

THE CEO WORK PORTFOLIO

How to Regain Agency and Autonomy of Your Life and Work



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As a CEO, how you spend your time and with whom you spend your time should be driven by the choices you make. If you feel like your calendar is managing you and you have no control over your time, you have given up your agency and autonomy.

To regain control of your time and, ultimately, your life and work, you first need to get clear about your purpose, values, and choices. Your purpose, values, and choice serve as the platform for how you spend your time and with whom you choose to spend your time. As you begin to intentionally allocate your time from this platform, those around you will begin to recognize and respect the choices you make - the message that these choices send.

In their [seminal Harvard Business Review article on how CEOs manage time](#), Michael E. Porter and Nitin Nohria, describe the importance of time allocation: "The way CEOs allocate their time and their presence—where they choose to personally participate—is crucial, not only to their own effectiveness but also to the performance of their companies. Where and how CEOs are involved determines what gets done and signals priorities for others." Porter and Nohria continue, "A CEO's schedule (indeed, any leader's schedule), then, is a manifestation of how the leader leads and sends powerful messages to the rest of the organization."

Context and Choice

Managing your work portfolio starts with managing the context for your work. A context shapes whatever exists within it. For example, a meal in the context of a holiday is a celebration or a ritual. In the context of a short turnaround between flights, a meal is a hassle.

Here's another example:

Take some vegetables, chop them up, and toss them in a pile in the backyard.

What do you have?

Take the same chopped vegetables and throw them on the floor.

What do you have?

Same vegetables - put them in a wooden bowl on your table.

What do you have?

In each of these scenarios, the content is the same, but there is a different context, different experience, and different action.

What is the context for your work? If this is not a question you have asked yourself, you are not alone. More often than not, CEOs do not stop to ask themselves this question.

Many CEOs do not realize that they can take their work and define the context.

Framing executive work within the context of your life's purpose or what drives you can transform work into full-self expression.

Arriving at what drives you or determining one's life purpose is a journey of reflection and inquiry, often aided by a guide or coach. The questions one reflects upon in this sort of inquiry include:

1. What are my values?
2. What is truly important?
3. What do I really want?

In answering these questions, you can then answer a critical boundary-setting design question: How much time am I willing to spend working?

The flip side of this question is: How much time am I willing to forgo with family, friends, hobbies, and leisure so that I can work?

When you examine these questions honestly, you see the profound absurdity of being beholden to your calendar.

If the context of your work is anything less than "the privilege to pursue my life's purpose," I invite you to either:

- A. Resign, or
- B. Determine your life's purpose so that you continue taking on this big job.



The Jobs and Capabilities of the CEO Work Portfolio

Once you have decided the portion of your life you want to devote to work, there are several ways to organize the activity under the heading “CEO work” so that you can more readily maintain the context, “privilege to express my life purpose” rather than “overwhelm.”

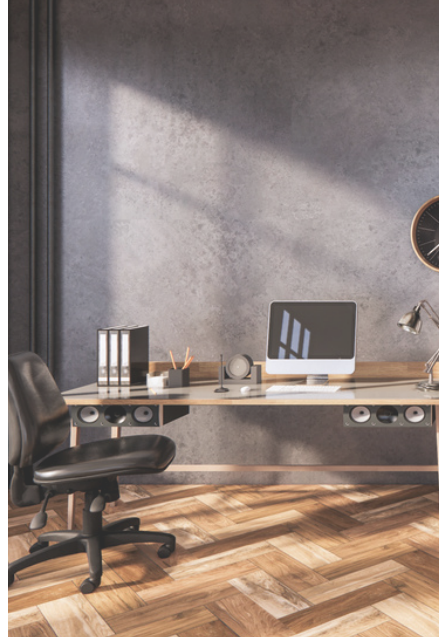
The position of CEO has three main jobs, which are carried out through four key capabilities.

Jobs

- Strategy
- Board and Investors
- Running the business

Capabilities

- Managing Energy
- Managing Relationships
- Managing Conversations
- Leveraging Systems and Structures



JOBS

Strategy

It's your job to create or to see to it that strategy is created, understood, aligned around, and executed, including strategic adjustments in the execution.

Board and Investors

Public company CEOs are hired by the Board, which is chartered to protect the interests of the investors under securities law. As a CEO, your role is to engage with the Board wisely, diplomatically, and purposefully to support and promote a well-designed strategy.

