

# The Journey to Executive High Performance: How to Find Joy at the Top



Dr. Christian Marcolli  January 16, 2025 CEO Insider

Jeff, a senior executive, was promoted to managing his division, and put in charge of its strategic realignment and reorganization. This task turned out to be demanding, complex, and intricate, requiring his constant attention across five continents. From the very first day, the board and CEO expected immediate results, because the divisional leadership team was already reacting dysfunctionally to the overdue reorganization. Despite clear data and detailed explanations, some team members actively resisted the necessary change.

## From eager to obsessive

The pressure on Jeff was immense. He started out looking forward to work every day, tackling his tasks thoughtfully and vigorously, eager to keep learning something new. At first, he enjoyed the challenge of his role. But as time went by and the scale of his task became clear, all that positive energy started to give way to something else.

Even in parts of the division that seemed to be running smoothly, Jeff found flaws and failings. Further, some departments were working against each other. He was forced to demand information and exert unpleasant pressure to make progress. He felt he had to be on top of everything, all at once. His initial joy in the role soon turned into an inescapable obsession, sapping his energy and frankly, making him unhappy.

But twelve months later, while in a leadership team meeting, Jeff could hardly believe his ears. The CEO of the company lauded his efforts, noting the amazing progress and results he'd made remodeling his division.

"We owe this to Jeff," she said. "His outstanding performance in such a short time proves his passion and leadership. We are lucky to have him on board." When the meeting was over, she invited him to lunch. "I'm about to settle my succession," she said. "Are you interested in becoming the CEO of this company?"

## Success is a journey

I know Jeff's story well. He had turned to me for coaching while knee-deep in his company's reorganization. While he had vivid recollections of his first elated weeks in his new role, more than anything, he felt pressure and unease. We met soon after that lunch and he told me he wasn't sure how to feel about the prospect of ascending to the C-Suite. "Do I want this? I'm far from happy," he said.

"Maybe that's right where you should be," I told him.

### 4 stages to world-class performance

To achieve world-class performance and have it be a rewarding, satisfying experience, executives, business leaders and entrepreneurs need to undergo a profound transformation. It's what I call an Executive Performance Transformation – which I developed after working with many world-class executives and leaders over the course of their careers. Like Jeff, everyone goes through its four stages at their own pace:

**Stage 1: Drawn in.** At the beginning of a new role, you feel driven and enthusiastic about your new tasks, and you are fully motivated to master them to the highest levels.

**Stage 2: Obsessed.** After a while, your enthusiasm turns into obsession. Duties, time pressure, massive intensity and workload drain you. To keep up with your increasing responsibilities, you work harder and longer. This stage can be tough going and is often joyless – think about what Jeff said about being unhappy. The critical turning point is taking important mental steps forward, often the hardest task to do on an executive's performance transformation.

**Stage 3: Ready for success.** You change your understanding of your staff, the company, your division or department, and how they are all intertwined. Reflecting on your day-to-day work, you see how the business ticks. You learn how to keep it moving. You can set decisive priorities, realizing what you can delegate, and what you have to do yourself. Once you have mastered this, you are ready for the first big wins. You create clarity in enterprise thinking. And you become very good at managing your nervous system. It's a crucial step forward in your transformation, when you can adjust your perceptions and behavioral patterns patiently and consistently.

**Stage 4: Playful.** You reach a point where you can perform with ease – even playfully. Knowledge, experience and personal leadership excellence have shaped your ability to prioritize and focus confidently. This is how you stay cool and sustain world-class business performance. Now, you experience joy again while performing excellently.

## On the threshold of excellence

Jeff was right on the threshold between obsessed and ready for success. He wasn't sure if his potential next promotion to the C-Suite was right for him as he wasn't experiencing any sense of happiness. He felt things could become worse if he exposed himself to even greater pressure as CEO.

But as I reminded him, it is absolutely normal to feel very little joy at this stage. Many successful executives have the same experience. It's not only joy or fun that shows we are in the right game. In fact, purpose and willingness to grow and improve are far more appropriate indicators. We are in the right game when we do not fear crunch time – because we're passionately pursuing our goals. Being passionate about your job does not necessarily mean you enjoy it all the time. It means digging in when the going gets tough and not giving up. It means working hard on yourself, developing new insights and behavioral strategies, making smart use of them and executing them. This is true executive excellence.

Most importantly, I told Jeff, the shift from obsessed to ready for success is a make-or break phase. Instead of stalling in obsession, he would have to proceed positively. If he did he would be able to experience both high performance and job satisfaction differently – and better – and feel that enjoyment and contentment he was looking for.

I had no doubt Jeff would become a CEO, whether it was in this company or another. In fact, he became and still is the successful CEO of another firm in the same industry. He did face all the transformation stages again. But given his experience with navigating them the first time, he was able to walk through them faster, more efficiently, and with much greater confidence. Best of all, he's happy. He experiences joy on a regular basis in his role.

You can too. Keep going. Invest in yourself to get to the playful stage, and continue to make great things happen!

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