Congratulations! You’ve just been promoted to the executive ranks of your organization. Alternatively, you’ve been told that within the next six to twelve months you should be promoted to this level. Or perhaps you’re already an executive and your role is changing. Any of these events is a major milestone in your career and merits a bit of reflection on what brought you this far.

If you’re like most of your peers, your path to the executive level has probably run from a starting point as the stellar individual contributor on a team. You may have then been promoted to manage that team on a day-to-day basis, making sure that the team’s work was brought in on time and exceeded expectations. In your company, the executive level may begin when you are responsible for overseeing the work of multiple teams. That may be where you are
now or soon will be. Or, it may be that entry into the executive team of your company comes when you are responsible for a major profit center or enterprise-wide support function like finance or human resources. For the purposes of this book, I’ll define an executive level role as one that reports directly to the company president or one that reports to a direct report of the president. If you are working in a major subsidiary of a Fortune 1000 corporation and you report to the subsidiary president you are probably considered to be an executive, at least in the context of your subsidiary. If you are in such a role or are reporting directly to a senior executive in a smaller company, you are in the target audience for this book.

If you’re fortunate, you have had one or more mentors along the way who have guided and counseled you on what it takes to be successful at the different levels through which you have already moved. Perhaps you still have such a mentor and your transition to the next level will be smooth, hassle-free, and completely successful. If you are so blessed, you probably don’t need this book. If you are in the 99 percent of the corporate population without this extra measure of exceedingly good fortune, read on for advice and truth from highly successful executives who collectively will be your mentor and guide to successfully advancing through the uncharted terrain of the next level.

The Learning Continuum

As a former Fortune 500 human resources executive and current executive coach, I have had a lot of direct and vicarious experience with transitions to the executive level. I have seen a few smooth transitions to the top, a lot of bumpy ones, and more than a few flame-outs. Over the past several years, I’ve concluded that moving successfully to the executive level requires conscious intent about what behaviors and beliefs to keep as well as what behaviors and
beliefs to pick up and let go. The bumps I experienced in my own executive transition, as well as those I’ve seen in colleagues and clients, were rooted in two distinct phases of the learning continuum. The first phase is when you literally don’t know what you don’t know—otherwise called \textit{unconscious incompetence}. Based on the theory that ignorance is bliss, you might actually enjoy this phase. After all, you’ve just been named an executive and life is good!

If you’re lucky, phase one will last a week or two before phase two begins. This is that painful period of \textit{conscious incompetence} when you begin to discern that there are things you need to know that you don’t know. However bad continued incompetence may sound, at least you’re making progress in advancing through this new terrain. In all likelihood, if you’re going to be incompetent, it’s better to be conscious than unconscious!

\section*{Moving Toward Competence}

The purpose of this book is to guide you as a new executive in moving very quickly through the two phases of incompetence to the next two phases of learning. These are \textit{conscious competence}, in which you know what you need to know but it doesn’t yet come completely naturally, and \textit{unconscious competence}, in which you know what you need to know, you’re good at it, and you’re operating at your best with ease.

Before we go any further, let’s touch on an obvious point. You are likely a highly competent and functional human being or you would not have made it as far you have. You are, however, entering a new phase in your career—and, to sustain your success, you will have to let go of some beliefs and behaviors that have been working for you until now. You will also have to pick up some new beliefs and behaviors to achieve success as an executive. Based on my experience as an executive and a coach, I have some assessments of my own about
what you should pick up and let go, but if I were you I would want more than one person’s opinions. So I have enlisted around thirty accomplished senior executives to share their perspectives on what to pick up and let go of to be a successful executive. Collectively, they will guide you to executive success.

Amy: Case Study of a New Executive

Before we get to their advice, let’s consider the case of Amy, who has just been promoted to vice president for product development.

Amy has been a star performer for her financial services company since she arrived five years ago, after a three-year stint as an associate in a major management consulting firm. Amy moved from being a key contributor on a product development team to becoming the leader of that team after two and a half years. One year after that, she became a director with responsibility for a couple of key product lines.

As a director, Amy continued to deliver what her senior vice president had come to expect of her. She was a brilliant analyst with a gift for sifting through data and making grounded predictions on new products that would appeal to the high-income, high-balance customers that were the target of her business segment. In her director role, Amy enhanced her reputation as someone who stayed on top of every detail and who, when her team members were stuck or headed in the wrong direction, could provide the right solution to drive progress forward. Her energy and focus enabled her to work ten or eleven hours a day at the office, which she usually supplemented with an hour or two responding to e-mail and voice mail most evenings. Her weekends typically incorporated at least five or six hours of work-related reading and planning for the upcoming
Because of her single-minded focus on product development, Amy spent most of her time dealing with members of her team and did not have a lot of space left over for networking with peers and business leaders outside her domain of expertise. This lack of broader exposure created a bit of a challenge for her senior vice president when he recommended Amy for promotion to the executive ranks, but, in the end, the results she had delivered over the past several years carried the day, and she was named a vice president of the company. 

