20 Characteristics of Successful Senior Executives

Great leaders tend to have a few traits in common, including:

**1. They Are Competitive**

They approach every business situation as a competition.

**2. They Are Dedicated to Continuous Improvement**

They do not settle for "good enough" for their own performance or the performance of their teams. They hold themselves accountable to learning, growing and improving, and they appreciate this behavior in their team members.

**3. They Have Their Own Version of Work-Balance**

Harvard Business School Professor Boris Groysberg and his team have been studying executive work/life balance for years, and his findings resonate with my own observations. According to their latest research, *“Work/life balance is at best an elusive ideal, and at worst, a complete myth, today’s senior executives will tell you. But by making deliberate choices about which opportunities they’ll pursue, and which they’ll decline, rather than simply reacting to emergencies, leaders can and do engage meaningfully with work, family, and community. They’ve discovered through hard experience that prospering in the senior ranks is a matter of carefully combining work and home so as not to lose themselves, their loved ones, or their foothold on success."*

**4. They Know Exactly Where They Want to Go**

Top executives have a clear “vision” for themselves and their organizations They may not understand exactly how they will get there, but they are committed to finding the way through action and experimentation.

**5. They Love Making Decisions**

And they can do so with limited information. A senior executive’s typical day is often filled with an endless series of meetings in which they are asked to [make decisions](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/decisions-that-make-or-break-you-as-a-leader-2275843). The successful ones would rather make a decision with limited information and then change it if they are wrong, rather than let it drag on for months.

**6. They Expect Solutions and Hate Whining**

They will maintain open channels of communication and love hearing from all levels of employees. They have limited patience for complaints without solutions.

**7. They Have Presence**

They look the part and can command a room.

**8. They Are Risk Takers and Don’t Mind Making Mistakes**

Successful executives have no problem talking about their mistakes and the lessons learned from those mistakes. They take pride in the “scars” they have earned and view them as a part of growth.

**9. They Manage by the Numbers but Don’t Lead by the Numbers**

In other words, they have incredible business acumen and can drill [down into the details](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-are-business-metrics-2275174) of the monthly operating reports and financial statements. They realize that business success is about leading *people*, not managing the numbers.

**10. They Regret Not Taking Action on Poor Performers Sooner**

I hear this over and over and over. It’s almost a required experience and lesson for every successful executive. They all have stories about how they took over a business and their biggest was mistake moving too quickly to “get the right people on the bus.”

**11. They Learn How to Size up a Team Quickly**

While this may seem to contradict number ten, in all cases they said they *knew* early on who should stay and who should go, but they didn’t trust their instincts and tried to turn the person around.

**12. They Are Rapid Learners**

They ask a lot of [great questions](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/coaching-questions-for-managers-2275913), are extremely intelligent, and can sort out the important from the minutia. And they *don’t* like having smoke blown up their chimneys.

**13. They Multitask and Tend to Exhibit Short Attention Spans**

Unfortunately, this behavior is often perceived by others as not paying attention or caring. They often have to learn the behaviors of how to listen and show people that they are listening.

**14. They Get Bored With the Status Quo**

They thrive on new situations, turnarounds, and start-ups. When a business gets mature, they get antsy and start looking for the new challenge. In fact, in many cases, someone will come looking for them – they rarely have to look for new jobs.

**15. They Have Mentors and Know How to Leverage Them**

That’s why so many of them are willing to [mentor](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/developing-and-serving-as-a-mentor-in-today-s-workplace-2275287) others.

**16. They Learn From Experiences, Good and Bad**

They can look back at every challenging assignment and former boss (good ones), and draw a lesson learned.

**17. They Are Strategic**

They can connect the dots and see the forest from the trees. They spend time with customers, and they understand they work hard to translate insights into [strategies and actions](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/the-manager-s-guide-to-understanding-strategy-part-1-2276148).

**18. They Have High Expectations of Others**

Successful executives tend to be perceived as highly demanding, transferring their own personal high expectations to others. This can be challenging for their team members to deal with over time.

**19. They Manage up**

They know how to adapt to the styles and expectations of their bosses. It’s not that they are being compliant; they are doing it to keep their bosses off their backs so that they have the autonomy to run their businesses.

**20. They Learn How to Play Well With Their Peers**

“[Politics](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/why-you-cannot-afford-to-ignore-office-politics-2275877)” is not a dirty word; it’s a requirement in order to gain the support and cooperation of your peers. The successful ones do it in a way that builds coalitions, instead of back-stabbing.