



THE CEO PLAYBOOK

Navigating fears, conquering the
Doom Loop, unlocking success

Interview Insights from 72 CEOs

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Introduction

WHY THIS CEO RESEARCH STUDY?



CEOs navigating the dynamic business landscape, often face isolation and burnout amid high expectations from employees and shareholders. Our interviews with 72 global CEOs, ranging from \$2M to \$200M+ revenues, unveil these shared challenges. In a constantly evolving business environment with increasing competition, sustained growth requires careful navigation. As CEOs navigate shifting customer needs and rising competition, they face challenges that are far from unique. This study sheds light on their pains, fears, uncertainties, along with their goals and dreams for the future.

Central to our findings is the CEO Doom Loop, a complex phenomenon where multiple challenges converge, creating a cycle of fear and stagnation. It arises from the dynamic interplay between organizational complexity and the CEO's leadership capabilities. As companies evolve, CEOs must adapt, but without proper guidance, they risk becoming overwhelmed, hindering effective performance, and perpetuating the cycle. This inability to delegate and trust their team is often indicative of a lack of strong leadership, which can be a significant factor in the development of the Doom Loop. Furthermore, the absence of robust leadership teams can exacerbate the situation, reflecting the CEO's own shortcomings as a leader. Fortunately, with the right mindset and professional coaching, CEOs can escape this spiral.

**THIS CEO PLAYBOOK ILLUMINATES CHALLENGES,
PROVIDES SOLUTIONS, UNLOCKS SUCCESS,
AND HELPS AVOID THE CEO DOOM LOOP.**

CHALLENGES AND PAIN POINTS

In their pursuit of organizational growth and quality maintenance, CEOs often find themselves grappling with a significant challenge: an overreliance on themselves. This overreliance stems from a shortage of the right team members, leading CEOs to feel like they're stuck on a hamster wheel—constantly working but making no progress. The absence of effective leadership only compounds this issue, particularly during the first phase of the CEO Doom Loop, where CEOs may inadvertently dive back into day-to-day operations to solve problems. This natural tendency to take matters into their own hands can prevent other members of the leadership team from fulfilling their responsibilities.

Our research uncovered several key pain points exacerbating CEO hyper-dependency:

- 1 Talent acquisition, retention, and development
- 2 Alignment and collaboration issues
- 3 Lack of accountability
- 4 Inconsistent growth

Analysis of the survey data highlights talent-related concerns as a primary obstacle, with **approximately a third of the CEOs citing it as their biggest challenge.**

CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: TALENT RELATED CHALLENGES



We struggle to attract a sufficient number of applicants for posted positions, resulting in hiring decisions based on a limited pool of candidates.



Our interview process often fails to identify candidates who align with our culture and deliver consistent top performance.



Lack of clarity on progression and promotion pathways within our organization is leading to talent attrition.

CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

Our research reveals that organizations grappling with talent-related challenges often face alignment and collaboration issues, alongside accountability and execution inconsistencies. Achieving alignment throughout the organization is paramount for goal attainment, as functional silos and erratic execution often stem from a lack of meaningful collaboration and alignment efforts. Therefore, it's imperative for the leadership team to collaborate in crafting a shared vision, values, and purpose, which should be clearly documented in a strategic plan visible to the entire organization.

This strategic plan serves as a guiding beacon, fostering alignment and accountability across all levels of the organization.

CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: ALIGNMENT AND COLLABORATION



It doesn't seem like we are all on the same page.



My sales leadership appears more aligned with the sales organization than their peers on the leadership team.



I am not sure that our leadership is committed to our plan.

CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

In the first phase of the Doom Loop, if CEOs dive back in to do the work themselves, they unintentionally undermine their leadership teams and risk cultivating a culture of mistrust. By stepping in to fix problems, they stop performing the role of CEO and prevent someone else from their leadership team from performing their responsibilities. This can weaken the CEO's position and can cause other members of the leadership team and their employees to feel not trusted.

