



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT HOOP5H
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MARCH 18, 2014

ARTICLE **MANAGING YOURSELF**

The Seven Skills You Need to Thrive in the C-Suite

by Boris Groysberg

MANAGING YOURSELF

The Seven Skills You Need to Thrive in the C-Suite

by Boris Groysberg

MARCH 18, 2014

What executive skills are most prized by companies today? How has that array of skills changed in the last decade, and how is it likely to change in the next ten years? To find out, I surveyed senior consultants in 2010 at a top-five global executive-search firm. Experienced search consultants typically interview hundreds (in many cases thousands) of senior executives; they assess those executives' skills, track them over time, and in some cases place the same executive in a series of jobs. They also observe how executives negotiate, what matters most to them in their contracts, and how they decide whether to change companies. (For more on how executives set their work-life priorities, see [this](#).)

Here are the seven C-level skills and traits companies prize most:

- 1. Leadership.** The skills cited as most indispensable for C-level executives—not just CEOs—are those that jointly constitute leadership. One consultant described the search for a chief information officer in these terms: “Whereas technical expertise was previously paramount, these competencies [being sought today] are more about leadership skills than technical ones.” The consultants differed on the type of leadership most highly in demand, mentioning “inspirational leadership,” “leadership in a non-authoritarian manner that works with today’s executive talent,” “take-charge” leadership, “leadership balanced with authenticity, respect for others, and trust building,” and “strategic leadership.” Ethical leadership was also mentioned. Some consultants observed that the type of leadership sought depends on a company’s specific needs. “Visionary leadership is frequently mentioned when a company is on a new path, adopting a new strategy, or at a tipping point in its growth,” one respondent noted. Another said, “Driving an organization or function to a higher level of performance, efficiency, or growth requires a ‘take-charge’ leadership.” One consultant predicted that firms in 2020 will seek the “same [attributes as in 2010] but with an even greater appreciation for the intangibles of leadership and [for experience] having led a business through tough times.”
- 2. Strategic thinking and execution.** “Strategic foresight”— the ability to think strategically, often on a global basis—was also frequently cited. One consultant stressed the ability to “set the strategic direction” for the organization; another equated strategic thinking with “integrative leadership.” Others emphasized that strategic thinking also calls for the ability to execute a vision, which one respondent called “operating savvy” and another defined as “a high standard in execution.” One consultant pointed out that strategic thinking is a relatively new requirement for many functional C-level executives, and another noted that the surge in attention to strategic thinking occurred in the decade 2000-2010. [\[BA1\]](#)
- 3. Technical and technology skills.** The third most frequently cited requirement for C-level executives was technical skills—specifically, deep familiarity with the particular body of knowledge under their auspices, such as law, financials, or technology. Many respondents stressed technology skills and technical literacy. “A C-level executive needs to understand how technology is impacting their organization and how to exploit technology,” one respondent asserted. Others stressed financial acumen and “industry-specific content knowledge.” In contrast to popular wisdom, many technical skills are not declining but increasing in importance.

4. **Team- and relationship-building.** Many consultants emphasized team-related skills: building and leading teams and working collegially. “A world-class leader must be able to hire and develop an exceptionally strong leadership team—he/she cannot succeed as a brilliant one-person player,” one asserted. Another said that today’s executive must be “more interested and skilled in developing his/her team, less self-oriented.” Executives no longer sit behind closed doors,” one consultant said; instead they must be “team-oriented, capable of multitasking continuously, leading without rank, resisting stress, ensuring that subordinates do not suffer burnout—and do all of this with a big smile in an open-plan office.” One consultant characterized the entire company as a team and described the executive’s job as “leading and developing the company’s team, from the leadership down to the ‘troops.’”

