

## THE PATH TO THE C-SUITE

# Athena's Guide to Preparing for the Executive Ranks

Here at Athena, we like to say “what got you here won't get you there” when referring to big leaps in one's career, such as breaking into the C-suite ranks or taking a seat in the boardroom.

**The move to the C-suite signifies a transformational shift in your leadership.** It places you in alignment with other C-suite leaders who are not only responsible for a functional tower of the business, but also for risk, innovation, external brand perception, relationships with investors, and business resiliency—in other words, once in the C-suite, you become a steward of the business overall. You're operating laterally, across the business, with other senior leaders who hold a diverse range of responsibilities, and who each offer their own unique perspective.

You're operating in an entirely new domain, with its own set of rules, expectations, and opportunities for contribution and visibility. In this guide, Athena has culled together our greatest insights and lessons from our worldwide community of leaders. The insights shared in this guide are just one part of Athena's comprehensive Pathway to the C-suite, our comprehensive framework for leaders who are new to the C-suite, on their way, or who operate alongside the CEO.

# In this guide, you will learn:

- 1 How you can cultivate your personal brand and thought leadership
- 2 What you need to support your journey, such as an update of your professional documents
- 3 How to form the right relationships that can propel your career forward
- 4 Ways to get noticed for opportunities
- 5 The basics of preparing for a C-suite interview



# Understanding C-suite business acumen

While you're not expected to be an expert in every function of the business, you will be expected to speak the language of the C-suite – and that means your ability to speak to *all* areas of the business with confidence and understanding. Your leadership ability and decision-making framework will rely on your foundational understanding of areas that may be new to you, like legal, risk management, budgeting, mergers and acquisitions, IPO, and others.

Business acumen is not something to be conquered entirely; it's an ongoing area of executive learning. For starters, your business acumen should set the stage for you to navigate business structure changes, mergers and acquisitions, external risk, public perception, and liability. You should be comfortable understanding these key areas:

▶ **Other C-suite business leaders:**

From Chief Legal Officer and the Chief Human Resources Officer to your Chief Product Officer and Chief Financial Officer, the C-suite requires you to understand your peers' domains, their perspectives, and how to best collaborate with them. In the C-suite, your "tower of business" will intersect and overlay with that of your peers; your understanding, and fostering respect for one another, are foundational to the success of the entire team.

▶ **Business entity or structure:**

You should be able to speak to your company from a structural perspective, but also from a funding stage perspective. Are you a Series C startup, are you employee-owned, or are you a corporation? Know your stage and structure.

▶ **Mergers and Acquisitions:**

Understand the basics of M&A, especially its impact to your area of the business. Be prepared to strategize plans, create and present budgets, and think through additional areas like strategic communications and resource planning.

► **IPO:**

Depending on your company stage, you may need to become familiar with the IPO process, including how to support a board, governance basics, and ramp up your financial acumen.

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► **Basic policy concepts:**

Your business may or may not be more impacted by regulation than others; understand what's at stake, including the major players and influencers in your space.



# Mastering strategic leadership and executive influence

There is no one template for C-suite leadership, and the C-suite attracts all types – from introverts to analytical thinkers to creatives. What’s most important is knowing yourself and owning your leadership mindset. In the C-suite, you’re expected to serve as a visionary, strategic leader both in your function and also at the integrated business level.

## Here’s what this includes:



**Vision meets function:** You have your feet planted in two worlds – one in your current reality, and the other in the future. You need to keep a pulse on each, including the ecosystem in which your business operates, innovative opportunities on the horizon, creative ways to drive business value creation, the competition, and other stakeholders (like investors, employees, and even media). To be successful, you need to understand how to manage your time and energy, but also how your C-suite team and company like to do it – there are a myriad of frameworks for visioning, strategic planning, and accountability.



**Become a steward of the culture:** C-suite leaders are not just serving the company; they are representative of the company. You will be expected to safeguard the culture, positively build upon it, and understand that you are a role model for those on the rise.



**Persuasion and influence:** C-suite leadership is about people. It's about driving alignment, motivating, perspective, and influence. And, the larger and more complex your organization, the less you truly control – and the more you must influence. This not only relies on traits like trustworthiness and curiosity, but it also depends on your ability to scale your influence to your audience. You must communicate to junior employees far differently than you would to a fellow C-suite leader, for example.



# Owning and amplifying your executive brand

Your personal image as an executive directly influences how others see you, how they engage you, and your access to new opportunities. As a C-suite leader, your brand must convey that you are a strategic leader, a champion of culture, and a visionary, capable expert. If managed proactively and well, your personal brand will be viewed as an asset to your organization – one they value and are invested in.