Amy has been a vice president for four months now and feels like she is paddling hard to keep her head above water. With the vice president’s title has come responsibility for three new product lines in addition to the two she grew and now oversees. With five key product lines to keep track of, she is finding that she is working longer and longer hours and is still not able to stay on top of all the details.

A number of factors are driving up her hours—some expected and some unexpected. Amy has not been surprised that the broader scope of her responsibilities has increased the amount of attention she has to give to her now-expanded team. Because Amy is an expert in her field, she has made a practice of stepping in to provide detailed suggestions to her team members on how to solve problems they face on their projects. To her chagrin and puzzlement, she has found that her newer direct reports will often take the ideas that she comes up with when she is “just thinking out loud” and implement them without her even realizing that she had given them the idea. Some of the results of this phenomenon have been less than optimal and have required her time to step in and correct the problems that were created.

Another thing Amy did not expect was how much time she would spend preparing for the weekly meetings that her senior vice president has with her and his three other VPs. She is exquisitely aware that he expects her and the other VPs to have a strong handle on
what is going on in their areas and to be able to speak to their issues whenever he asks. He also expects his direct reports to offer insights and advice on each other’s responsibilities. Amy is spending several hours each week gathering the information she thinks she might need for the SVP’s staff meetings. It feels to her like getting ready for a pop quiz each week.

Amy is beginning to notice other factors that are contributing to the complexity of her new job. As her team has grown, she has inherited a number of new direct reports. One of these, Brian, consistently disappoints Amy with both the quality of his work and the negative attitude he regularly exhibits. He has a reputation for being technically brilliant and probably considered himself a candidate for the slot that is now Amy’s. More and more, Amy is finding that she has to follow up with Brian to make sure that he delivers on his commitments. On more than one occasion, she has been blindsided by important decisions that Brian has made but has not shared with her. With what little time she has had to think through the situation, Amy is beginning to conclude that Brian may not be a fit for her team, but she is reluctant to take on the time and hassle of putting together a game plan for dealing with him. For now, she’s hoping that he’ll turn around on his own.

Adding to the pressure is Amy’s recognition that her boss also expects her to have a grounded point of view on how to drive revenue growth for the company as a whole, not just in her product lines. This expectation was further brought home in Amy’s first quarterly business review (QBR) with her boss and the company CEO and the rest of his directs. In preparing for that session, Amy had her staff working for weeks on a thirty-slide PowerPoint® deck that she intended to present to the top executive team. When it came time for her to speak, she sensed that she was losing the group about three slides into her deck. She sped through the next several slides, skipped some in the middle and attempted to salvage her main points as she jumped ahead to the summary slide. Amy left her first QBR with her confidence shaken. Other than what she said in her
presentation, she had not participated in the conversation around the table and, frankly, felt like an imposter who was playing at a level for which she was not yet ready.

Although he does not consider her an imposter, Amy’s boss is concerned about her performance and that of her broader team since she was named a vice president. He is surprised that her performance seems to be declining and is wondering if Amy’s promotion was perhaps a case of offering her too much too soon.

What Should Amy Do?

Clearly, Amy is going through a rough stretch. Almost as clear is the fact that she is not getting a lot of support and guidance from her boss. High-performers are often elevated to the executive level and then left to figure out on their own how to operate successfully in their new roles. For executives, the expectations are high but rarely stated explicitly. Let’s take some time to assume the role of Amy’s coach and help her identify some changes she needs to make to get back to the high level of performance that she has had in her career up to this point.

Have Confidence in Her Presence

Amy has to brush off the jitters that have shaken her confidence as a new executive and adopt the belief that she should be exactly where she is. One of the first challenges for many new executives is to let go of the idea that the succession plan must have had some sort of fluke that led to their arrival in the executive suite. In Amy’s case, as it often is for new executives, this uncertainty is compounded by the challenge of advancing through the uncharted terrain of moving from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence.
Even as she is moving through the unknown, it is important for her to remember that there are sound reasons why she has been selected for her new role. Amy needs to believe that she has been invited to the table because she is expected to contribute in meaningful ways. This belief should come through in the way she presents herself to her colleagues. Executive presence relies on adopting a relaxed confidence that puts others at ease and instills confidence in your judgment. It requires that you silence any inner critics that call into question whether you are ready for your role or deserve your shot as an executive leader. Amy does have tactical opportunities to build her confidence on a day-to-day basis (as you probably do, too). There are also transformational opportunities to strengthen your executive presence so that it is a natural extension of how you are at your best. Both the tactical and transformational opportunities will be addressed in this book.

