

The New CEO Progression Blueprint: Expanding CEO Succession Optionality During Uncertain Times



Why traditional CEO succession planning is falling short

CEO succession and selection is arguably [the most consequential decision](#) a board will make. More than any other leadership decision, it determines who will shape the enterprise's strategy, culture, credibility with investors, and enduring performance. Yet in many organizations, CEO succession is narrow, rushed, and ultimately holds little connection to the future of the business. Too often, succession is treated as a discrete event rather than the sustained leadership imperative it has become, with [only 8% of boards](#) planning more than five years in advance of CEO succession.

Simultaneously, the context around the CEO role has changed dramatically. Markets are more volatile. [Transformation is the new normal](#). Stakeholder expectations are broader, louder, and less forgiving. At the same time, the CEO role itself has expanded in scope and complexity. The demands of enterprise leadership now extend well beyond operating performance. CEOs are expected to lead through disruption, manage competing stakeholder pressures, set direction amid ambiguity, and sustain trust under intense scrutiny. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as demands on the role grow, average CEO [tenure has dropped to 7.1 years](#), acutely short tenures of [just 30 to 36 months](#) are increasingly common (up 79% year over year), and for those not yet in seat, [interest in the CEO role is declining](#).

In this environment, traditional succession planning can no longer deliver what CHROs, CEOs, and boards truly need. In fact, only about [half \(52%\) of board directors](#) are confident in their ability to design a successful C-level succession strategy. C-level leaders themselves are even less convinced, with [only 38% of CEOs](#) and [fewer than one in three \(28%\) of other C-suite executives](#) reporting confidence in the board's ability to strategize leadership succession.

Moving from succession to progression

The challenge boards face today is not simply choosing the next CEO. It's building and maintaining a broad, future-ready leadership pipeline over time, fit for different scenarios and a changing landscape. That requires a different mindset and a new model—one that moves from succession to progression.

Russell Reynolds' CEO Progression Blueprint is built on that premise. It reflects a clear point of view: best-in-class CEO progression is built upon a long-term, continuous, and strategic progression system designed to build optionality, deepen and strengthen leadership pipelines, and prepare boards for multiple possible futures. Importantly, it values and creates a culture where every leader is expected to develop on an ongoing basis.

