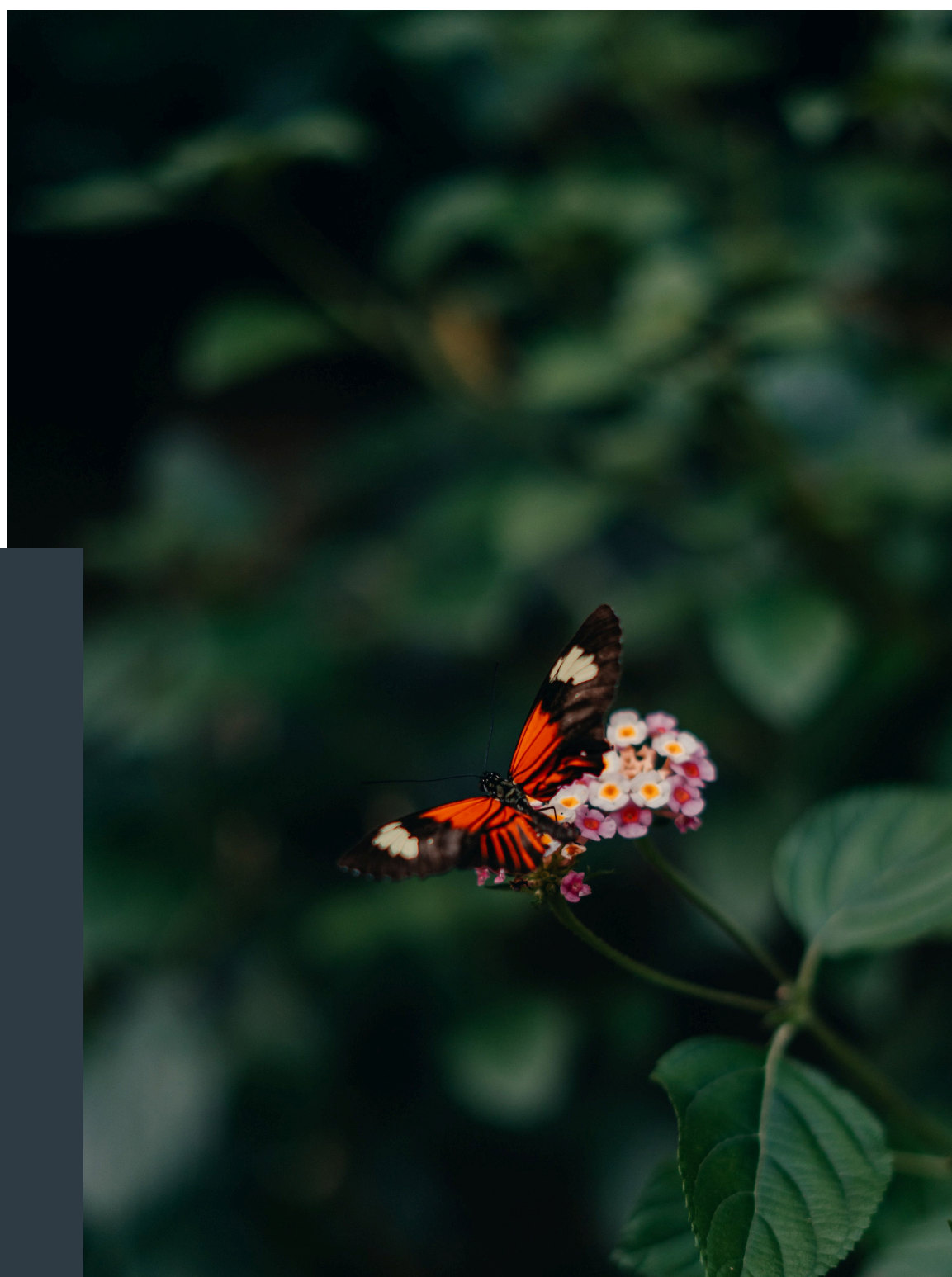




Holmes Noble | Insight

Executive Leadership Has Changed. Has Leadership Development Kept Up?



Five Shifts Shaping Enterprise Readiness



The Development Gap

Most organisations invest in capability. Too few deliberately create the enterprise experiences, exposure and accountability that build future leaders.



Define the experiences required for future enterprise roles.



Assess for enterprise readiness, not just current performance.



Create broader accountability across functions and the enterprise.



Build external exposure with Boards, investors, customers, regulators and partners.



