

The logo consists of the words "E•SUITE" and "LEADER" stacked vertically in a gold, serif font. They are enclosed within a thin gold circle. The background of the entire slide features a pattern of overlapping, semi-transparent circles in various shades of beige and gold, with several thin, curved gold lines weaving through the design.

**E•SUITE
LEADER**

WELCOME TO THE E•SUITE

**Lessons from an E•Suite Coach:
How to Excel in the Ivy League
of the Workplace**

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WELCOME TO THE E•SUITE

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Introduction: Welcome to the E•Suite	3
E•Suite Lessons: Excel in the Ivy League of the Workplace	9
Lesson #1: Make more decisions, more often	
Lesson #2: You're there to produce results	
Lesson #3: Meet the unspoken goals	
Lesson #4: Get closer to the details, sooner	
Lesson #5: Master information flow	
Lesson #6: You're only as good as your team	
Lesson #7: Become great at being inspiring	
Final Thoughts	19

You're not alone.

If you're like any of the hundreds of corporate executives and senior leadership teams that I've coached for over a decade, let me assure you that you are not alone if you've ever experienced the following:

- "It's lonely at the top" only scratches the surface of what you're experiencing.
- A 'first 100' days onboarding model is nice in theory, but in reality, it's more like, 'first 30 days'
- You hoped for more support from peers instead of being doubted and second-guessed
- Your team is far from high-performing and resistant to change and new ideas
- You're being flooded with information and there's not enough time to prepare or think
- You're getting little to no time with the CEO and the guidance or direction just isn't there
- You've been given enormous goals without the infrastructure, resources, or support to deliver
- Everyone has an opinion and you spend countless hours each week getting stakeholders aligned
- Even at this level, you're being excluded from important discussions and decisions
- The corporate politics are real and the mental gymnastics is exhausting
- You thought you wanted this job, but you're starting to question how long you can last

Welcome to the club.

You're not alone if you've ever thought, "I can't believe that nobody told me what a mess I'm inheriting," or, "I thought things would be different at this level," or even, "I hate my job."

Maybe you're not surprised when I tell you that these thoughts are not uncommon. You understand how it feels to be the executive in charge, the person everyone looks to for answers, the one expected to deliver big numbers, reach big goals, and do the impossible.

You also know the surprise and disappointment that comes when the peers and coworkers you thought of as friends aren't going to have your back in the ways you had hoped. And you understand buyer's remorse: It was so much easier before, you tell yourself. Why did I agree to this executive role? Why didn't I just turn it down, say no, and walk away?

I'll tell you why. You said yes because you'd rather be the one in charge than report to someone you don't respect or like. You agreed because you didn't have a reason not to, because you didn't think you could say no, because you figured that worst case, you'll do the job for a few years and leave with a big payday. You said yes because it's always been your dream to be the one at the top and actually be the CEO, or CFO, or the executive running things.

You signed on because you love the company, you love the people, and you love a challenge. You earned this job, you're more than ready, and you know it. You want to be a role model and example of what's possible to others who might also share the dream of leading at this level. You said yes because you simply want to see what you're capable of.

Welcome to Executiveland.

Welcome to a place I like to call Executiveland. Think of this as the complex world of senior leadership that can be frustrating, confusing, anxiety-producing – and also exciting, energizing, and immensely rewarding.

If you're here, you've earned a place in the Ivy League of the workplace, where you're surrounded by the best of the best, the ambitious, the Type As, the people making big things happen inside some of the biggest, best, coolest companies in the world.

It's also where you'll find the insecure, the anxious, the impatient, plus the quiet, the charismatic, the fearless and the afraid. The longer you stay here, the more you'll notice how all of those qualities exist with the **same person – and that person is you.**

Executiveland is like a country you've wanted to visit your entire life.

To prepare for your big trip, you read travel books, you study maps, you learn about the culture and customs. You can't wait to visit, only when you arrive, it isn't at all what you expected. You're met with confused looks when you start to speak in the local language, and the map leads to dead ends. None of this makes sense: Others have been to Executiveland and raved about it, but this is hardly a dream destination. Worse, you wonder if something is wrong with you: You've spent years wanting to be here, only now that you are, you can't wait to get the first flight back home.