Be Accountable Instead of Responsible for Results

As an objective observer, you most likely concluded that Amy has unrealistic expectations about her ability and need to be directly involved in everything that is going on in her area. As an individual contributor and as a functional manager, Amy was responsible for delivering specific projects or streams of work. As an executive, she is now accountable for seeing that others meet their responsibilities for deliverables.

The difference between responsibility and accountability is the difference between doing and leading. Too many new executives continue to spend time acting directly in the realm of their functional expertise because they are comfortable in the space that has made them successful to date. As an executive, Amy is on the hook for what her people get done. She cannot allow herself to be on the hook for doing it all herself if she hopes to meet the broader expectations built into her new role.
Define What, Not How

Closely related to the issue of confusing responsibility with accountability is Amy’s habit of stepping in to provide detailed solutions to the challenges facing her team members. Amy’s approach poses a number of problems. First, with the increased scope of her responsibilities, Amy simply does not have the time to be the go-to person on every issue and still meet her obligations as an executive. Second, and just as important, by always providing the solution, Amy is limiting the development of both her team members and her team leaders. One of Amy’s key functions as an executive is to help build the next generation of leaders for her company, and she's missing out on one of the best means of fulfilling this expectation, which is to define the results that are needed but not how to get those results. Again, as an executive, Amy is accountable for the results her team produces; they are responsible for producing the results. Her job is to define what the results should be, not how to accomplish the results.

Look Left and Right as She Leads

To put her performance back on track, Amy needs to recognize and respond to the things that have changed now that she is an executive. One of the most significant changes, and opportunities, that has been created by her promotion is that Amy is now part of a new team—the executive team. Amy needs to be intentional and deliberate about looking left and right to collaborate with her new executive peers. As an executive, Amy has more access than she did a few months ago. If she chooses to take advantage of her access, she has valuable opportunities to partner with her peers in other functions to contribute to the broader business agenda of her company. In turn, she can bring a broader and more grounded perspective back to her functional team, enabling them to better understand how their actions support the goals of the company. No one else on her functional team has the kind of access that Amy now has. She is the only
one who can apply those aspects of the broader view that she can take as the vice president for product development. Amy needs to develop some new habits around taking the opportunity to collaborate with her peers.

Take the Outside-In View

Amy has many clear strengths, and one of the most notable is her tenacity in delivering on her commitments. Over the years she has come to be known as someone who lets nothing get in the way of delivering the results expected of her function. Unfortunately, she has become a living illustration of the truth that an overused strength can become a weakness. Amy’s focus on her functional work has damaged her peripheral vision. Over the past few years, she has not left herself much time for forming and growing relationships with people who can give her fresh perspectives on important company issues or offer advice and counsel on key opportunities to which she should pay attention. She needs to restructure her time and perspective so she can more clearly see what is important to the business as a whole and how her function fits into that bigger picture.

Develop a Big-Footprint View of Her Role

As an executive, Amy needs to learn that she has acquired a bigger footprint in the organization and, as such, her words and actions carry more impact and consequence than they used to. When used well, this big footprint will allow her to get more done through others and accomplish more for her company. She needs to learn, though, that, because many people in the organization will want to move quickly in order to make a good impression on her as an executive, her words and actions can have unintended consequences. This is what’s causing the problems Amy is experiencing with her new direct reports’ tendency to act too quickly.

At the same time that she is learning to manage her new profile with respect to her subordinates, she will need to step up to the
expectations of other executives in the company. To be successful as an executive, Amy will have to quickly develop a point of view around value creation and show conviction in expressing it. Being grounded in a point of view about your discipline is the price of admission to the executive team. Once you’re on the team, you distinguish yourself by presenting that point of view in a way that interacts with other disciplines to move the organization forward. For a new executive like Amy, quarterly business reviews with the CEO and weekly staff meetings with senior executives are important forums for showing conviction and a bias for action around a well-reasoned point of view.

