



How to Transition From Consulting to C-Suite



By Antoine Tirard , (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour , (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Former management consultants can make great CEOs. But the transition isn't an easy one.

When companies need new CEOs, they don't typically start looking for one in the ranks of management consulting. Former management consultants represent only 5 percent or so of CEO transitions over the past ten years across the world, but according to a [recent study by Spencer Stuart](#) it would seem that consultants are more than worthy of consideration for the top job. Once at the helm of an organisation, they tend to improve the condition between twenty to thirty percentage points better than their non-consultant counterparts, whether the company was in crisis previously or not.

This doesn't mean all consultants are cut out for the C-Suite, but it certainly warrants examination into what consultants can bring to the party. So we asked a few who made the transition how they made the jump and how they succeeded on the other side.

Thomas Bittner was a junior consultant at McKinsey, aged 30, having already operated as sales director, finance director and even member of the executive committee, in a French steel company for Northern Europe. This was a time when McKinsey was moving towards more work in implementation of strategy, and so Thomas was of great interest to them, having a strategic brain and a top MBA, as well as deep experience of a significant industry. As clients got to know of his existence, they started demanding to work with him, as he was the one who had real experience, as opposed to most of the other career consultants. He found it intellectually stimulating but he realised that it is easy to tell such leaders what to do, but far harder to make it happen. He was missing the implementation!

Come and implement this strategy

So, influenced by the frequent calls of headhunters, Thomas decided to take up the challenge offered to him by one of his clients, Polychrome Corporation, whose CEO offered him the position of VP for Europe of the company. Thomas had realised that he wanted to become a CEO, and after effecting a total turnaround of the European operation over five years, his ambition became a reality, and he was appointed.

While he recognises that consulting taught him a sense of urgency, using analytical tools to deliver value quickly, he had to learn the soft side of strategy implementation in his CEO role, such as how to enforce change on those who (typically) do not want it and this was something he could only develop by doing.

He stresses the importance of learning change management, and dealing with people, building coalitions, empowering individuals, leading by example, and communicating effectively.

CEO's and Chairmen on Speed Dial

Christina Gutenberg, a 22-year veteran of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) underwent a huge shift in career when she joined one of the largest family-owned companies in Europe. As a partner, with many high-powered

clients, and some fascinating internal roles, Christina never expected to leave consulting, though she had occasionally considered the option. She enjoyed the intellectual stimulation, rarefied atmosphere and the interaction with significant leaders across industries and cultures.

After a chance encounter with the chairman of this company, she was offered a C-level position and took the lead of the automobile unit of the company, about which she knew little. Christina read more than thirty books on the industry, and quizzed all her former colleagues who had made similar moves. She took the time to get coaching on both the industry and leadership angles of her new role.

Once inside, however, she had to get used to not having CEOs and chairmen on speed dial, as partners at consulting firms become accustomed to. Being an outsider, she also had a very different background to her colleagues and speed and dynamism were no longer the norm. However, she did use the BCG alumni network to her advantage. The other challenge Christina faced was entering a company that was actually doing rather well, and did not need “fixing”. Figuring out what she actually can change is an ongoing challenge, and one she struggles with occasionally. She has learned to have a short-term and long-term view of what and how to change, with very different rationales behind each one.

Significant and Painful Failures

But as we mentioned earlier, not every consultant who made the jump landed in the corner office. A senior partner we know from a prominent strategy consultancy joined a large pharmaceutical company, as head of strategic planning, reporting directly to the CEO. Within a short time after joining, he launched a series of initiatives, creating confusion and chaos in an organisation that was already riddled with complexity. He demonstrated very few skills in communication or empathy, and thus alienated the majority of his team and peers, and did not endear himself to the CEO either. To top it all, ironically, he ended up dramatically increasing the spending on external consulting, which was, of course, the opposite of the intended effect. By this time, the CEO had lost patience and asked him to leave. He has since returned to the world of consulting.

Across the many interviews we’ve conducted with consultants jumping into the C-Suite, we have identified some key success factors for those making the move.

1. Take time to research your new industry/role and get some coaching. Don't assume you can play on old skills or relationships.
2. Use your consulting methodologies to bring added value, but don't assume you know it all or can fit in because of that.
3. Bring your analytical brain to fix things, but build soft skills too.
4. Expect to change things but don't assume that your organisation will be as fast or open to change.
5. Remember it's not all obvious to your new colleagues. Don't assume they're lazy.

For organisations looking for CEOs, a management consultant might be a good option. However, don't assume that just because they are smart, they don't need backup from you. You'll need to make a big deal about their differences, but help them to fit in and feel valued. Be sure to support them by exploring and implementing changes they recommend, helping them manage parts of the business they are not used to, and coaching them to hone their soft skills. One thing is for sure, you'll have to engage on another level, but so will consultants becoming CEOs.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Lyell** is the founder of Culture Pearl and an expert in written communication across borders and languages.

For more on our in-depth interviews with consultant CEOs, read the extended version of this post on [NexTalent](#).

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/how-transition-consulting-c-suite>

About the author(s)

Antoine Tirard is an international Talent Management Consultant, Trainer and Coach to large global organisations.

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!

Download the free Knowledge App