Remember, the Board's main job is to hire and replace you when you're ready or if you are failing.

Investors come in different sizes and shapes and have their own strategies and priorities. Which investors you focus on attracting ought to be a consequence of your strategy, though it's not easy to completely control the mix.



	Running the Business Build the Organization Drive Results
	Board & Investors Cultivate Relationships Communicate Strategy Position Decisions Tell the Story Report
	Strategy Develop the Core Maintain Options Explore the Edges Experiment Industry Connections

Running the Business

This is what new CEOs usually think of as their whole job. They are surprised to learn that there is so much else involved. Running the business entails the execution of strategy. This means selecting key leaders and chartering the operating mechanisms through which direction is set, decisions are made, performance is reviewed, and people are developed.

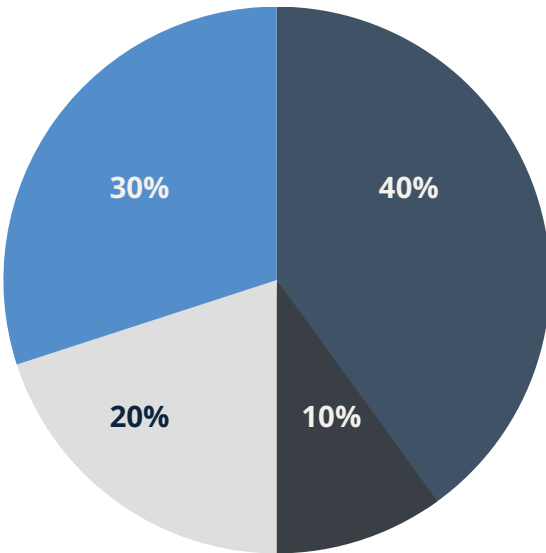
CEOs don't do the work (mostly). They choose the leaders who create the environment in which the work gets done. Then they engage those leaders and others in the organization through a series of conversations designed to focus the energy of the enterprise toward the successful execution of the strategy. Exhausted CEOs forget that it's not their job to do the work.



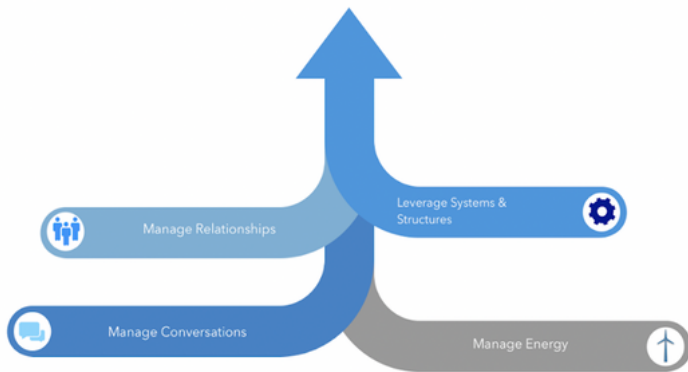
CAPABILITIES

Managing Energy

This capability is a matter of self-awareness. What energizes you? What saps your strength? If you don't know how to give yourself energy, you will have a hard time giving it to others. Each of your three jobs, and especially running the business, requires that you generate more energy than you expend from your interactions. This means generating it first for yourself - being inspired by the work, by the mission, by the people, by the challenge, by whatever it is that lights your flame. It also means doing as little as possible of the work that saps your strength. You know what the sappers are (or we can quickly find out), and you most likely know someone for whom your kryptonite is their rocket fuel. Managing energy includes getting smart about collaboration.



- **Your Wheel House**
Where do your strengths intersect with the priorities of the enterprise?
- **Your Rest**
What provides you with complete disconnection from effort and struggle?
- **Your Recharge**
What would you do even if you weren't paid?
- **Your Kryptonite**
Where are you spending precious energy that could be done better by someone else?



Managing Relationships

Physicists tell us that all there is in the Universe is relationships. Matter is energy in various states of relationship. Particles are packets of energy that coalesce when they interact, as when we measure them, and otherwise are smeared out over space-time as waves of probability. The presence of a particle is determined by its relationship to an observer. What does quantum physics have to do with being a CEO? Your job is a network of relationships. These include your executive team, their direct reports, their direct reports, and all of their combined relationships and their potential to replace you someday. Your relationships include your Board, the members, their relationships with each other, and to the governance model. The network includes investors, regulators, customers, channel partners, and so forth. The sheer number of relationships could overwhelm you. Fortunately, you don't have to manage them all individually, provided that you understand this about relationship management:

- All people have purposes, concerns, and circumstances.
- If you are perceived as being unaware or uncaring about their purposes, concerns, and circumstances, they will resist you.
- If you are perceived as aware of and caring for their purposes, concerns, and circumstances, they will collaborate with you to create value.
- People's perception of your awareness and caring is your personal brand. It has leverage and can show up even when you are not physically present.