The old playbook doesn't work.

If you're in a new executive role, and it's not what you anticipated, welcome to the club, because Executiveland isn't all it's cracked up to be. For years, research has confirmed what executives already know: They aren't prepared for their new roles. Studies tell us that 50-70% of new executives fail within the first 18 months on the job. Two-thirds say they did not have the complete picture of what they would be facing on the job, and nearly 80% of new executives say they were not adequately prepared for their new roles

It's hard to imagine any leader who would tolerate these types of poor outcomes, but executive education remains a booming business. I should know: The majority of my clients have attended prestigious ivy league programs or other training designed for executives at some point in their development.

Einstein said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

New executives are not set up for success, and it isn't their fault. Many executive education programs rely on tools and concepts **created decades ago**.

The world has changed dramatically in recent years, but the playbook hasn't kept up. Executives attend courses or programs, but they don't go far enough to address the complexities, challenges, and what it feels like to be a senior leader today.

Figure it out.

Once new executives are in their roles, they are often left to figure things out on their own. Executives are put into challenging, high-stakes situations with no instruction manual and have to get it right the first time.

This puts new executives in an unfair position, which explains why even talented leaders can misstep, second guess themselves, and wonder if they have what it takes to last in the role. This takes the joy out of what could be the experience of a lifetime, and it doesn't have to be this way:

Mistakes and missteps are often completely avoidable when you're prepared.

It's unlike anything else.

One more important consideration, which also explains why so many executives report feeling unprepared: Moving into a job top isn't just a career move, it's one of life's biggest transitions that only a few ever experience, and something all big life transitions have in common in this: You don't know what it's really like until you're there.

Consider the life transition of parenthood: When my first son was born, it quickly dawned on me that I had absolutely no idea how to feed him, in spite of the six-week parenting class and dozens of books I read in advance. It was as if every lesson, great piece of advice, or new piece of wisdom I had acquired in advance went completely out the window once the day arrived.

That's the thing about big transitions. There is only so much knowledge you can really internalize in advance, and once you're in it, all bets are off. Books and classes only get you so far, because transitions of this magnitude can't fully be put into words, and even joyful transitions come with mixed emotions, cognitive overload, decision fatigue, with understandable stress and anxiety. No wonder so many executives describe feeling unprepared for executive leadership: For this level of transition, there is only so much preparing that can be done. The real learning starts once you're in the seat.

E•Suite Lessons: Excel in the Ivy League of the Workplace

Here's the very good news: If you're in a senior role, an executive role, or anything else that you'd describe as a very big job, you're in excellent shape. You know much more than you may be giving yourself credit for, if you're like any of the hundreds of senior leaders I've worked with over the years. The players may be new, and the goals may be bigger, but you know how to do the hardest part:

Believing in yourself.

- Lesson #1: Make more decisions, more often.
- Lesson #2: You're there to produce results.
- Lesson #3: Meet the unspoken goals.
- Lesson #4: Get closer to the details, sooner.
- Lesson #5: Master information flow.
- Lesson #6: You're only as good as your team.
- Lesson #7: Become great at being inspiring.

Lesson #1: Make more decisions, more often.

Success at the executive level starts in the mind. You may be tempted to believe otherwise, to think that the job is about realizing strategy, achieving results, delivering on your commitments. Think of those elements as the byproduct or outcomes that you'll get because you've fueled your actions, your leadership, and your behaviors with the right internal shifts, thoughts, and beliefs.

This starts by making more decisions, more frequently, to serve you. Too many of us don't make decisions consciously, or we accumulate decision debt, where we allow too many unanswered decisions to take up space in our brain. You can't afford to do that anymore: Executive leadership requires a big output of mental energy and stamina, and it will need your brain working on all cylinders in order to achieve results.

