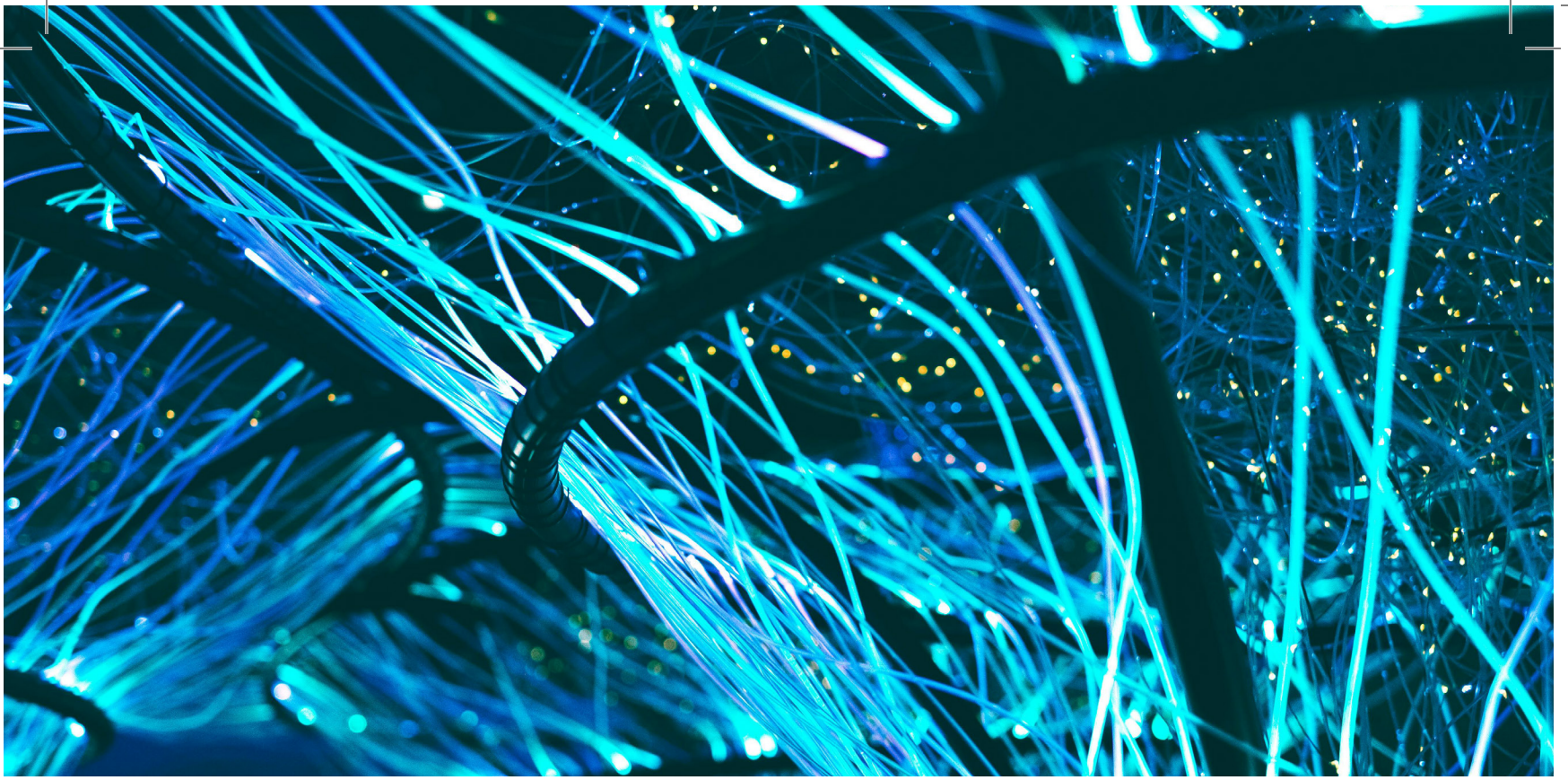
The Succession Risk

Each role builds different leadership patterns. While CEOs focus on vision and persuasion, COOs and CFOs may have learned to focus their attention on translating vision into concrete plans. This is not to say that they lack the ability to inspire or influence, but rather that their roles may not have required them to flex those muscles as often.