Develop Team Reliance

Amy is finding that she is in constant motion attempting to stay on top of what her expanded team is doing and directing their work. While she may not realize it, part of Amy’s challenge is to get her ego out of the way and let go of the idea that she is the only one who can ensure that the right work gets done in the right way. In the past, Amy has derived satisfaction from her personal accomplishments on the job, but now she needs to shift the source of that satisfaction to what her team accomplishes. To trust that her team will do the right work in the right way, she needs to move quickly to ensure that she has the right people on the team in terms of both their motivation and their ability to contribute. In this regard, she needs to resolve the situation with Brian by either obtaining his commitment to contribute fully to the work of the team or helping him find a situation that better meets her needs and his.

Custom-Fit Her Communications

The episode that brought Amy’s situation to a boil with her boss was her performance in the quarterly business review with the company CEO. Needless to say, highly visible events such as a QBR merit preparation and forethought from any executive. In Amy’s case, her
preparation went into a finely crafted PowerPoint deck when that time likely would have been better spent on other aspects of her performance in the meeting. In preparing for meetings with senior executives and other key stakeholders, Amy needs to develop the habit of asking herself questions such as these:

- Who is the audience for my message?
- Where are they now in terms of their thinking?
- What, if anything, do I need to do to change their thinking?

When making a presentation or the case for a new initiative, Amy should assess who is going to be in the audience and get clear about what she wants them to think and how she wants them to feel after she speaks. What is the emotional response that will lead to the appropriate action? Does she need the audience to feel excited? Concerned? Optimistic? Challenged? She should shape the content of her message, her body language, and her tone of voice to create the response that leads to the best action by the members of the group. There is a lot Amy can do to master the art of tuning in to the audience.

Regularly Renew Energy and Perspective

My guess is you probably felt fatigued just reading about all that is going on in Amy’s world. Let’s shift the focus then, from Amy to you. Ron Heifetz, professor at Harvard University and author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, makes the point that leaders periodically need to get off the dance floor and up on the balcony. By making this shift, you can see the patterns and the flow better than when they’re right in front of you. One of the best ways to get up on the balcony is to establish routines of renewal that you regularly practice.
Life as an executive is demanding and it requires your best. To succeed over the long run as an executive, you will need to pick up routines of renewal in the mental, physical, spiritual, and relational domains of your life. You’ve likely reached the executive level in part because of your commitment and drive. Now that you’re here, don’t overdo it. Your energy and perspective will serve you well in the uncharted terrain of the next level if you establish space in your life to reinforce and reconnect with how you are at your best.

Follow Your ESP™

By encouraging you to Follow your ESP™, I am not recommending that you develop an obsession with your sixth sense. Rather, I would encourage you, Amy, or any executive to establish an Executive Success Plan™. In reading through Amy’s case, it is easy to become overwhelmed with the number of things that she needs to address. There is no way she can address all her opportunities at once. She needs to pick the one or two most important opportunities that, over a forty-five- to ninety-day period, will have the biggest positive ripple effect on how she shows up as an executive. She then needs to identify one or two more things to work on and repeat the cycle. I will confess that in writing Amy’s case, I purposely gave her a lot of problems to address in order to illustrate the major points that our senior executive mentors share in the rest of this book. Whether you are a new or more seasoned executive, I am reasonably certain that you have opportunities for improvement that you can address. I seriously doubt, however, that you have as many as Amy. Appendix A introduces a process and framework for building your Executive Success Plan by soliciting feedback from your colleagues and enlisting them to be your team of coaches committed to your success as a new executive.
Anatomy of The Next Level

I want to take a moment to explain how the rest of the book is organized. Each of the following chapters focuses on one of nine pairs of behaviors and beliefs that one must pick up and let go of to be a successful executive. These pairs of behaviors and beliefs deal with the issues outlined in the case study on Amy. Each chapter concludes with a summary list of ten tips for picking up the different elements of executive presence. You’ll notice that the nine pick-up-and-let-go distinctions are organized into three broad components of executive presence: personal presence, team presence and organizational presence. When the Next Level model of executive presence is put together, it looks like the one shown in the following chart. Because executive development is an ongoing journey, this book contains two features in the appendices that will be useful to your growth as a leader. The first is the previously mentioned template for creating an Executive Success Plan (see Appendix A). The second is a Situation Solutions Guide (see Appendix B), which identifies typical situations in which you may find yourself as an executive and the solutions from each chapter that can help.

Again, congratulations on your appointment as an executive. I look forward, in the pages to come, to being your guide in making the strategic choices around what to pick up and let go of to ensure your success as you advance through the uncharted terrain of the next level.
## Building Executive Presence

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