Develop judgement through complex trade-offs and enterprise decisions.



Enable success, not just selection - through the right environment, team and support.

“ The organisations that build the strongest executive pipelines will be those that are deliberate in creating enterprise leaders. ”

Executive Leadership Has Changed. Has Leadership Development Kept Up?

I have come to believe that organisations are still developing executives for yesterday's leadership expectations whilst selecting leaders against tomorrow's.

During the past year, I have spent much of my time assessing senior executives across a wide range of organisations, from listed businesses and privately owned companies to private equity-backed organisations. The sectors, personalities, leadership styles and organisational challenges have varied considerably. Yet despite those differences, I have been struck by how often the same conversations emerge.

When people hear that I assess senior executives, they often assume I spend my time identifying weaknesses. In reality, the opposite has been true.

The overwhelming majority of executives I meet possess strong commercial awareness, strategic capability, transformation experience and people leadership. They are thoughtful, resilient and increasingly authentic leaders. Many have led significant organisational change, managed substantial P&L responsibility and built highly engaged teams. Genuine capability has rarely been the central issue.

This has led me to question one of the assumptions we often make about executive succession. If there is no shortage of capable executives, why do so many organisations continue to struggle to build strong leadership pipelines? Why do Boards still recruit externally for many of their most senior appointments? And why do executives with outstanding track records sometimes struggle to move beyond functional leadership?

In my experience, the expectations of executive leadership have evolved more quickly than the way organisations develop their leaders.

The role of today's executive is fundamentally different from that of a decade ago. Success is no longer defined simply by functional expertise or operational excellence. Modern executives are expected to think commercially whilst remaining customer-centric, lead transformation whilst maintaining performance, embrace technology without losing sight of people and culture, and balance immediate delivery with long-term strategic thinking.

They must lead across functions rather than within them, make sound decisions when certainty is unavailable and operate confidently with Boards, investors, regulators, strategic partners and customers. At the same time, they remain responsible for creating high-performing organisations from within.

Perhaps the biggest surprise throughout this year's assessments was that development conversations were rarely about fixing capability gaps. I found myself talking far less about becoming more strategic, improving communication or developing greater resilience than I had expected.

Instead, the conversations consistently centred on broader organisational accountability, enterprise-wide decision-making, more complex P&L responsibility, Board confidence, investor engagement, external leadership, international exposure, strategic partnerships, government and regulatory relationships, enterprise strategy and building leadership capability beneath the executive.

The discussion had moved beyond capability towards experience.

That distinction matters. Organisations continue to invest heavily in leadership development, but much of that investment remains focused on building capability rather than deliberately broadening experience. Leadership programmes, coaching and executive education all have an important role to play. However, they cannot replicate the judgement that comes from navigating ambiguity, making difficult trade-offs or carrying responsibility for the organisation as a whole.

Few organisations appear to ask a more fundamental question:

What experiences does this executive need over the next five years to prepare them for enterprise leadership?

When I refer to enterprise leadership, I am not referring to the size of an organisation. I mean the ability to lead the whole organisation, balancing strategy, commercial performance, customers, operations, people, culture and external stakeholders rather than operating through a single functional lens.

Whether the organisation is an SME, a private equity-backed business, a division of a global company or a multinational enterprise, the principle is the same: enterprise leadership is defined by the breadth of leadership required, not the size of the organisation.

Increasingly, Boards are looking not only at what leaders have achieved, but also at the breadth of leadership they are ready to take on next. Board conversations are becoming less about previous success and more about future enterprise readiness.

This is particularly apparent in executive career journeys. Some leaders are deliberately moving sectors to secure their first Chief Executive appointment. Others are leaving larger organisations to gain greater autonomy and broader organisational responsibility in smaller businesses. Many openly question whether spending too long within one organisation or industry may eventually restrict future opportunities rather than strengthen them.

Breadth of experience is beginning to outweigh the comfort of familiarity. Executives themselves are becoming more intentional about seeking roles that prepare them for broader leadership rather than simply represent the next step upwards.

At the same time, organisations are changing how they define leadership.

One organisation I recently worked with made the deliberate decision to move away from traditional functional competency frameworks. Rather than assessing finance leaders differently from engineers or commercial teams, it developed a single behavioural framework based on organisational values and culture, applicable from administrator through to Chief Executive.

I had the privilege of working with the organisation to design and implement that framework. The experience reinforced my belief that technical expertise remains essential, but leadership is increasingly being defined by behaviours, judgement and the ability to contribute across the organisation rather than by functional excellence alone.