**There are several key areas and/or tools that can help support your brand:**



**Thought leadership:** Your thought leadership should set you apart, whether in written form, on stage, or on social media. Being known for sharing your wisdom and insights at a macro level is one of the top ways you can increase your visibility – as well as access pivotal career opportunities. This is how you build your social and political capital; it's how you influence; it's how you build relationships at scale.





**Revamp your professional documents:** Every executive should have their professional career documents up-to-date. We call this your Branded Career Portfolio (BCP), a set of documents that speaks to your holistic career and the value that you (and only you!) deliver as a leader. Your BCP should include a resume, bio, and a comprehensive LinkedIn profile. Why are these documents so critical? Your bio and resume are key tools to leverage not only in internal promotions but also for media and visibility opportunities. Think of them like your “press kit” for speaking engagements, advisory roles, awards, website bios, and more. Collectively, these pieces create a cohesive executive profile – which is critical to have and to “own” even before you enter the C-suite.



**Social media:** Social media is your door to reaching audiences that are beyond your immediate network. It’s a digital way to engage, network, and build rapport and trust – all with those just beyond your immediate reach. Through social media, you can establish new connections, build your thought leadership, and be considered for speaking and media opportunities. It’s also where you share your human side – you’re real, you’re unscripted, you’re vulnerable. LinkedIn is a must for any professional, but depending on your role, you may find value in other platforms as well (such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and even TikTok).





# Accessing C-suite opportunities

Now, you have the tools for success – but how do you even access the opportunities in the first place? C-suite promotions will come to you through a few paths: internally, through referral, through a direct connection, or from a recruiter. In each of these scenarios, the following strategies will be important for ensuring you're appropriately considered:



## **Develop key relationships beyond your functional area:**

You can quickly develop relationships with other leaders by ensuring you and your team are valuable to others. Offer support, serve as a partner strategist, and give your time generously. These thoughtful acts will underscore your leadership and help others see you in a positive light.



## **Become a partner in tackling complex business challenges:**

You have an opportunity to bring forward solutions when the business faces massive issues. Be the problem solver, the innovator, the strategist. Show your skills in these areas and present creative, useful solutions. This is a fantastic way to level up your leadership and ensure those above you see you as the strategist that you are.





**Become a company promoter:** While you're sharing your thought leadership with the world, consider how you might champion your organization, too. This serves a dual purpose: you're seen as the thought leader on "big stages", whether on social media or real stages; in the eyes of your organization, you're seen as the go-to thinker and strategist within your realm. Your thought leadership continually reinforces your value, and it's through this cycle that you will get noticed for advancement opportunities.



**Nurture your connections:** This includes your close connections as well as your "weaker ties" – people in your network who feel more on the fringe and lesser known. You may be surprised – your weak ties are likely to reveal more opportunities and introductions for you than your known connections! This is simply because you haven't nurtured them as much yet. When you network, do so sincerely and be sure to give in return – favors, introductions, sharing of knowledge. You want your networking to be based on a genuine interest in getting to know the other person.



# Interviewing for the C-suite

When you interview for the C-suite, you typically interview with various existing members of the C-suite and the board of directors. This is where your business acumen can shine – show that you understand the various realms of the business. Even more so, be sure to articulate that you understand their point of view and what they care about.

The same goes for the board. Try to get a sense of their perspective and their motivations. Have an idea of how they relate to the business (are they independent board directors, or are they investors, etc.?). Do your homework on recent product launches, media announcements, and have a general sense of public sentiment. If the organization is in a highly regulated industry, come to the interviews with a basic understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by that regulation.

And, should you receive an offer, you'll also want to do your homework on salary data, C-suite perks, and legal due diligence. (Tip: Not only can Athena coaches help you think through these negotiation strategies, we can also connect you with various members across the business world who can share real-world compensation insights with you!)



# Leveraging Athena in your journey to the C-suite

Since our founding, Athena Alliance has supported thousands of executive women as they made career pivots of all kinds – to the boardroom, to the C-suite, to founding their own businesses, to becoming an investor, and more.

We've pulled together a framework based on what we've seen truly work to help executive women succeed: we surround you with the learning and business acumen-building resources to empower you with the most recent case studies, knowledge, trends, and tips. We pair you with a top executive coach who can serve as your sounding board, guide, and strategist in making bold career moves. And, we have an exceptional global network to help you level up your contacts to include the coveted weak ties, industry experts, and supporters who will help you overcome almost any goal.



# Getting started on your path to the C-suite

Our top strategies and learning content are captured in our newly released “Pathway to the C-suite” – a step-by-step program to help you navigate this transition. Our goal: to provide everything you need to transition confidently into your next phase – and to be there to champion you when you get there.

Beyond the pathway, Athena’s resources include our exceptional community of leaders, world-renowned coaches, and a vast network of career opportunities – many investment firms, boards, and other organizations come directly to Athena to source talent.

For more information, visit  
[athenaalliance.com/membership](https://athenaalliance.com/membership)