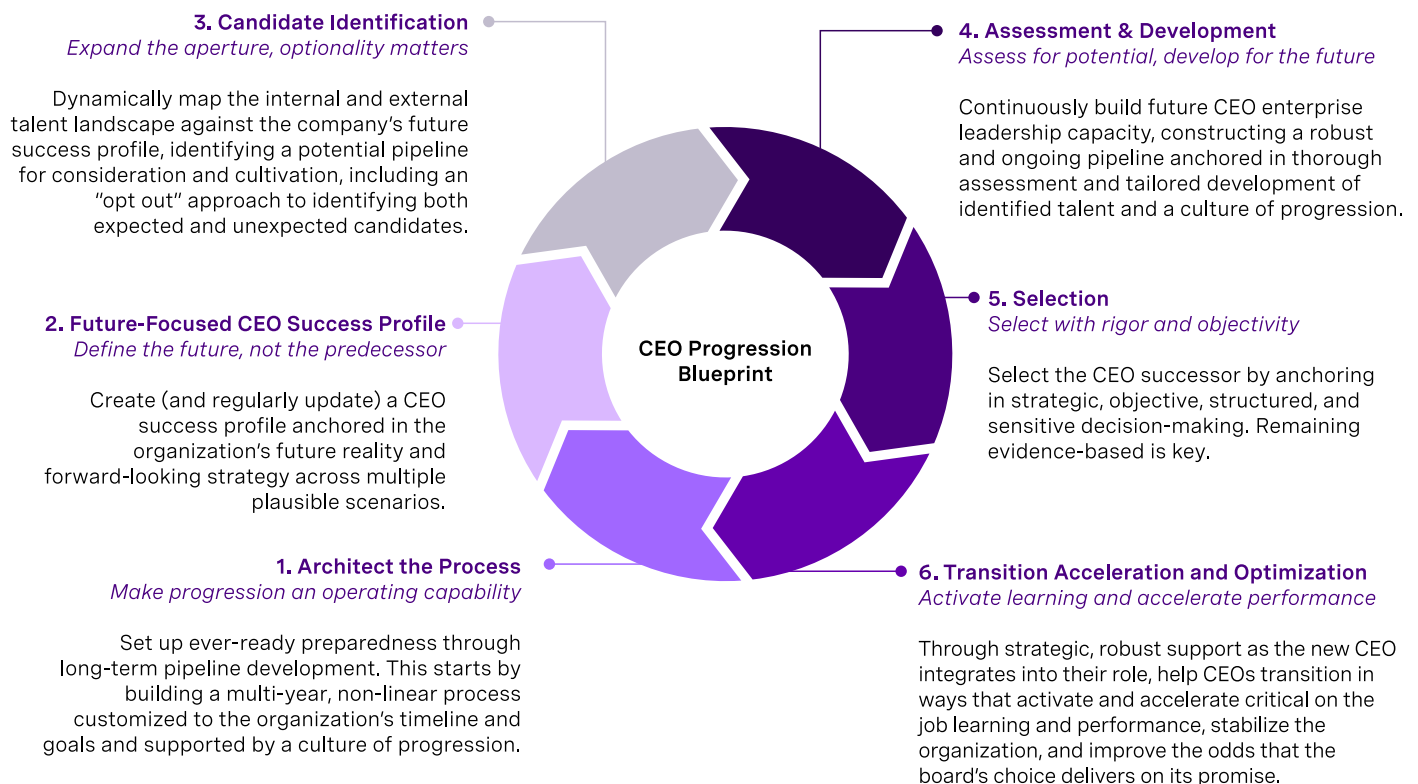
This distinction matters, as too many succession processes begin too late, narrow the field too quickly, and over-rely on familiar CEO profiles and readiness markers. Boards often focus on a small number of visible candidates, compress development and evaluation, and define the mandate via the outgoing CEO (rather than through the lens of future business needs). While creating the appearance of rigor, these approaches actually limit choice, thus introducing, rather than reducing, risk.

By contrast, progression treats succession as an end-to-end, ongoing enterprise capability that resets almost immediately following the start of new CEO's tenure and is designed to give the board "decision leverage" when the time comes to choose the next CEO. It's both a system and a culture of leadership development, growth, and optimization, wired as much into the central operating procedures as the organization's ethos.

Building a future-ready CEO pipeline

At the center of the Blueprint is a simple but powerful idea: the strongest boards and most strategic CHROs and CEOs do not wait for succession to become urgent. Instead, they continuously cultivate the conditions that make better CEO selection decisions possible, take this duty seriously, and are not overly deferential (neither to the CEO nor the dominant voices on the board).

Critical to this, the Progression Blueprint is designed to generate optionality. In an uncertain environment, this may be the single most important outcome a progression system can deliver.



Architect the process: Make succession an operating capability

Long-term CEO progression work starts with architecting the process early. Ideally, this means beginning soon after a new CEO is appointed (optimally, within the first year), not when a transition is already on the horizon. Starting early gives boards, the CEO, and CHRO time to discuss and align around the future CEO leadership mandate, regularly re-visit and update it, assess internal candidates with more rigor, and support development in a more deliberate way.

It also allows them to maintain an informed view of external talent and shifting market expectations, while leveraging the process to ensure the board's expectations of future leaders align with the evolving strategies in a disciplined way. Not incidentally, thoughtfully architecting the process also helps build the shared board ownership, judgment, and engagement required for a journey that unfolds over time, rarely follows a straight line, and calls for peak board effectiveness.

The aim: ensuring that the organization is not forced into a high-stakes decision with a limited set of choices, under only one business context scenario. In many organizations, traditional succession becomes emotionally charged and politically fraught. As a result, the conversation narrows, candor drops, and critical development opportunities can be missed. Tighter timelines and rising pressures can also result in CEOs and board members with less prior CEO succession experience taking a back seat to those with greater past exposure and louder voices.