The challenge comes when a leader carries the behavioral focus of their prior role into the CEO seat. Without rebalancing, these patterns may create blind spots in the top job. The good news is that these patterns are not fixed; with awareness and development, leaders can recalibrate their focus to better fit the scope of the role.

When stepping into the CEO seat, COOs and CFOs may need to learn and lean into behaviors that bring vision and persuasion to the forefront.





From Successor to CEO?

The System-3™, Three-Step Approach

1 Understand

The System-3™ Leadership Simulation surfaces how leaders behave under pressure. Boards see clear signals of what leaders emphasize and what they may overlook.

2 Evaluate

Assess whether these behaviors align with the demands of the CEO role. Identify strengths to leverage and blind spots to address.

3 Develop

Use coaching, stretch assignments, leadership development, and team alignment to build readiness. Support successors in rebalancing their leadership behaviors with the transition.

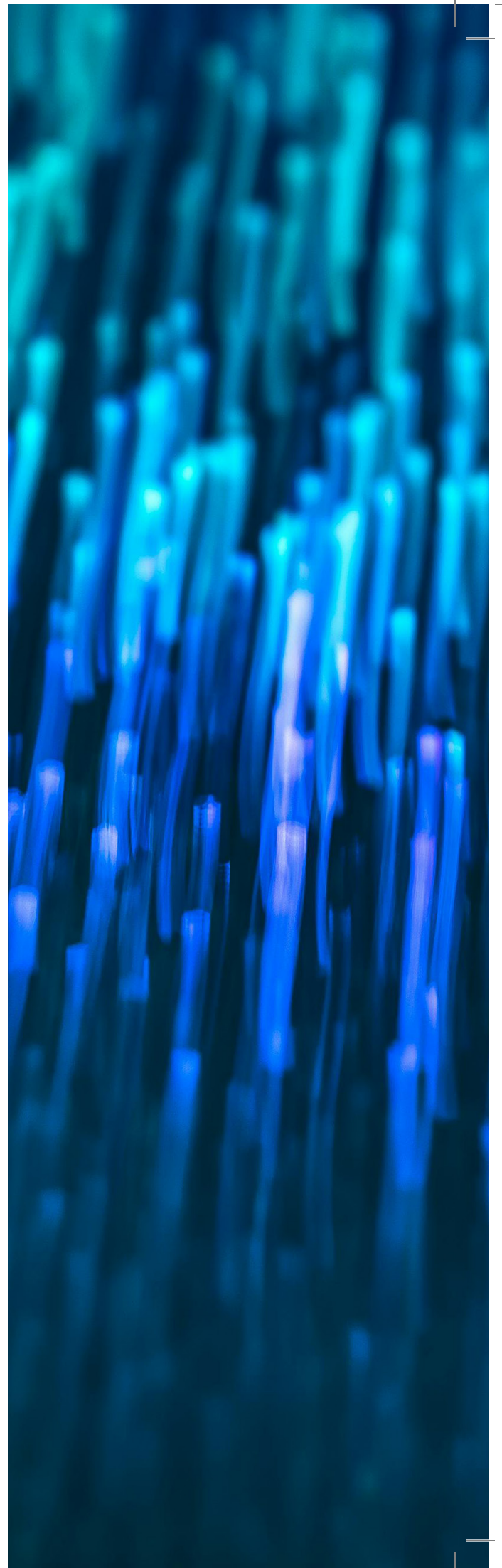
Conclusion

CEO succession is not just about knowledge or experience. It is readiness to lead through a new lens. The behaviors that drive success in COO or CFO roles are not always the ones needed in the CEO role.

System-3™ makes these behaviors visible, accurate, and actionable. By capturing how leaders make choices under pressure, it gives boards clarity they can act on and helps CEOs develop successors who are ready to lead.

Succession is not only a transfer of responsibility. It is a shift in how leaders act when it matters most.

These insights are based on current data and are part of an ongoing process; findings may evolve as more data is collected.



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For more insights, read a related article on our website:

[The CEO Blueprint: Vision Crafting and Influence](#)