What are the types of decisions you can start to make, immediately? Here are a few examples:

- Instead of thinking, "I'm not sure I believe this strategy will work," tell yourself, "I've decided that this strategy will work, and now we get to figure out how."
- Instead of thinking, "This team is not high-performing," say, "I've decided this team could be high-performing with better leadership from me."
- Instead of thinking, "My CEO isn't effective," tell yourself, "I've decided that this is the perfect CEO for me right now, because they are showing me that I can handle more than I thought I could."
- Instead of thinking, "I don't trust them," say, "I've decided that it isn't helpful to think I don't trust them."

Start to notice how many decisions you or others aren't making and what

it may be costing you, even unconsciously. Don't let yourself get away with saying, "I don't know," or "We need more time to figure that out," when you could just decide. Too many of us are too afraid to make decisions, because we're afraid of making the wrong decision. This becomes a major barrier to performance at the executive level. Making decisions is critical, because decisions drive the quality of the actions you do, or do not, take. Decisions are what get us moving, learning, and achieving. Don't overlook this important step.

Lesson #2: You're there to produce results.

Executives are encouraged to lead with inspiration, communicate a powerful vision, and drive change. What gets less airtime is this: **You're there to deliver results, grow value, and accelerate performance.** The idea may seem like Executive Leadership 101, but staying focused on delivering results is much harder than it looks inside your typical corporation. That happens, in part, because we tend to hold onto processes, systems, and operating models that are far past their expiration dates. They may have been the right elements at one time, but as a business evolves, grows, and needs change, they interfere directly with achieving results. For example:

- Offsites that are about "teamwork" instead of team performance
- Executive meetings centered around providing updates instead of engaging in dialogue, debate, and mutual accountability
- A focus on team dynamics instead of team performance and accountability for results
- Stale incentives or comp models that don't encourage behaviors to achieve today's results

- Inflexible processes or ways of working that limit options and interfere with performance
- Global town halls that share numbers about sales or performance without providing enough insight into why we're winning, or losing, and what we'll do about it
- Leaders that communicate about activity and accomplishments, versus producing results
- Allowing a lack of results or underperformance to persist at an individual or team level
- Activities where the time investment is disproportionate to the ROI (i.e., prep for board, QBRs)

Identify how you'll strengthen the culture of results that lives within you, your team, and whatever parts of the organization you're leading. **Start small and pick areas that you can control**, and start to create a new playbook for how you achieve results at your company.

Lesson #3: Meet the unspoken goals.

An unspoken goal is the goal that really matters, the highest priority, and against which performance is ultimately assessed. It's one reason why good executives may be given less-than-stellar reviews: look carefully, and you might find that they missed delivering on the unspoken goal despite doing everything right on paper. As the name suggests, unspoken goals are tricky because they aren't always explicitly articulated or emphasized, which is why even sophisticated executives can fall into the trap of overlooking them.

This happens for many reasons, including the fact that **companies set corporate priorities without also establishing clear metrics or accountability** around them. That's often a good clue that a goal isn't yet something that is truly valued at a company, despite whether it should be or what is written on paper

Another easy way to know if you're pursuing a goal that isn't actually valued? There is little impact if you don't achieve it. **If others don't notice or care if this goal ever gets achieved, that's all you need to know.**

Before deciding where to devote important time and resources, ask yourself:

- What tells me that this is a goal that others care about achieving?
- How will achieving this goal positively and directly impact business results?
- How are we held accountable for achieving this goal?
- What happens if we don't achieve this?
- If we do achieve this goal, how will others (customers, executives, shareholders) benefit?
- How am I personally evaluated and rewarded for achieving this goal?

As an executive, you and your team deserve praise for a job well done, and when you focus on delivering against the right goals – including the unspoken ones – your value is better seen and rewarded.

Lesson #4: Get closer to the details, sooner.

Starting any new senior role, particularly at the executive levels, is an intense undertaking. Many leaders **struggle to get traction in the beginning** for reasons that are easy to understand, starting with the fact it takes time to assess the real health of your business, your team, and whatever other assets you'll have to work with. It may be that the business or team you inherited isn't as far along as you thought. You may have more travel than you anticipated, or a CEO who asks tough questions and expects immediate answers. You may be surprised by the dynamics on the executive team and adjusting to a new peer group.

