



Stepping towards success

1. What do you enjoy doing? What activities give you a sense of satisfaction? What percentage of your time currently do you spend on these?
2. Do you feel what you have to contribute is valued, for instance in regular meetings at work?
3. Do you understand how to get the best out of every team you belong to?
4. Can you exert influence, especially in relation to your key stakeholders?
5. Do you know how to pitch your ideas in ways that engage and persuade?
6. Does your current role contribute to your long term physical and emotional well-being?
7. Do you have the skills to operate internationally and with diverse cultures at home?
8. Can you motivate yourself to set and implement a dynamic goal plan that will take you to your dream job?

FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE, CHECK YOUR ALIGNMENT

Do you fit where you are now?

Bob came to us as a coaching client when he increasingly found himself at odds with his boss. He had been in his business development role at an accountancy firm for five years. During this period, the firm had expanded nationally and the board supported a challenging growth plan. It was an exciting time with a lot of opportunities. The trouble was the firm's executive team wanted to hang on to highly centralised control procedures long after these had passed their use-by date. Bob was viewed as a 'rebel' and penalised for taking initiatives, even when these benefited the firm. Realising he simply didn't fit, Bob moved to another firm where he could express his entrepreneurial flair.

A second example concerns Gillian, a high performing executive with a varied career where she rarely stayed with an organisation for longer than three or four years. Gillian loved the adrenalin rush that came with working in very tough circumstances where a company had its back to the wall. When we met Gillian, she was working in her first CEO role for a mid-sized company that had delisted. The situation was difficult, private equity was involved and Gillian's task was to sort things out as fast as possible. She sees herself as a renovator taking on the 'worst house in the best street'! She enjoys high stakes problem-solving and she's an inspiring leader of people through change. But 'business as usual' is not for her. Gillian knows this and deliberately seeks out roles that play to her strengths.

Are you operating in your 'sweet spot'?

Finding the right fit is a key factor determining success. One way to think about this is to consider what you're good at, what you find deeply rewarding (these two may not be the same!) and where you see an organisational need. If you can contribute your strengths in a sector or organisation that values these, you are more likely to do your best work. But if your passion just isn't in it, you'll begin to feel bored or stuck. In contrast, if you'd score yourself high on passion but low on competence, you risk being seen as average at best. You're likely to plateau early and make little further progress. What if your skills and passions are there, but are 'off strategy' in terms of the organisation's vision of itself? You'll end up being out of alignment and thus undervalued.

To be successful, you need to combine your strengths with your passions, and contribute these to an organisation that needs what you have to offer.

Some skills are not portable

A Harvard study followed twenty high performing senior executives as they transitioned into their first CEO roles. Not all delivered on their promise. In fact, outcomes, including impacts on share price,

were strikingly varied. What made the difference between success and failure? The answer turned out to be the extent to which the talents of the new leaders matched the challenges of their new organisations. Some skills emerged as transferrable only when the new environment was similar to the old one, where they had previously been high performers. Even a very gifted executive didn't necessarily become a star CEO.

For instance, if you are a savvy cost cutter and you move into an organisation where cost management holds the key to success, then you'll likely do well. But if the strategic needs of the organisation don't match your strengths, then you may face problems. Compare your strengths and interests, with a new organisation's strategy and circumstances. Can you bridge the gap? Do you want to? Will they give you time to develop your business-critical alignment?

As organisations grow, their needs change

Research conducted at the University of California highlights that organisations tend to follow predictable patterns as they grow in size over time. For instance, at an early stage of development growth comes from the creativity and personal commitment of the founders. This helps them evolve until they reach the first critical watershed of growth when the old informal ways of doing things no longer cut it. There's a need to professionalise the leadership team and how things are done. If the organisation can rise to this deep change challenge, it will continue to evolve and grow – until the next crisis point arrives. The structures, management focus and leadership style must evolve and adjust to suit the life cycle stage of the organisation. The model helps our clients identify where their particular strengths and passions might best align with a specific organisational growth stage.

Given this complexity, how can you prepare yourself?

New times call for new skills – and a different spin on some old ones. There are clear signals about what might be termed a core skill set that will help you on the path to the C suite. Some recent Harvard studies resonate with UGM investigations here. Your technical and functional expertise is a given these days: it just gets you to the starting line. What got you to the top of the middle might not get you much further these days. For instance, high performing executives now need well developed influencing skills and the ability to operate across geographic boundaries. In light of these findings, we've designed an Eight Steps to Success program.

What about you? Have you got the skills that organisations want these days? Have you identified what would be the best fit for your strengths and passions? In the side box, you'll find some questions to help you think about your steps to success.