

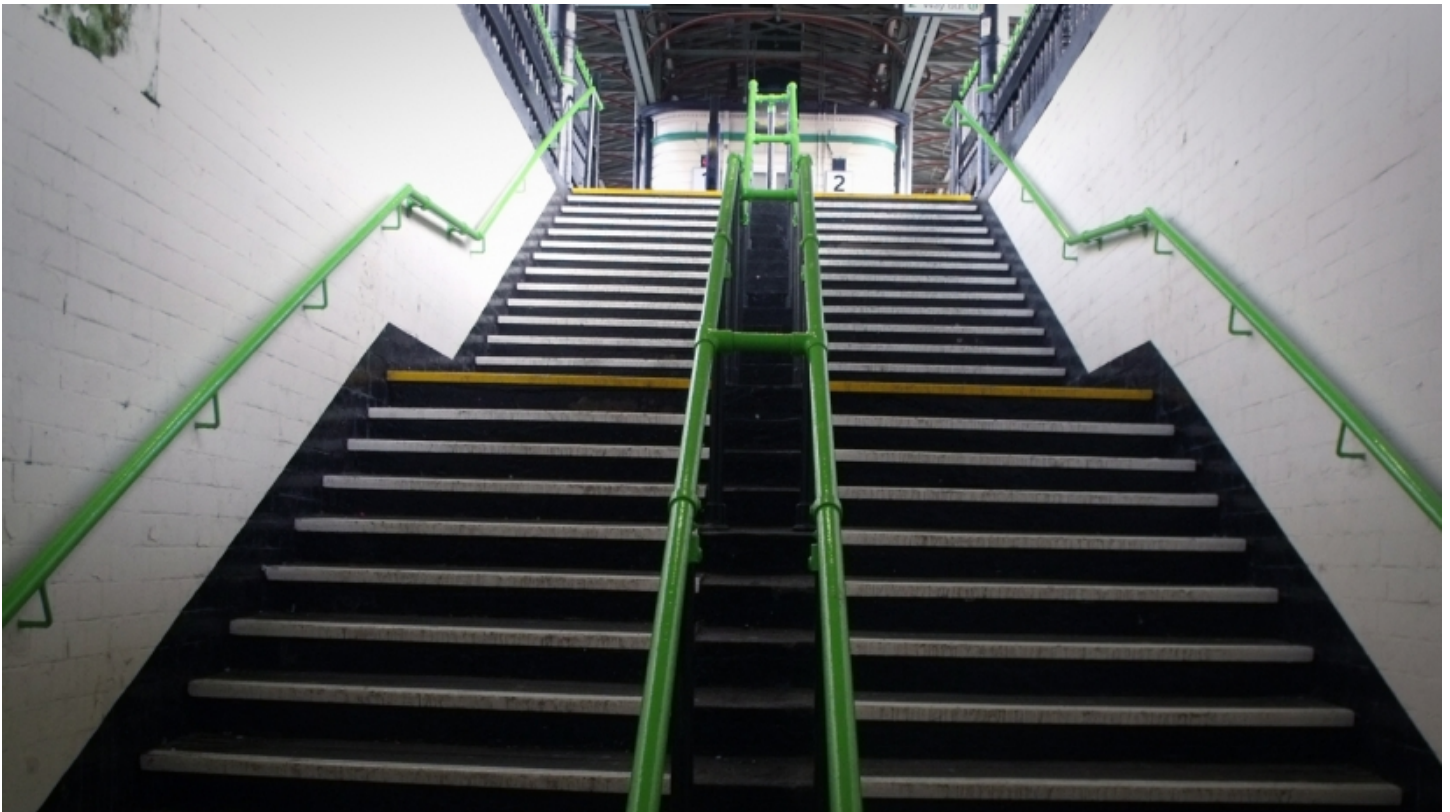
# 10 Tips From CEOs for Everyone Dreaming of Getting to the Top

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It's graduation season, and this year, U.S. colleges and universities will propel [1.8 million](#) young people into the working world. While not all [aspire](#) to land in the C-suite, some have their sights set on the top job, either by founding a company or climbing the corporate ladder.

With the likes of [Mark Zuckerberg](#), [Evan Spiegel](#), and [Elon Musk](#), recent years have seen a surge of “Under 30 CEOs.” And though the average age of CEOs [is slightly declining](#), today's graduates may have expectations for advancement that [don't match reality](#).

So what does it really take to get to the top? To guide the next generation, I interviewed three successful and prescient CEOs. I asked them to project which abilities will be required of their future counterparts, and what advice they'd give to young people who aspire to become a CEO.

## 1. Broad-based knowledge.

Jacqueline Hinman, CEO of Fortune 500 engineering company CH2M HILL, predicts that as change accelerates, broad knowledge and understanding of one's business will be critical. Hinman started out as an environmental engineer, but later served in project management, business development and marketing roles.

"I purposely kept moving," she says, "I zig-zagged up and down and sideways." Though most CEOs will still have [limitations in operational knowledge](#), those who've served in multiple roles in their company and industry will always be a step ahead.