If the leadership team isn't aligned with the direction of the organization, they aren't going to be accountable to execute the plans created. Furthermore, companies struggling with accountability and execution have a high probability of struggling with consistent growth.



CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY



We just can't seem to get the things done that we need to.



I have leaders that won't own their function, and don't make hard "people" decisions, which results in us dealing with the same problems.



I don't know why we struggle so much with accountability.

CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

When examining the challenges CEOs encounter, the importance of finding and retaining top-tier talent becomes apparent. CEOs often find themselves investing significant time managing what we refer to as “C Players” – individuals who may not meet performance standards or align with the company’s culture. These “C players” demand considerable leadership bandwidth and frequently struggle to elevate their performance to the level of “A” or “B” players. This struggle is often exacerbated by their difficulty in aligning with the team’s goals and collaborating effectively, as they may prioritize their own interests over those of the organization.

In the context of the Doom Loop, should CEOs revert to handling tasks that should be delegated, they inadvertently undercut their leadership teams and risk fostering a culture of mistrust. In doing so, CEOs divert attention from their primary responsibilities, which include focusing on the organization’s vision and direction.

Moreover, if the leadership team lacks alignment and trust with the company's direction, they may not feel accountable for executing strategic plans effectively. Organizations grappling with issues related to accountability and execution will struggle to achieve consistent growth.

CEOs must acknowledge that effective people management begins with hiring the right individuals. Once the right people are in place, the foundation for success is built upon a clear vision, goals, and objectives set at the company, leadership, and individual contributor levels. Success also hinges on CEOs refraining from engaging in activities that should be delegated to their leadership team or subordinates, thereby ensuring proper management focus and accountability. Without diligent goal setting, direction, and follow-up, growth objectives and long-term vision will remain elusive.



INSIGHTS FROM BUSINESS AUTHOR AND RESEARCHER JIM COLLINS

"In fact, leaders of companies that go from good to great start not with 'where' but with 'who.' They start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats. And they stick with that discipline — first the people, then the direction — no matter how dire the circumstances".

— EXCERPT FROM COLLINS'
BOOK **GOOD TO GREAT**



Lack of consistent growth and people issues

A closer analysis of problem areas shows that issues are correlated to the CEO's lack of focus on "people issues.". For example, **60%** of CEO respondents who said they no longer wanted to deal with lack of alignment and collaboration also reported disinterest in dealing with lack of accountability and inconsistent execution. Likewise, half of the CEO interviewees who expressed apathy in attracting, retaining, and developing talent said they would not be

addressing the lack of alignment and collaboration.

This goes back to the quote from Jim Collins, CEOs need to stick with the discipline of first getting the right people in place, and then focusing on the direction no matter how dire the circumstances.

If CEOs get tired of working on this, and lose the fortitude to resolve these issues, then they're heading into or are stuck in the CEO Doom Loop.

Our research revealed the same frustration with inconsistent business growth and talent-related challenges from companies with revenues below \$10 million to companies generating over \$100 million in annual revenues.



**CEOS NEED TO STICK WITH THE DISCIPLINE
OF FIRST GETTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN
PLACE, AND THEN FOCUSING ON DIRECTION**

Lack of revenue growth, CEO overreliance, Doom Loop

Overall responses showed that many CEOs were concerned about over-dependence on their role. The problem mainly presents itself as lack of consistent revenue growth, which many CEOs expressed as “sales execution.” Lack of consistent sales execution stifles growth affecting the business’s ability to attract talent. CEO overreliance also shows up in the form of lack of alignment and teamwork resulting in inadequate collaboration and execution. The crux of these issues is that they are interdependent and can form a self-perpetuating cycle, which can create what we define as a “CEO Doom Loop.”

