

The Problem with the CEO's Job Title

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The title Chief Executive Officer is something of a misnomer. The task of a CEO — and for that matter of any manager — is not wholly or even primarily about execution. In fact, when the CEO starts to "do" things, and starts becoming more "active," that is usually when a company gets into trouble. An effective CEO makes things happen principally through his executive colleagues, aptly called "Chiefs" too: the CFO, CCO, and COO. Of course, given that these team members are Chiefs as well, they also should not be doing too much, either. Their job is to make sure that, in turn, their teams do most of the "execution" work. And so on.

In fact, if you ask successful executives to describe what keeps them so busy, you'll typically get a list of six truly distinct tasks:

1. **Visioning,** or framing of their firm's business challenge;
2. **Planning**, or generating potential solutions to the issue at hand;
3. **Deciding,** or making a commitment to a course of action;
4. **Explaining** the rationale that led to this commitment, and presenting the legitimate expectations stakeholders can hold about the results that will be produced, about how this will be done, and about the rewards that successful execution allows (all of which may cause a change in the decision taken);
5. **Executing,** where all energies are devoted to the execution of the decisions, until results are realized, and which concludes with the distribution of rewards; and finally
6. **Evaluating,** where one evaluates both the process followed in generating a vision, and the outcomes thus obtained and the rewards shared, with a search for errors that may have occurred, and for corrections and adaptations that need to be made for errors not to be repeated in the future.

Few executives, of course, are good at all of these tasks. The key to identifying where the greatest need for improvement is, therefore, to ask executives this question: **what is your biggest improvement wish** concerning your boss and colleagues in the executive team you are a member of?

Answers to this question are diverse, but have a common and remarkable pattern: first, the activity least identified actually concerns **Executing** (5 in the above list). This answer is a stark opposite to the commonly heard complaint from CEO's that the greatest difficulty they face concerns execution! Secondly, the large majority of answers (typically above 70 to 80%) lie in the first four steps. Thirdly, the single biggest frustration of business executives in their "up-teams" lies in tasks 3 and 4**Deciding** and **Explaining.**

These questions to followers reveal what business executives want from their CEOs and their senior executives: make clear decisions and communicate them to us, with their rationale and implications. Trust us, support us, and leave execution to us — and stop thinking that the execution problem is (only or largely) with us. Execution, when well framed, well motivated and well prepared, is the easiest step in management: all that is left, under those conditions, is to execute what we agreed upon in our meetings. The difficult task lies in the preparation of execution, and after execution, in proper evaluation, learning and correction.

The language used in business at the top is thus a problem: it anchors executive action (and mindset) precisely where the challenge does not lie! Perhaps, therefore, it's time to change the label: The British term Managing Director or the French equivalent Directeur Général both appear superior to CEO. But perhaps an even more accurate title would be Chief Decision Officer as this is the task that rests most fully on the shoulders of the boss. Chief Framing Officer probably won't work (because of the acronym confusion with Chief Financial Officer) but perhaps Chief Evaluation Officer would (at least it shares the acronym).

The point here is not so much to replace a bad title with another partially flawed one, but rather to identify the duality at the heart of the executive's job: responsibility for actions mostly and largely taken by others, that are influenced by (always imperfect) framing, and the need to (always imperfectly) make adaptations revealed through imperfect execution. CEOs do not so much execute as influence execution through framing, decision-making, and evaluation. Of course, it would be better if their job title did reflect that fact.

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