## 2. Self-awareness.

Bill Warren, former president of Monster.com and CEO of Direct Employers Association, believes that self-awareness -- knowing who you are and how you're seen -- is foundational to success at any level, but particularly at the top. Warren observes, "Self-awareness helps you make the right decisions."

Researchers agree, with leadership guru Jack Zenger [calling self-awareness](#) the "singular secret for success."

## 3. Technological savvy.

In an era when technology trumps tradition, today's CEOs must develop skills that were unheard of in the past. Eric Anderholm, CEO of information security manufacturing and consulting firm Sergeant Laboratories, stresses that CEOs must know as much about technology as they do about business. By way of example, Anderholm says that today's CEOs are practically giving a free pass to their chief information officers. When a company gets hacked, he notes, "if the CIO says 'we don't know how this happened,' the CEO has little recourse but to accept that excuse because he or she is not qualified to challenge it. This can't be allowed to happen in the future."

**Related:** [5 Visionary CEOs and Their Key Traits That Every Leader Should Master](#)

## 4. Courage.

Successful CEOs, Hinman observes, "Have to be willing to put a stake in the ground and say, 'This is the direction we're going.'" They must also, Warren adds, have the courage to challenge the status quo. Warren [founded](#) Online Career Center (OCC), the first internet employment site, and ultimately served as president of Monster.com, but later left to start a new company. With DirectEmployers Association, Warren changed the model to reduce online recruitment costs for employers. He blew up the very business model he'd created! In an increasingly [disruption](#) business world, tomorrow's CEOs must cultivate the courage to question everything.

## 5. Service.

In our [increasingly narcissistic world](#), successful future CEOs will buck the trend and adopt a service mindset. Hinman believes that being a CEO is ultimately about service—to shareholders, employees and customers. Being self-centered can quickly derail the CEO and even [kill the company](#).

"Boards will often forgive a year of financial challenge," Hinman says, "but they rarely forgive a CEO that can't lead and serve people."

## 6. Understand what you really want.

Being a CEO [can be](#) difficult, time consuming and stressful. Richard Hytner, former CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, started his career yearning to be a CEO.

“I felt,” [he admitted](#) to the *Washington Post*, “[that] the only way to survive was to reach the top.”

But over time, he noticed a weight on his shoulders and “never wanted to be a chief executive ever again.” If after some in-depth reflection, a young person does want the top job, Hinman advises, “You need to know the real reason you want to be in the C-suite.” She says that the right reasons are a passion around your business and a desire to serve shareholders, employees and customers. The wrong reasons are about ego, compensation and entitlement.

## 7. Ask for feedback.

Tough feedback can be a tough pill to swallow. For most people, asking for feedback is like going to the dentist: though few enjoy it, it’s actually quite important to do. Hinman agrees, noting that successful CEOs go out of their way to learn the truth. She cites an experience earlier in her career where she got “no-holds-barred feedback” in the form of a 360 review. Armed with the truth about how she was perceived, Hinman set out on a path to understand her strengths and address her weaknesses.

“Without that experience,” she says, “I would have had blind spots that could have derailed me.”

Future CEOs should get in the habit of seeking feedback early in their careers, and equally importantly, be willing to entertain the idea of doing things a different way.

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## 8. Seek out opportunities.

Small opportunities can have big payoffs. After founding OCC, Warren would drive his old Buick to New York to court clients. One day, he was visiting someone on the 34<sup>th</sup> floor of an office building. On the way down, the elevator stopped on the floor of another company.

“Well, I’m here,” he thought, “I might as well drop off a brochure.” That company became one of OCC’s first clients. Future CEOs should embrace each chance to succeed.

According to Dr. Marlene Neill, an assistant professor at Baylor University, companies often groom future CEOs (whether they know it or not) by placing them on special projects and committees. In that case, she advises making a name for yourself by making substantive and noticeable contributions.

## 9. Shake hands and kiss babies.

According to a [recent report](#), 39 percent of Americans spend more time socializing online than in person, a trend the *New York Times* [called](#) “the flight from conversation.” The rise of social media, and the ensuing lack of personal connection, concerns Hinman. As venture capitalist Mark Suster [notes](#), “All business is built upon human relationships. You can’t make any impact...without shaking hands and kissing babies.”

Young people who spend more time amassing LinkedIn connections than building deep personal relationships will find themselves left behind. Future CEOs should get a leg up by building deep relationships with a wide network of people.

## **10. Don't rush.**

Even though [skyrocketing to the top](#) at a young age might sound appealing, the fast track has its [downsides](#). No matter how smart and ambitious someone is, not taking the time to build skills like influence and emotional intelligence can [often derail](#) them before getting to the C-suite.

“Being in one company for a long time does seem archaic now,” Hinman admits. “But it’s important not to rush into your desired executive role. You have to gain mastery and take the longer view.”

So take the time you need and learn all you can. Hinman advises future CEOs to ask questions along the journey like, “What do I need to be to be qualified for positions with more responsibility in the future?”

All of my interview subjects agree that transformation, innovation and increasingly rapid change will be a constant in the future of business. The next generation of CEOs will have a huge task ahead of them. What better time to start preparing for it than right now?