As professional CEO coaches with extensive experience working with hundreds of CEOs, we’ve noticed a common tendency among many CEOs. They often attribute blame to others, whether it’s their leadership teams, employees, or external factors like competitors or market conditions, for problems and stagnant growth. We firmly believe that CEOs play a pivotal role in addressing issues within their organizations. Ultimately, any problem within the organization is either directly influenced by them or tolerated by them.



CEO COACHING TAKEAWAY



As a CEO, it’s essential to recognize that no matter what business you are in, you are ultimately in the people business. Attracting and developing the right talent is crucial for achieving alignment, collaboration, accountability, and consistent execution, which are all essential for achieving growth objectives. By taking responsibility for these pain points and creating a culture of ownership and accountability, **CEOs can break the Doom Loop cycle** of over-dependence on their role, and achieve long-term success.

FEARS & WORRIES

What keeps CEOs up at night? Uncover the fears and concerns that haunt today's business leaders and learn how to break free from the "Doom Loop" to lead with confidence.

In addition to the anxieties CEOs face while running their companies, they shoulder a unique burden unknown to their leadership teams and employees. When asked, 'What keeps you up at night?' their responses were telling. The majority expressed fear of failing to achieve critical business initiatives and goals, or worse, the collapse of their business. In essence, failure loomed largest among their fears.

Common stressors keeping CEOs awake at night

- 1 Fear of failure
- 2 Fear of not achieving revenue growth goals
- 3 Lack of confidence as a CEO (*Do I have what it takes to get to the next level?*)
- 4 Leadership team performance

Many CEOs expressed their primary concern as the fear of failure, closely followed by the apprehension of not meeting revenue or growth targets.



CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: FEAR OF FAILURE



The size of the numbers and the volume of activity cause sleepless nights. I feel a great responsibility to achieve our goals and when we don't, I am disappointed in myself.



My greatest fear is not achieving our goals and our vision. Would feel like we failed.



If the company fails, I ruin my father's legacy and may lose my ability to retire comfortably.

CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

Lack of confidence and fear of failure

Several CEOs independently used the similar phrasing to describe their potential failure, saying “I’m afraid everything will go under, and I’ll be a failure.” One CEO described it as “the whole house of cards I’ve built will fail.”

Interestingly, upon examining the overlap between the primary and secondary concerns of CEOs, a whopping **62.5%** of those who shared a fear of failure also reported a lack of confidence in their abilities as CEO. A quarter of them also expressed concern about insufficient leadership capacity, while others were apprehensive about not meeting their revenue growth objectives.



CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: FEARS AND CONCERNS



I am fearful about making the hard decisions, so I tend to put them off and not make them. Therefore, we stay where we are at. I would like to move us forward, yet these fears are always with me.



I have concerns that I may not have the skillset to get the business to the next level — I am just a salesman.



The responsibility ultimately falls on me – accountability and responsibility – it's overwhelming given the magnitude of the business.



The successful transition of me into the CEO seat. I've never been a CEO before. I need to change how I operate personally. This is a lot of change for me.

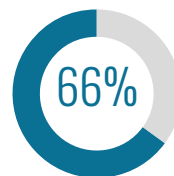
CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

Leadership Capacity

Peeling back the “leadership capacity” onion reveals that **50%** of CEOs that express concern about their stewardship believe they do not have a suitable team. Additionally, **66%** of CEOs who report a lack of confidence in their abilities also feel they don't have the right team. A notable correlation exists between having the right team in place, personal confidence, and leadership capacity.



50% of CEOs that express concern about their stewardship believe they do not have a suitable team.



66% of CEOs who report a lack of confidence in their abilities feel they don't have the right team.

CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: PEOPLE ISSUES



Culture issues, especially at the top level. We have a lot of people that get their feelings hurt frequently.



People issues!



I think about hiring more of the right people constantly.



It's all on me and without the proper team we can't get there.