5. **Communication and presentation.** Collectively, the consultants said the ideal C-suite candidate possesses the power of persuasion and excellent presentation skills—which one consultant called “the intellectual capability to interact with a wide variety of stakeholders.” This is a tall order because there are many more stakeholders now than before. Speaking convincingly to the concerns of varied audiences— knowledgeable and unsophisticated, internal and external, friendly and skeptical—calls for mental deftness and stylistic versatility. Some consultants emphasized that a strong candidate should be “board-ready”; others emphasized the ability to “influence the direction of a business and the front office” and to achieve “organizational buy-in.” And C-level executives must also be adept at communicating externally. “Presentation skills have become key to success,” one consultant said, “and will continue to be of increasing importance in the future, as the media, governments, employees, shareholders and regulators take an ever-increasing interest in what occurs in big business.” Another warned that executives need to be “good at making presentations in front of a ‘tough audience.’” Finally, C-level executives must be adept in receiving and synthesizing information.

6. **Change-management.** Virtually unacknowledged and underappreciated until quite recently, change-management skills are in growing demand. Consultants noted rising demand for an executive who is a “change driver,” able to “lead a transformation/change agenda” and capable of “driving transformational change.” One thoughtful consultant said that, as a job specification, change management typically has less to do with driving drastic firm-wide change than with being at ease with constant flux. “This requires a ‘change-agent’ executive,” he noted, “motivated by a continuous-improvement mindset, a sense of always upgrading organizations, building better processes and systems, improving commercial relationships, increasing market share, and developing leadership.” Another consultant noted that a firm seeking an executive who can engineer change often opts for an external candidate on the grounds that an external hire can bring “a new skill set that can lead to significant change and growth.”

7. **Integrity.** Although not skills per se, integrity and a reputation for ethical conduct are highly valued, according to the consultants we surveyed. One said that hiring companies want “unquestioned ethics.” Another remarked that ethical conduct was not explicitly sought in the past but would be front and center going forward: “Personal integrity and ethical behavior . . . are far more important now because of the speed of communication.” Another said that “organizations are more attuned to the ‘acceptability’ of senior hires, be it to regulators, investors or governments.”

We also asked the executive-search consultants how the most highly prized C-level skills have changed over time and what further change they foresee. The first clear theme that emerged is the importance of a global outlook and meaningful international experience. Already the foremost emerging skill over the past decade, a global orientation is apt to become even more dominant going forward.

Another striking theme was the demise of the star culture. Being a team player—working well with others—matters more and is expected to grow in importance. Team skills and change-management skills tied for second place among those considered crucial today but largely ignored ten years ago. One consultant shared a telling anecdote: “Recently I was called to find the new CEO of a local branch of an international company. The former CEO was fired because his management team decided he was too bossy and did not allow them opportunities for growth. They brought these concerns to the top level of the company, and the decision was to replace him.”

Many consultants said that technical skills—once the prime goal of executive searches—are still important but have become merely a baseline requirement. Because the repertoire of obligatory executive skills has grown in scope, some said, both hard and soft requirements have expanded accordingly. Executives who neglect their technical skills might be passed over. In fast changing global economy, dated technical skills can hamper resource-allocation and strategic decisions.

What skills do you think executives need to be successful now and what skills will they need in 2020? What are you doing to be ready to be hired in ten years? We would love to hear; please share your ideas with us.

Methodology

To answer these questions, we surveyed several dozen top senior search consultants at a top global executive-placement firm in 2010. As a group, they were 57% male and 43% female. They represented a wide range of industries, including industrial (28%), financial (19%), consumer (13%), technology (11%), corporate (6%), functional practice (6%), education/social enterprise (4%), and life sciences (4%). These senior search consultants worked in 19 different countries from every region of

the world, including North American (34%), Europe (28%), Asia/India (26%), Australia/New Zealand (6%), Africa (4%) and South America (2%).

Boris Groysberg is the Richard P. Chapman Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, Faculty Affiliate at the [HBS Gender Initiative](#), and the coauthor, with Michael Slind, of *Talk, Inc.* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012). Twitter: [@bgroysberg](#).