A culture of progression lowers the proverbial temperature by shifting the focus from a one-time replacement decision to an ongoing effort to expand leadership optionality, making it easier to have honest conversations about readiness, broaden participation, and strengthen the bench over time.

By avoiding a "horse race" style succession process, development-centric progression processes enable transparency and shared ownership with internal talent on their future motivations and development, reducing anxiety, increasing buy-in and retention. This also helps boards build the habits that stronger progression governance requires: shared ownership, greater familiarity with internal talent, and more constructive ways of handling disagreement as circumstances change.

Despite these clear benefits, the distance between best practice and common practice remains vast. Our [2025 Global Board Culture and Director Behaviors study](#) found that only 8% of board directors engage in proactive long-term planning (over five years out). Less than one in three directors (29%) develop plans in the three-to-five-year range, and half report plans that only look one to three-years out. Perhaps unsurprisingly, under these conditions only 44% of board directors believe their succession processes will yield a successful candidate.

Internal succession vs. external search? It shouldn't be an either/or question.

As leadership pipelines tighten and talent mobility increases, reality necessitates that boards develop a deeper understanding of their organization's talent pool. The magic lies in approaching long-term leadership planning with a delicate, strategic methodology that, where appropriate, encompasses both internal and external talent landscapes, emphasizing optionality and alignment to the future CEO success profile.



“Succession should be a continuous system, not an episodic or one-time event. Starting early is not a signal of instability; it’s a sign of strong governance and strategic discipline that empowers better decisions when the time comes to make a CEO change.”

Margot McShane

Future-focused CEO success profile: Define the future, not the predecessor

A backbone of the Progression Blueprint is a future-focused CEO success profile. This is where many succession processes go off course, unwittingly. Boards often default, consciously or not, to a familiar leadership archetype, anchoring the exercise in the past, not the future. Frequently, they seek out candidates who are similar to the current CEO (if successful), who have the broadest operating résumé, or who feel most proven against historical expectations. These familiar criteria present the illusion of safe choices and risk mitigation, but they often unintentionally have the opposite effect.

As the demands of leadership change, the CEO profile must change too. The mandate and requisite skills need to be forward-looking to mitigate against impending risks and enable continued success. The question boards should ask is: **who will be best suited to lead the organization in its next chapter and beyond?**

By emphasizing the competencies most correlated to [leading through change](#)—including true self-knowledge, curiosity and adaptability, systems thinking, a clear leadership purpose, resilience, and drive towards impact—boards optimize the chances of delivering the strategy and adapting to a world that requires [perpetual transformation](#). These competencies should be assessed in parallel with the leadership experiences most critical to being successful in role, given the organization’s evolving strategies. They and the CEO mandate aren’t static. They require rigor and refreshment, on a regular cadence, to ensure board alignment that the future CEO success profile reflects what is needed most in the future.

Candidate identification: Expand the aperture, optionality matters

One of the clearest weaknesses in traditional succession planning is that it tends to privilege the obvious contenders. High-visibility executives enter the conversation early and remain centered within it, while less conventional but potentially high-upside leaders are often overlooked or do not initially see themselves in the role. (For example, [we found that](#) 41% of sitting women CEOs say that becoming a CEO was not originally a career goal of theirs, and 36% say they didn’t consider becoming a CEO until someone else suggested it.) This can narrow CEO slates over time, reinforcing assumptions about what future CEOs should look like.

That dynamic is not a formula for board confidence or succession success. In fact, our [2025 Global Board Culture and Director Behaviors survey](#) shows that, troublingly, half of directors [don’t have confidence in an internal CEO candidate](#). This is particularly concerning in emergency situations, when boards don’t have the luxury of recruiting an external successor.

The Progression model looks across a wider range of internal leaders, earlier, and complements that view with a clear understanding of external talent. Shifting from an “opt-in” to an “opt-out” pipeline development approach is a proven strategy for broadening that aperture. When organizations proactively assume all high-potential leaders will be considered for the CEO role—rather than relying only on executives who naturally surface or self-advocate—boards begin with a broader universe. This in turn helps uncover leaders who may not fit the traditional mold, and who may very well be aligned to what the business needs next. Just as importantly, in an opt-out model, boards develop a more direct understanding of the internal field over time, rather than relying too heavily on the incumbent CEO or a small subset of directors to interpret ambition, readiness, and potential.