CEO COACHING INSIGHTS

Fears manifesting into a Doom Loop

The CEO must overcome multiple fears at the same time which can turn into the “Doom Loop” for even the most successful executives. When the business experiences a lack of growth or sales effectiveness it can kick off a vicious cycle. CEOs start by questioning if they have the leadership capacity, which begs the question: Do I have the right team? This can ultimately lead to a lack of confidence resulting in fear of failure. This fear gridlocks the CEO leading to falling revenue and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While leaders' fears may seem independent, a closer look at them reveals interdependence. A CEO's doubt over their leadership capabilities is caused by lack of confidence in themselves. This fear can also be attributed to the lack of the right team to run the business and the feeling of not having the right skills to run the business. All these fears culminate in the feeling that the company may ultimately fail, and the failure of the company will be their personal failure.

Ultimately, managing a business is akin to a sport, where the CEO coaches the team. However, when faced with multiple fears and doubts, even successful executives may find themselves stuck in a “Doom Loop.” In such situations, seeking external guidance from an experienced advisor or coach can provide invaluable perspective and strategies to navigate through challenges before they escalate. By tapping into external expertise, CEOs can gain insights they may not otherwise see internally and proactively address issues to prevent them from snowballing into larger problems.

Patrick Lencioni summarized solutions perfectly in his book, ***“The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive: A Leadership Fable”***.

Lencioni named those four obsessions as:

- 1 Building and Maintaining A Cohesive Leadership Team
- 2 Creating Organizational Clarity
- 3 Over-Communicating Organizational Clarity
- 4 Reinforcing Organizational Clarity Through Human Systems



ULTIMATELY, MANAGING A BUSINESS IS AKIN TO
A SPORT, WHERE THE CEO COACHES THE TEAM.



Lead, Don't Do

Out of the many CEOs we interviewed, only one admitted “I’m the #1 issue in my company. I get too involved in minor details and don’t delegate enough.” This awareness speaks to the reality of the situation: every issue in a company ultimately points back to the CEO. They either cause them or tolerate them. Keep this in mind the next time a fire needs extinguishing, and you feel the need to put it out.

We believe that, even though other CEOs don’t admit it, they are guilty of the same problem. Time and time again we’ve seen this denial while coaching many CEOs over the decades. CEOs must take responsibility for building a cohesive leadership team and creating organizational clarity to address these challenges effectively.

Patrick Lencioni’s principles underscore the importance of leadership in navigating these challenges. By following his guidance, CEOs can create a strong foundation for their organizations, ensuring alignment, clarity, and effectiveness at all levels.