This reflects a broader shift. As organisations become more interconnected, leaders are increasingly valued for their ability to integrate rather than optimise.

The strongest executives are not necessarily those with the deepest functional expertise. They are those able to connect strategy with execution, commercial priorities with operational delivery, technology with customer outcomes, financial performance with people and culture, and short-term delivery with long-term value creation.

Functional expertise is largely assumed at executive level. Enterprise perspective is increasingly what differentiates leaders.

Enterprise judgement is equally important. Technical expertise may take an executive into the Boardroom, but judgement increasingly determines their credibility once they are there.

Balancing competing priorities, allocating resources, making difficult trade-offs, operating with incomplete information and understanding the wider consequences of strategic decisions are defining characteristics of senior leadership. These qualities are difficult to develop through formal programmes alone. They are earned through experience and tested through accountability.

What experiences does this executive need over the next five years to prepare them for enterprise leadership?

External leadership has also emerged consistently. Many executives are highly accomplished at leading internally. They have built strong teams, delivered transformation, improved performance and influenced Executive Committees.

Yet development recommendations frequently focus on increasing Board confidence rather than simply Board exposure, strengthening investor relationships, building strategic partnerships, engaging more closely with customers, governments and regulators, and becoming a credible ambassador for the organisation.

The role of a senior executive is no longer simply to run an organisation. Increasingly, it is also to represent it. External leadership is becoming as important as operational leadership.

The nature of people leadership is evolving too. Most executives demonstrate strong capability in leading teams, creating engagement and developing individuals. However, the more important discussion is increasingly about creating leadership capability across the organisation.

Building successors, strengthening the leadership bench and creating sustainable organisational capability are becoming as important as leading a high-performing team. The strongest leaders are measured not only by the people they lead today, but by the leaders they create for tomorrow.

Modern organisational structures add another layer of complexity. Matrix arrangements, shared services, central transformation teams, enterprise technology functions and private equity ownership mean that many executives are responsible for delivering outcomes without directly controlling all the resources required to achieve them.

Success therefore depends less on positional authority and more on influence, collaboration and stakeholder alignment. Executives must be able to build partnerships internally as effectively as they do externally.

Technology, and particularly artificial intelligence, featured in almost every assessment conversation. Interestingly, very few executives viewed AI as a strategy in itself. Instead, they described it as an enabler of better decision-making, productivity, customer experience or operational performance.

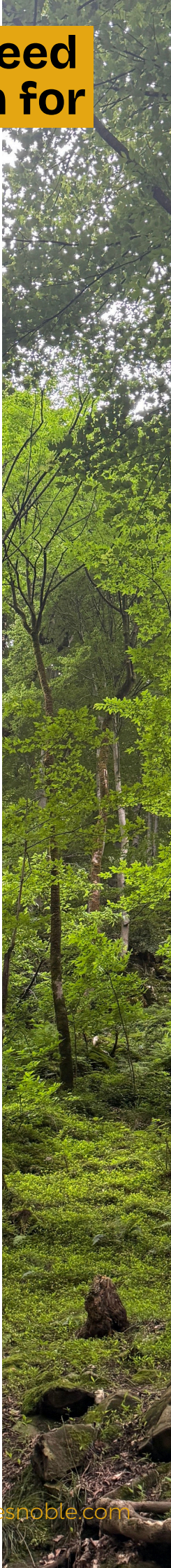
This distinction matters. Technology literacy is now a leadership expectation, but its value lies in how it strengthens the organisation rather than in adoption for its own sake.

One of the most surprising observations concerned executive development itself. Despite assessing highly capable leaders, relatively few described a structured, long-term development plan. Most referred to annual objectives, performance reviews or learning through experience.

Organisations often invest significant effort identifying future leaders, yet comparatively little effort appears to go into intentionally designing the experiences that will prepare them for future enterprise roles. It is difficult to build a long-term succession pipeline when development is viewed primarily through a twelve-month lens.

Reflecting on these conversations has also prompted me to think differently about how organisations use executive assessment.

There is often a natural tendency to focus on potential risks, gaps or reasons why an executive may struggle in a new role. Understanding those risks is important, but assessment should also help organisations answer a different question:



What does this leader need from us to maximise their chances of success?

Leadership effectiveness is shaped not only by the individual, but also by the environment in which they operate. Assessment should therefore inform not only appointment decisions, but also onboarding, development, team dynamics and the organisational conditions that enable leaders to perform at their best.