Succession pipelines don’t narrow by accident; they narrow [because of how they are designed](#). When organizations rely on familiar signals of readiness, they ignore the stark reality of inherited assumptions and uneven access to developmental opportunities, reducing the strength of the CEO pipeline before a succession decision even begins. When leveraging an “opt-out” approach, organizations can sidestep this structural gap, helping unexpected executives align their [motivations for leadership, values, and purpose](#) with their perception of the CEO role and a professional path forward that they had not necessarily imagined.

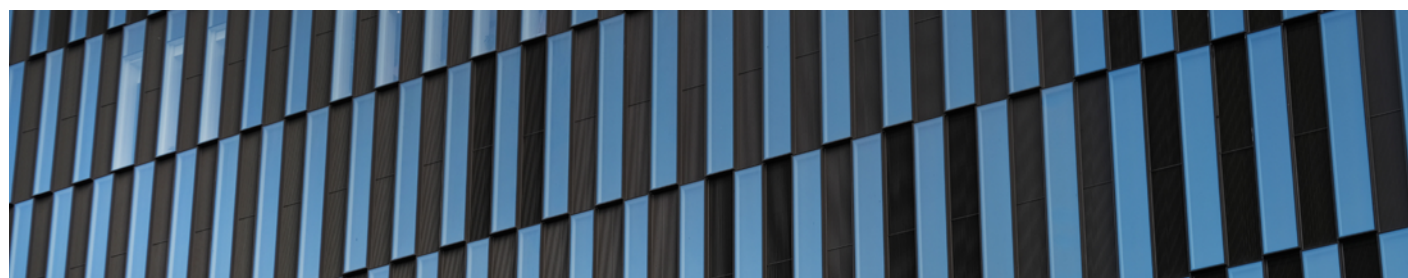
In addition to an internal opt-out approach, the external candidate-identification element of a dual-track model remains key to broadening the aperture. The longer time horizon of a progression-based system allows organizations and their partners to develop a more robust understanding of current talent’s strategy-mandate fit, as well as any potential gaps. This deeper understanding enables a highly targeted, bespoke approach to external candidate curation. Executed strategically and with sensitivity, this focused and selective approach enables an external search process that delivers the greatest impact and value.

Starting this work early allows boards to continuously benchmark internal and external talent side by side, which lowers the social tension that often arises when external candidates are considered only in the shadow of a possible CEO transition. Just as importantly, it keeps boards from defaulting to a narrow set of candidates from the current sector, opening the field to a wider range of leaders who may be better matched to the company’s future needs. When done with precision and discretion, a highly selective, dynamic, and confidential external analysis—ran in parallel with internal progression efforts—can fill gaps, uncover unexpected candidates, and expand the range of scenario-ready options.



“True CEO potential is defined not only by what a leader has done, but by the leadership competencies that actually make the difference in a perpetual change-led world. Broadening the CEO aperture reframes executive progression pipelines; identifying a greater range and depth of leadership choice and delivering what the business truly needs next.”

Hetty Pye



Assessment and development: Assess for potential, develop for the future

Once candidates are identified, boards need a more evidence-based approach to assessing readiness and accelerating development. In many organizations, readiness is still inferred from reputation, confidence, board exposure, or prior title. But progression requires a more disciplined standard. Candidates should be evaluated against a defined future profile, using structured assessment and a clearer view of their trajectory, differentiation, and growth potential.

Inherent in this approach is a more expansive view of leadership potential. This is where the thinking behind RRA's [Leadership Portrait™](#) is particularly relevant. Our proprietary assessment and development model encompasses an executive's readiness to meet **immediate challenges**, their relevant experience and leadership competencies, as well as their **future potential**, measuring both their ability to grow and likelihood of realizing their full potential.

Future CEO readiness cannot be judged only by current performance or prior role scope. Instead, potential realization is an ongoing journey that even the most senior executives must contend with as the context and challenges around them evolve. As such, boards need to distinguish between executives who have succeeded in favorable conditions and leaders who can create value through ambiguity, disruption, and change.