While most reasonable companies and teams give executives a grace period to adjust and get acclimated, that doesn't last long, and **people forget quickly that you're new.**

Given that, you'll see no shortage of advice about how to successfully transition into an executive role, including the oft-heeded suggestion to go on a listening tour. It's a valuable step, but **proceed with caution**, because the time commitment can be enormous, and months may pass before you get a full picture of the real issues or opportunities in your business.

As one leader put it: "When I started the job, I didn't spend nearly enough time understanding the full scope of the problems in my business. I cared too much about the political ramifications of not meeting with certain stakeholders early on. But in hindsight, if I had prioritized spending more time with my team and those closest to the problem, I could have pinpointed issues much sooner than I did."

What to do instead? Shorten your timeframe to get engaged in the areas that will create the most value for your organization. Start with a simplified process (I like a 'red/yellow/green' framework) to assess the health of your organization and know what you've got to work with. Be extremely disciplined about whom you include on your listening tour, so you aren't overwhelmed with meetings or information to absorb.

And, where it does make sense, make a splash. If growth is a challenge, perhaps you embark on a '100 clients in 100 days' tour. You might prioritize investor meetings, team offsites, or a global tour, depending on the state of things when you take on the role.

Lesson #5: Master information flow.

Most executives take in a massive amount of information on a given day, with little time to absorb, process, think, and reflect. There's an expression that says: **If you don't know what you think or what you want, you get distracted by what wants you.** That's why it's so important for senior leaders to establish a regular practice of planning, thinking, reflecting, and daydreaming. Otherwise, it's too easy for **other people's views, voices, and agendas to crowd out your own thinking and dilute your own unique value.**

Taking time to synthesize, review, and reflect on the information you take in on a regular basis is a game-changer. For instance:

- **Sunday Hour One.** Spend a full hour on Sunday identifying 1-2 key results to achieve or problems you want to tackle in the week ahead, and update your calendar accordingly.

- **Target a specific problem each week.** Spend quiet time asking: “How will we reduce our expenses by \$40M in Q3?” Or: “How will I create more accountability across the team?”
- **Reflecting time:** Review and digest outcomes from the week. Summarize your ideas or takeaways into simple headlines and consider what you’ll do with the information you have.
- **Daydream.** Ask: What dream do I have for myself this week? What is my customers’ dream? What do my employees dream about achieving in their lives this year and how can I help?

Lesson #6: You’re only as good as your team.

No matter what type of senior team you’re leading, going from good to great, or even great to amazing, is entirely possible and **starts with how you meet.** Why meetings? They are the easiest way to elevate your team culture, improve performance, and stay focused on results as an executive. To do that, consider:

- **Avoid meetings about “teambuilding” or “dynamics.”** The best teams get better when they work on real things. Be careful about meetings where the stated purpose is to “improve trust” or “work on candor.”
- **Rethink your agenda.** Teams have so much to do and don’t meet often enough, but nothing kills productivity more than trying to do too much in a meeting. Give the right areas of focus the time they deserve to allow for strategic thinking, real dialogue, with moments to let ideas breathe
- **Great team meetings require great preparation.** Too often, pre-meeting preparation misses the mark. Team members spend hours preparing pre-read materials that their colleagues may not read, or skim at best, due in part to the lack of clear guidance provided to them about the purpose, rationale, and expectations about preparation.

- **Get to the right level of dialogue.** Minimize or eliminate any portion of the meeting which is about reporting out or updating, which is low value and create a passive, “talking at” environment without real discussion.
- **Create a better offramp.** Too often, great meetings don’t produce lasting change, because commitments aren’t sustained. One reason for this? The transition from meeting to “real life” is abrupt, and teams need a better offramp back to work and into implementation. Start by helping your team picture and experience immediate next steps while everyone is still in the meeting. For example, if you’ve built a new strategic plan, spend time on your feet as a team, selling the plan to your fellow team members, running through mock Q&A sessions to prepare for future discussions with employees deeper into the organization..

Lesson #7: Become great at being inspiring.