The Boardroom itself is changing. Technical credibility is increasingly taken for granted. What distinguishes executives is confidence operating at Board level, contributing beyond their own functional expertise, managing upwards, challenging constructively and demonstrating the maturity to think from an enterprise rather than departmental perspective.

Leadership style and cultural alignment also play an increasingly influential role in appointment decisions. Capability may secure a place on the shortlist, but values, judgement, authenticity and the ability to build trust often shape the final decision.

Private equity has further influenced executive expectations. Leaders operating in private equity-backed environments are frequently required to adapt to accelerated transformation, faster decision-making, rigorous capital allocation and more direct investor engagement. Yet many executives receive limited support in understanding how leadership expectations change when ownership and governance change.

Leadership has also become more personal. Conversations around family, wellbeing, travel, purpose and flexibility now feature regularly when executives consider career opportunities.

This should not be mistaken for reduced ambition. It reflects a broader definition of career success and a greater awareness of the personal cost of senior leadership. Organisations seeking to attract and retain exceptional executives will increasingly need to understand the individual behind the leader, not simply the experience described on the CV.

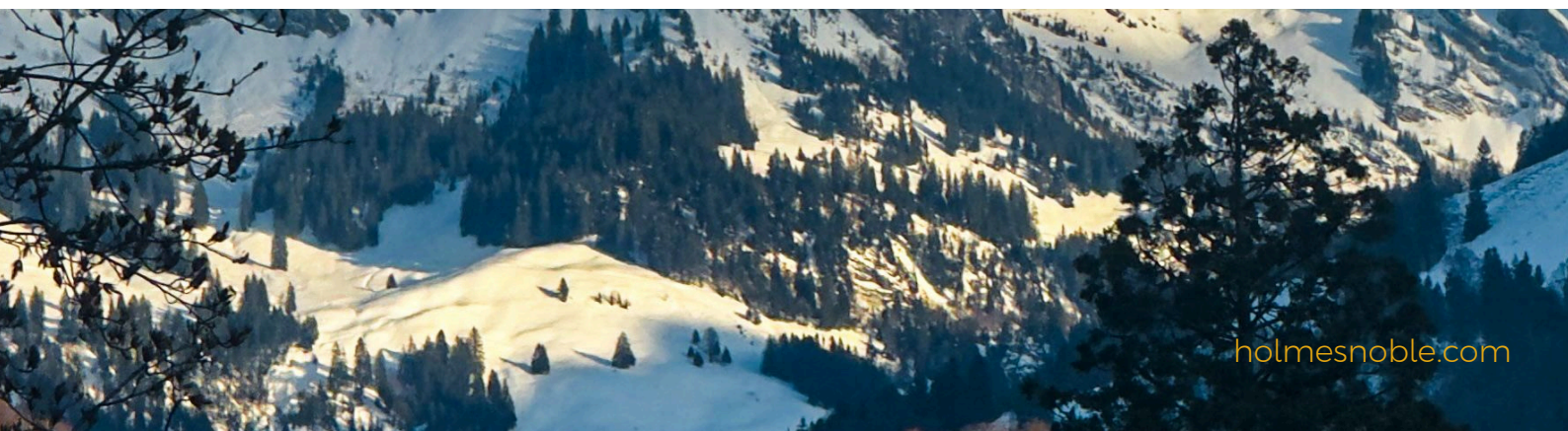
Reflecting on this year, I have become convinced that organisations do not face a shortage of leadership talent. They face a different challenge: how to develop leaders for a world in which enterprise judgement, external influence, adaptability, long-term perspective and breadth of experience have become as important as technical excellence.

That requires greater emphasis on creating enterprise experiences rather than simply building leadership capability.

For me, the distinction between a strong executive and a successful Chief Executive is becoming less about competence and more about enterprise readiness.

Enterprise readiness is not a single competency. It is the combination of capability, experience, judgement, exposure and perspective that enables an executive to lead the organisation as a whole rather than excel within only one part of it.

It develops through broader accountability, enterprise decision-making, external leadership, Board confidence, strategic partnerships, the creation of future leaders and a willingness to step beyond the familiar boundaries of a functional career.



What does this leader need from us to maximise their chances of success?

What this means for Boards

Boards should define the experiences required for future enterprise roles before identifying who might fill them. A succession plan should describe not only potential successors, but also the experiences, exposure and responsibilities each individual will need to become genuinely ready.