This is another important differentiator in the Progression Blueprint—treating development as a central element of succession, rather than a secondary one. The goal is not generic executive development. It is targeted preparation for a future CEO mandate. That may include broadening enterprise exposure, strengthening strategic range, increasing stakeholder complexity, or building the capacity to lead through ambiguity and transformation. Over time, this approach enables boards to turn today's less obvious candidates into tomorrow's highly credible CEO contenders, while bolstering leadership that supports the sitting CEO.

Selection: Select with rigor and objectivity

Even with a stronger pipeline and a more rigorous assessment process, the final selection decision remains difficult. CEO succession is inherently vulnerable to bias, overconfidence, and social-emotional dynamics. Boards can mistake familiarity for fit. They can anchor too heavily on pedigree, style, or the legacy of an outgoing successful CEO. Under pressure, they may gravitate toward the candidate who feels safest, rather than the one best suited to future demands or with the highest potential.

That is why [disciplined decision-making](#) must be designed into the process. Boards need shared criteria, explicit discussion of assumptions, and enough structure to challenge instinct when it's shaped by an outdated model of leadership. The advantage of a progression system: many of the hardest questions have already been explored well before the board reaches the final decision. By the time the selection moment arrives, the board has better information, more context, and a stronger basis for judgment.

Transition acceleration and optimization: Activate learning and accelerate performance

In many ways, risk becomes most acute when a CEO is named.

Selecting your next CEO is less an endpoint than a waypoint—a successful process starts long before that most important of board votes and continues long after. CEO leadership is the essential ingredient of enterprise success and the transition from the current CEO to the next is a moment that matters for every organization.

It's easy to underestimate the challenge of a CEO transition and many organizations underemphasize (if not outright overlook) this phase. Yet the first year in role can be the most fragile period of a CEO's tenure, as well as their opportunity to optimize their leadership opportunities. A new CEO must quickly establish their agenda and their authority, shaping the strategy and priorities while also [creating the conditions for collaboration and execution](#). Establishing trust and an effective working relationship with the board is equally critical. All of this takes place under close scrutiny from investors, employees, customers, and competitors. While delicate, this stage determines how CEOs will lead and create value during their tenure. A poor entry can have profound and lasting impact on their tenure. So, too, can a strong entry.

CEO is a learning role. No one is ever fully prepared for the depth and breadth of the authorities and responsibilities that come with the job and [no CEO is perfect](#), at the time of appointment or at any point thereafter. That is why the Blueprint emphasizes working with potential internal candidates prior to the selection process, helping them expand and accelerate their leadership development journey, as well as post-selection where the work focuses on the successful candidate, the current CEO, and board chair or lead independent director to ensure a smooth and effective transition process as the beginning stage of an ongoing process of learning and development.

A well-managed transition creates the conditions in which the enterprise can simultaneously perform and transform. A strong [transition plan](#) that leverages a network of trusted and confidential advisors who can offer safe, supportive, and personalized counsel helps accelerate performance, stave off the challenges of CEO loneliness and negative surprises, stabilize the organization, and improve the odds that the board's choice delivers on its promise. It also reflects a broader truth: succession quality should be measured not only by who is selected, but by how effectively that leader is set up to succeed. Critically, the transition moment also gives boards a chance to build on the momentum of the process itself, carrying forward the lessons, behaviors, and points of alignment it surfaced into the next cycle of progression and into other board work.



Shaping the future of CEO leadership through progression systems: The RRA CEO Progression Blueprint

It isn't a checklist. It's a flywheel. Each step strengthens the next, making the system more resilient, informed, and capable of producing strong CEO outcomes while also helping CHROs and boards become more effective stewards of leadership over time.

This leaves boards with a question: is your organization equipped for what succession now requires?

In a more volatile and less predictable environment, executive progression must become a long-term, differentiating, and strategic capability. The boards that outperform will not be those that move fastest when a CEO transition becomes urgent. They will be the ones that have already built the conditions for a better decision by turning succession from a moment into a system, expanding optionality, preparing for more than one future, and building a stronger foundation for leadership continuity, transition success, and long-term performance. This is the promise of progression.