Managing Conversations

All work takes place in conversation. There is a natural order to conversations that produce value. That order is align, act, adjust. Within each of these conversations, there are more specific conversations that produce alignment, action, and adjustment. Most conversations people hold are not designed to produce value. Instead, they produce waste. CEOs who do not recognize the difference are vulnerable to being co-opted by conversations that are not about executing the strategy. This may be about one executive's status and power, a project team's excuses for being late, or a board member's personal self-interests. Managing conversations means paying attention to the purpose you are there to fulfill and listening for the intersection of all relevant players' purposes, concerns, and circumstances. When you have an authentic intersection you have a basis for alignment. Before that, you may get compliance, but you will not get the commitment. This will eventually sap your energy.

Leveraging Systems and Structure

You know that you cannot be everywhere at once or even in the same month, quarter, or year. How do you ensure that your strategy receives the requisite energy, talent, and focus for its execution? You do this by seeing to it that the accountability structures, the reporting mechanisms, the hiring, selection, and development, and the cultural reinforcement systems are well-designed, interconnected, and maintained. CEOs who are exhausted view the structures and systems of their organizations as parts. CEOs who take their vacations and enjoy their time with their families view the structures and systems as integral to the living organism that is their organization. They see that a recurring failure to meet a standard in, say, the legal department may likely result in an unwise and unreviewed risk being taken in the supply chain. The CEO grasps the whole of the enterprise or at least senses the wholeness of its connections and interdependencies. Leveraging systems means sharing this sense with everyone in every setting and encouraging everyone to elevate their own conscious awareness to include more of the whole.

Establishing Boundaries

Being CEO and thriving in the role means saying “No.” The word “No” establishes a boundary: “this, not that.” Strategy is about “this, not that.” Culture is about “this, not that.” Your values are about “this, not that.” Your life purpose is about “this, not that.” And your calendar should be about “this, not that.” Boundaries are choices you make based on contexts you have created. They protect your energy for what you say is most purposeful and most important. They protect your relationships from inauthenticity, force, manipulation, and sham. They protect your strategy from dissipation, and they protect your purpose from cynicism and resignation.

If your calendar feels like someone else is trying to run your life, it’s probably because a lot of people are. It’s vital that you say “No” and take back the authorship of your life and your work within that life. This creates conflict, which must be managed. If your work serves your life purpose, you owe it to your own aliveness to do this. If your work does not serve your life’s purpose, you owe it both to yourself and your organization to step aside. If you are not yet clear about your life purpose, join the club. Knowing is not as important as discovering. Your job in life is not CEO. It’s being human. What can you become, and what can you contribute if you pursue the role of CEO as a vehicle for discovering the fullest expression of your humanity?

Charles Pfeffer

I work with CEOs and Senior Executives in all phases of their leadership journey to bring clarity, expand influence, and create impact.

Through listening, I guide my clients to clarify what they want – for their enterprise, their teams, themselves, and the world. I listen for what is possible and practicable so my clients can mobilize their talents and their teams, lead from purpose, and become the leader they know they can be.

I've helped executives across industries and organizations, including FedEx, Xerox, DuPont, and Medifast, to align teams, develop leaders, communicate rigorously, and produce results. I have coached teams with assignments ranging from bringing the world's first production digital color printer to market to safely closing down the NASA Space Shuttle program.

Collaborating with Nvolv Partners, I've worked with Starbucks and Save the Children to align leadership, strategy, and talent. I've teamed with Brimstone Consulting on strategic change initiatives at the New York Times, ExpressScripts, and the State of Maine. Working with the pioneering DEI firm, The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, I have helped to bring the power of inclusion to accelerate strategy deployment at Merck, United Airlines, and EcoLab.

Throughout my career, I have supported and provided leadership to non-profits serving children, vulnerable adults, and under-resourced populations. My partner and I recently achieved our dream of building a house on the coast of Maine. Together we have four adult children who are bringing a new generation of citizens into our world.



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