They should assess successors against future readiness, not merely current performance. Outstanding delivery in a functional or divisional role is important, but it does not automatically demonstrate the ability to lead the whole organisation.

Boards should deliberately create cross-functional and enterprise-wide accountability. This may include responsibility for major transformation, international expansion, acquisition integration, customer strategy, capital allocation, organisational redesign or a significant turnaround.

External exposure should be built into development plans. Future enterprise leaders need opportunities to engage with Boards, investors, strategic customers, regulators, government, industry groups and external partners before such relationships become an immediate requirement of the role.

Executives should also be given responsibility for difficult trade-offs, not simply larger teams or bigger budgets. Enterprise judgement develops when leaders must balance competing priorities and accept accountability for decisions with organisation-wide consequences.

Finally, Boards should use assessment not only to determine whether an executive can succeed, but also to understand what the organisation must do to enable that success. The quality of the environment, mandate, onboarding, team and Board relationship can be as important as the capability of the individual appointed.

The organisations that build the strongest executive pipelines will not necessarily be those with access to the largest pool of talent.

They will be those that are most deliberate in creating enterprise leaders.

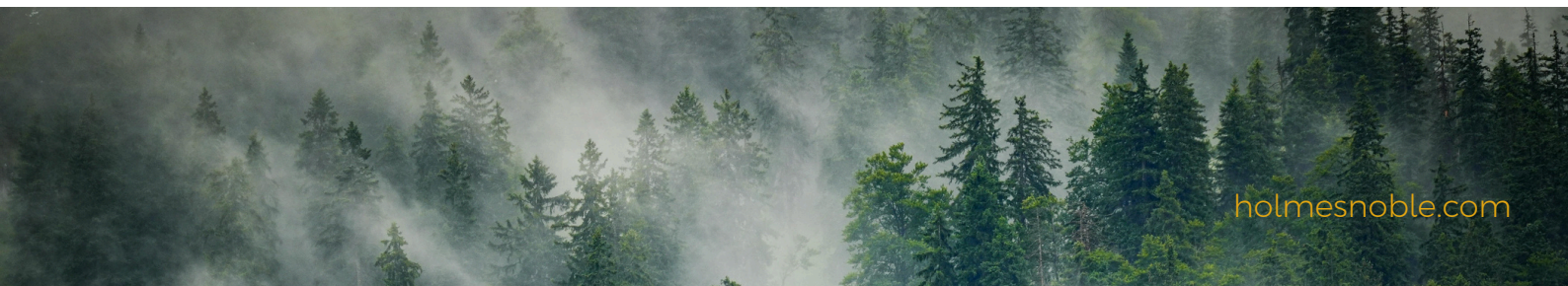
That, in my view, is how organisations will close the gap between yesterday's leadership development and tomorrow's leadership expectations.

About Holmes Noble

At Holmes Noble, we believe assessment should do more than evaluate capability. It should bring clarity, confidence and evidence to the decisions that shape an organisation's future. Whether evaluating individual leaders, supporting succession planning or designing organisation-wide capability and assessment frameworks, our approach is rigorous, insight-led and grounded in real-world executive performance.

We go beyond surface-level evaluation to understand how leaders think, make decisions, influence others and deliver results in complex, evolving environments. Our assessments are designed not only to evaluate leadership capability today, but also to identify the breadth of experience, judgement and development required to prepare leaders for broader organisational and enterprise leadership responsibilities.

By combining robust assessment with practical insight, we help Boards and leadership teams make confident decisions, strengthen succession pipelines and develop the leaders their organisations will need for the future.





Katie-Ann Poxon
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About the Author

Katie Ann brings over 26 years of executive search experience and talent management expertise across a diverse range of industries, including Transportation, Manufacturing, Aerospace & Defence, Infrastructure, and Energy. Throughout her career, she has thrived in various career environments, from executive search boutiques to corporate in-house roles to owning her own recruitment business.

Notably, Katie Ann spent a decade as Bombardier's Global Executive Search Leader. During this tenure, she headhunted and managed global executive level appointments and led global large-scale recruitment campaigns. Katie Ann is an expert in C-Suite and executive hiring, bespoke design and implementation of executive assessment frameworks, comprehensive leadership assessment and coaching. She has also leads transformation and talent programs. Having been diagnosed with autism and ADHD, she is instrumental in championing neurodiversity and inclusive practices across organisations.