Methodology

Our work with underleveraged and frequently unexpected talent through RRA Artemis unlocked a surprising and urgent truth: For all talent and all organizations, CEO succession needs a system-wide rewiring to meet today's pressures and deliver on tomorrow's promise.

Our years of proprietary forward-thinking research and intentional execution—including over 2,000 CEO search and succession projects and more than 1,200 CEO assessments in the last five years alone—have enabled us to define and deliver what CEO progression demands today, not just what CEO succession has always offered.

RRA's proprietary data and insights derive from our [Leadership Portrait](#) assessment & development model and backing research, our bi-annual [Global Leadership Monitor](#), [CEO Transitions](#) and [The New CEO](#) research, [Board Culture & Director Behaviors](#) study, [Transformational Leadership](#) study, and the RRA [Artemis](#) CEO accelerator program.



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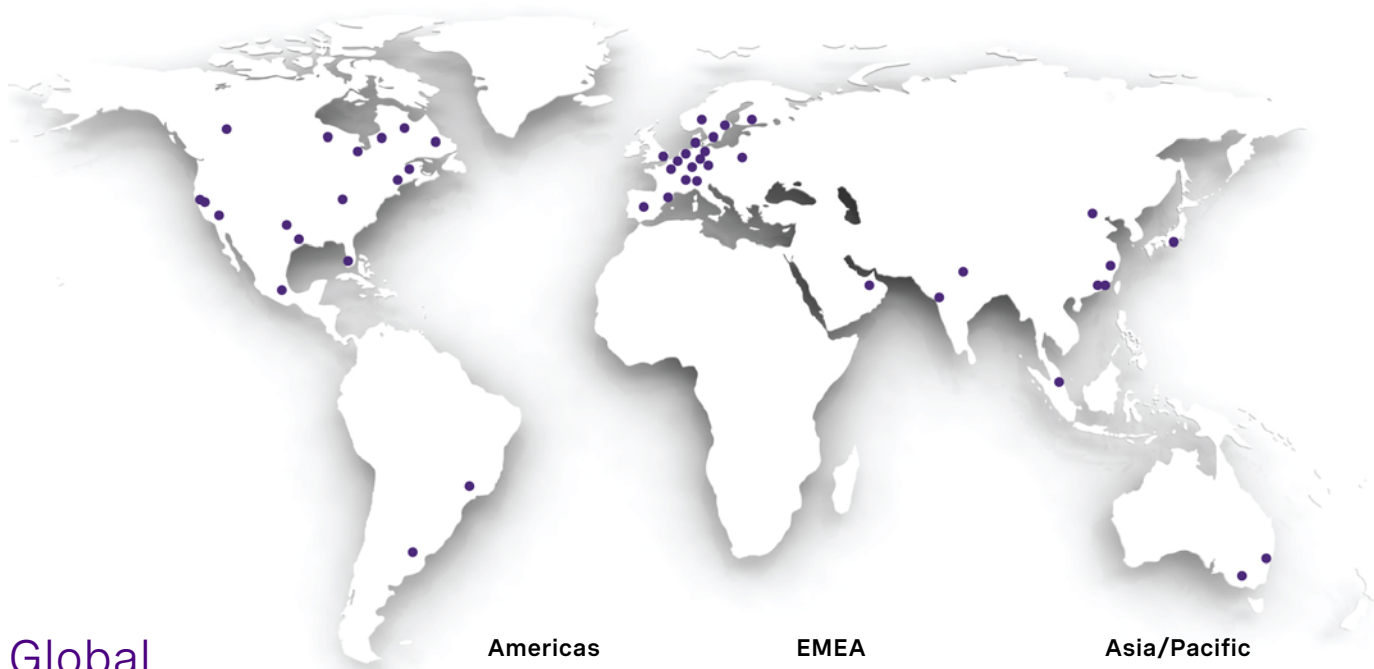
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About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory firm. Our 500+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private, and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, sustainability, and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture, and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led

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