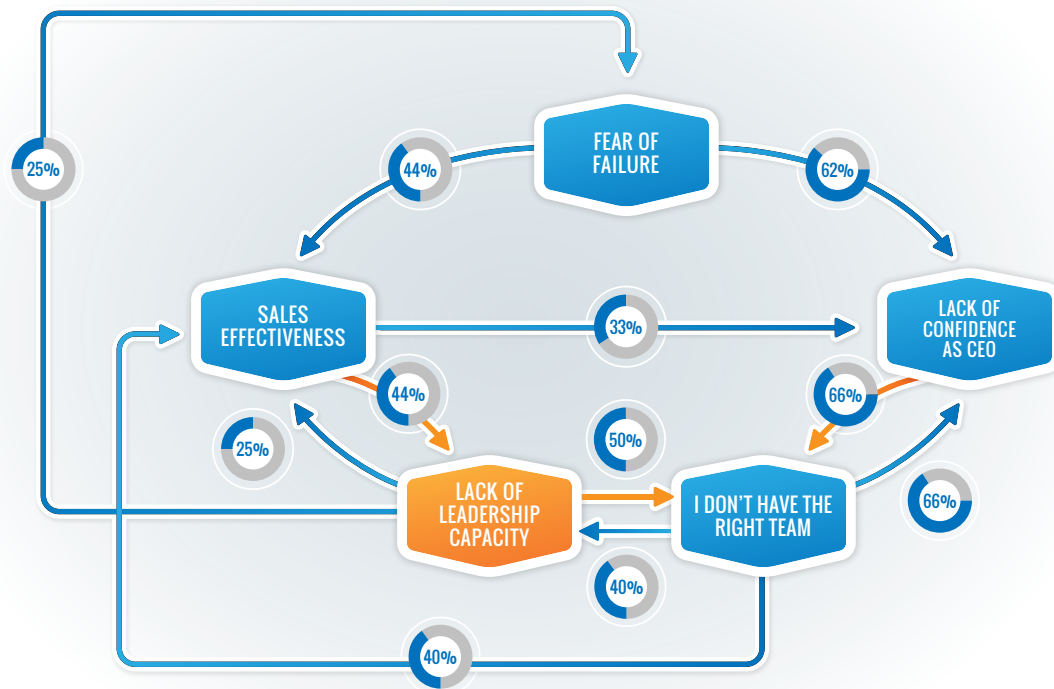
CEO COACHING TAKEAWAY

Today’s CEOs face a myriad of fears and concerns, including failure, revenue growth, and leadership capacity. The key to overcoming these challenges lies in growing as a leader, not as a “doer,” building strong teams, driving organizational vision and culture, and empowering their leadership. **Embrace these principles** to become an extraordinary executive and escape the “Doom Loop.”

THE DOOM LOOP

If you've been skimming this paper to this point, stop. "The Doom Loop" is the most important finding we pulled from our hours of interviews and analysis and it's worth contemplating for the sake of your position and your company.

PERPETUAL FEAR / WORRY ISSUE POINT MAPPING



The “Doom Loop” is a holistic problem that arises when individual issues faced by CEOs converge, creating a seemingly inescapable cycle of fear and failure. At its core, the Doom Loop results from the growth in organizational complexity outpacing the development of the CEO’s leadership skills. As the company evolves, so too must the CEO’s abilities; however, without the necessary guidance and growth, they can become overwhelmed and trapped in this destructive cycle.



When CEOs fail to realign their vision and goals with the changing landscape, they may become bogged down in the minutiae of their organization, inadvertently preventing team members from performing their duties effectively. This inability to delegate and trust their team is often indicative of a lack of strong leadership, which can be a significant factor in the development of the Doom Loop.

Furthermore, the absence of robust leadership teams can exacerbate the situation, as it reflects the CEO’s own shortcomings as a leader. This cyclical nature of the Doom Loop, fueled by the CEO’s lack of leadership growth and the inadequacy of the organization’s leadership team, ultimately leads to stagnation and failure.



CEOs MAY BECOME BOGGED DOWN IN MINUTIAE, INADVERTENTLY PREVENTING TEAM MEMBERS FROM PERFORMING THEIR DUTIES EFFECTIVELY.



However, it's important to recognize that nearly everyone can become a strong leader with the right coaching, guidance, and desire. Most CEOs are smart, capable individuals who have reached their positions through hard work and determination. Yet, to transition from a good to a great CEO, individuals can greatly benefit from expert coaching and resources to help them develop the necessary skills to successfully navigate the challenges and complexities of CEO leadership.

CEO COACHING TAKEAWAY

By investing in personal growth and leadership development, **CEOs can break free from the constraints of the Doom Loop** and propel their organizations towards success. This transformation requires a combination of self-awareness, strategic thinking, and the willingness to adapt to the ever-changing demands of their roles.

At the end of the CEO playbook, you will find a section titled 'The CEO Doom Loop Cure.' We believe you'll find this outline very helpful. If you need more assistance with the details of implementing this, please don't hesitate to reach out.

GOALS & DESIRES

Unveiling the CEO's ambition to pioneer transformative change as market leaders.

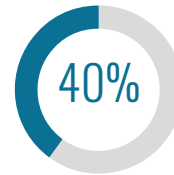
Despite the multitude of challenges and fears that CEOs encounter, their aspirations remain steadfast, intertwining both personal and business goals into their leadership endeavors. CEOs leverage their companies as vehicles to achieve not only professional success but also personal fulfillment, shaping the essence of their organizations in the process.