When leaders report to an uninspiring executive, the negative impact on productivity and execution is real. Too often, uninspiring leaders often are the last ones to see this behavior in themselves, and in my years coaching executives, I rarely see leaders get more than generalized feedback in this critical area, without many practical steps or ways to improve. Consider:

A lack of inspiration is a lack of awareness about your audience. When an executive is seen as uninspiring, it’s often because they assume that what matters to them matters equally to others. You’ll see this type of senior leader doing more talking than listening, asking few questions, reading slides or reporting out information, and then wondering why the audience is so quiet or unresponsive in the meeting

The opposite of uninspiring is curiosity. Assume your audiences do not care, even if you're talking about what should be a matter of importance to others. When you start from that cynical point of view, it forces you to ask better questions and get deeply curious about your audiences. For example, when raising an important issue in a meeting, you might ask yourself: How would this audience define value, in the context of this topic, versus how I see it? Audiences will only care once they understand the value in your ideas and how that value applies to them. When we're uninspiring, we simply forget to connect those dots for the audience.

Notice how often you talk about how tough it is. It's easy to talk about what is difficult, tough, or challenging, but the problem is, it's boring, it motivates absolutely nobody, and it keeps us stuck, because in most cases, the conversation never really evolves beyond how tough things are. Start to pay attention to whether this is a pattern you fall into, and simply shift the balance, so that you're also talking about solutions, about the future, or about what we can control to influence a different outcome instead.

Being uninspiring isn't a personality defect; it's something that **can happen to the best of us**, and the good news is that with simple behavior changes, we can improve in this area quickly. To start, ask yourself questions like:

- Do others really engage in my meetings?
- Do I find myself talking mostly about challenges and how tough things are?
- Do people describe me as inspiring?
- Do I do enough listening and asking questions?

Become curious about your responses and consider where you can put a few simple changes into place to make improvements. Even small shifts in behavior add up and yield immediate results.

This is only the warm up.

Use these lessons to help you grow, stretch, and raise your game in the areas that matter to you. As you do, one consideration that happens for highly accomplished leaders: Most of us aren't willing to deviate too far from the current way we do things, particularly when our approach is generally working. Why change? The author Tracy Goss puts it this way: **"This is not for people who want to become successful, but for those who have already won at the game of success and want much more."**

If you're an executive or someone on the path to becoming one, you've already won at the traditional game of life. Now, you have the opportunity to explore what's possible for you, your team, and your organization in entirely new ways. Maybe there is a part of you that believes you're only scratching the surface, you know there is more within you, and you want to see what you can achieve when you tap into that type of power.

If this is you, then you've arrived in Executiveland. It's the perfect place for people who don't expect it all to be easy, but they want to be there anyway, because this is the place where we get to grow, to put ourselves to the test, to be great, and make a difference in the world.

Welcome Executiveland. I'm here to help.

Consider me a partner in your success. If you're ready to apply these lessons and more to your leadership, reach out at www.esuiteleader.com to set up a 1:1 consultation.

Want more ideas like this? Visit www.esuiteleader.com and sign up for E-Suite Insights, a weekly newsletter with practical executive coaching delivered weekly to your inbox.



Meet Elizabeth

Elizabeth Freedman is an expert in executive performance and the Founder of **E•Suite Leader**, a leadership advisory firm that **helps executives lead great teams and organizations** and **shows the best leaders how to get to the executive suite and thrive there.**

Unlike traditional executive coaching and education, which primarily emphasize leadership development, Elizabeth founded E•Suite Leader to go further—empowering executives to excel where it matters most: **achieving outstanding results, delivering strategic impact, and building enterprise value.**

Previously, Elizabeth was a Vice President and Principal at global strategy firm BTS, and a former consultant with Accenture, where she worked with some of the biggest, best-known companies in the world, including Disney, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Dow, and more. She has been a contributor for **Forbes** since 2019, where she writes about practical strategies for the executive suite, and is the author of **Work 101: Learning the Ropes of the Workplace Without Hanging Yourself** (Random House).

Her expertise in leadership has also appeared in **The New York Times**, **Fortune**, **Chief Executive**, **The Boston Globe**, and the **Rotman Management Journal**. She holds an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management. Elizabeth is a frequent conference and keynote speaker and a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), earning the highest-level designation for professional speakers worldwide.

Learn more at www.esuiteleader.com