The top goals CEOs want to attain include:

- 1 Ensuring predictable and sustainable business growth
- 2 Implementing strategy to achieve the vision
- 3 Fostering the right team and culture
- 4 Making more time for self and family
- 5 Building a strong leadership pipeline

The top goals CEOs aspire to achieve encompass a spectrum of ambitions, ranging from ensuring predictable and sustainable business growth to fostering a supportive team culture. These goals reflect the CEO's holistic approach to leadership, where personal and professional aspirations merge seamlessly.

For instance, a CEO's desire for more time for self and family directly influences their strategic decisions, emphasizing the importance of work-life balance in driving organizational success.



Over 40% of CEOs cited their most significant goal as creating predictable and sustainable growth for their companies.

Over **40%** of CEOs cited their most significant goal as creating predictable and sustainable growth for their companies. This statistic underscores the paramount importance CEOs place on fostering long-term viability and success within their organizations.

CEO INTERVIEW FEEDBACK: GOALS AND DESIRES



Improving company performance and financial strength while becoming more predictable in our growth.



Building a three-year plan. I don't want to be burnt out.



Grow the company to be recognized as a leader in the market.



\$100M in revenue @ 15% EBITDA

Desires for Results and Impact

What was impressive was seeing that these CEOs overwhelmingly desired all the right outcomes for their organizations - building the right team, creating organizational clarity, implementing an effective strategy to achieve the vision, and achieving predictable and sustainable business growth. Modern CEOs are not just motivated by short-term achievements; they also want to have a lifelong impact on the communities they serve. Below is a sample of main ambitions pursued by executives.

- 1 Financial freedom in retirement
- 2 More time with family
- 3 Create or continue strong legacy
- 4 Succession planning for business longevity

We noticed a connection between specific goals. For example, leaders aiming to contribute to their community also expressed a desire to leave behind a legacy. Similarly, a significant number of those focused on generating employment and financial prosperity for their employees also expressed intentions to develop effective succession plans, ensuring the continued success of their enterprises.

CEO COACHING TAKEAWAY

Today's CEOs **aspire to leave a legacy beyond mere profit**. By prioritizing sustainable growth, cultivating strong teams, and executing effective strategies, they not only fulfill personal goals such as financial independence and legacy building but also shape the communities they serve through impactful leadership.

CONCLUSION

Being a CEO carries significant responsibility. Ensuring business success, addressing company problems and expectations, while safeguarding continuity can often feel isolating and overwhelming. However, rather than succumbing to these challenges, business leaders must recognize their limitations and seek wise counsel and support when facing difficult obstacles.

In our analysis, we've found that CEOs grapple with fears like failure and lack of confidence while simultaneously striving for ambitious goals such as sustainable growth and strategic vision implementation. Pursuing excellence becomes challenging when plagued by lingering self-doubt. The challenges of fear and self-doubt can compound, resulting in what is commonly referred to as the 'Doom Loop,' where fear and self-doubt reinforce each other. To overcome these challenges and achieve their goals, CEOs must commit to building a long-term vision and a strong culture, serving as ambassadors for their vision. Additionally, they must recognize the value of seeking expert support and guidance, as these resources are essential for navigating the complexities of effective CEO leadership.



CEOS MUST COMMIT TO BUILDING A LONG-TERM VISION AND A STRONG CULTURE, SERVING AS AMBASSADORS FOR THEIR VISION.

OUR ASPIRATION IS FOR CEOS TO UTILIZE THE INSIGHTS FROM THIS REPORT to shape their personal strategies and recognize the interconnectedness of their fears, concerns, and goals. By addressing these aspects holistically and seeking advice proactively, CEOs can navigate the complex landscape of business leadership and thrive in their roles. With the right mindset and mentoring, escaping The CEO Doom Loop is attainable.

As executive leadership coaches, we provide techniques and tools to guide CEOs away from the Doom Loop and its spiral. **We firmly believe in the continuous development of CEOs for business success, fostering confidence, clear vision, and collaboration within leadership teams. Remember, as CEOs grow, so do their companies.**

" HAVING A GREAT COACH HAS BEEN A GAME-CHANGER FOR ME. IT HAS HELPED ME GROW AS A LEADER AND ACHIEVE NEW LEVELS OF SUCCESS."

— SATYA NADELLA, CEO OF MICROSOFT



THE CEO DOOM-LOOP CURE

1

Create a clear and compelling vision for the future

2

Develop a company culture that attracts and retains top talent — “A” Players

3

Map out a strategy that elevates and separates you from the competition

4

Build an execution system that speeds communication and holds everyone accountable

THE CEO DOOM-LOOP CURE

1

CREATE A CLEAR AND COMPELLING VISION FOR THE FUTURE:

Set a bold and inspiring vision that guides your organization's direction. Clearly articulate where you aim to be in the future, aligning it with your values and purpose. Engage your team in deeply understanding this vision, ensuring everyone is on board and working towards a common goal.

2

DEVELOPING A CULTURE THAT ATTRACTS AND RETAINS TOP TALENT "A" PLAYERS:

Cultivate a company culture that fosters innovation, collaboration, and growth. Create an environment where top talent is drawn to, valuing transparency, open communication, and opportunities for personal and professional development. Each industry is different in how they attain this attraction. Research competition, parallel market segments, and thought leaders on how to implement a tailored strategy for your business.

3

MAP OUT A STRATEGY THAT ELEVATES AND SEPARATES YOU FROM THE COMPETITION:

Craft a strategic roadmap that sets your organization apart from competitors. Analyze market trends and customer needs to identify unique value propositions. Develop a clear plan that leverages strengths, addresses weaknesses, and captures emerging opportunities. Continuously refine and adapt your strategy to maintain a competitive edge.

4

DEVELOP AN EXECUTION SYSTEM FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Establish execution systems that reward efficient communication and drive accountability. Implement streamlined processes that enable swift decision making and collaboration. Set clear goals and metrics, assigning responsibilities, ensuring individuals are accountable for their actions. Regularly monitor this progress, provide feedback, and celebrate achievements to maintain a culture of accountability and high performance.



ABOUT ELITE SUCCESS ADVISORS



UNLOCK YOUR CEO POTENTIAL WITH EXPERT COACHING

- ✓ Access our team of highly experienced CEO coaches.
- ✓ Each of us has been a CEO and understands the unique Challenges you face.
- ✓ Leverage over 50 years of CEO experience and 22+ years of CEO coaching expertise.
- ✓ Craft and implement winning strategies with expert Coaching support.
- ✓ Achieve your full potential as a CEO.
- ✓ Join our mission where business catalyzes positive change.

MEET THE ADVISORS



JIM VICKERS

CEO of Elite Success Advisors

- 15+ years as a CEO and 20+ years in public, private, private equity, non-profit, Executive Leadership
- Has attained \$2 billion+ in sales revenue
- Dedicated to helping CEOs unlock their potential and achieve remarkable success
- Youth ministry advocate, lifelong athlete, and loves spending time with his wife, the better athlete



GLEN DALL

Elite Success Advisor and
CEO of Apex North Coaching

- A successful CEO who led the turnaround and growth of a publicly traded company
- Excels at helping fortify leadership teams
- Guides CEOs and leadership teams to alignment, inspiration, and growth in their business
- Lifelong advocate for youth, has completed 25 national 150-mile cycling events for charity



WILL DITZLER

Elite Success Advisor and
CEO of RiverBirch Advisors

- 24+ years as a CEO with 10+ years as a Business Coach
- Passionate about helping CEOs and leaders improve profits, people, and planet
- Strategizes the most effective methods and tools to optimize value delivered to COA clients
- Dedicates time to wildlife habitat management, outdoor activities, and planting 100,000 trees