

# Building a CEO-ready career conversation with Marc Lutz, Hays CEO, North & Central Europe

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Leadership careers are often described through titles and promotions. Yet when you look closely at how leaders actually reach the CEO role, the transition rarely happens in a single step. It is usually the result of deeper shifts that take place long before the title appears. Shifts in mindset, in perspective, and in how leaders approach responsibility.

This was the focus of a recent SwissMBAs Leadership Insights conversation with Marc Lutz, CEO North and Central Europe at Hays and author of *Vom Leader zum Überflieger*. The discussion explored a simple but important question: what truly prepares someone to lead an entire organization?

One message stood out clearly. CEO readiness is not something that suddenly appears with a promotion. It is something leaders build deliberately over time.

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## Start with direction, not titles

Many professionals approach their careers step by step. They focus on the next role, the next promotion, or the next opportunity that appears. Leaders who eventually reach the highest levels often approach their careers differently.

They start with direction.

Instead of asking what their next role should be, they ask a broader question. Where do I ultimately want to go? Once that direction becomes clear, it becomes possible to reverse engineer the journey. Leaders can then identify which experiences, responsibilities, and capabilities will help them move toward that goal.

Hard work alone rarely guarantees progression. Many capable professionals deliver strong results but remain in the same role for years. One reason is that they never articulate where they want to go.

Managers cannot read minds. Leaders who progress often make their ambitions visible and actively work with their organization to build the capabilities required for the next step. Clarity creates momentum.

## **Leadership starts with self-leadership**

One of the most important ideas shared during the discussion was that leadership begins with yourself. Before leading teams, functions, or organizations, leaders must develop a clear understanding of who they are, what they stand for, and where they create the most value.

Marc summarized this philosophy through a simple framework he calls the STAR model.

The first element is Superpower. Leaders must understand their own strengths and how they contribute to the organization. Self-awareness creates focus and credibility.

The second element is Team. Leadership is fundamentally about trust. Strong leaders build teams where people can contribute their strengths and take ownership of outcomes. Delegation and trust are not optional. They are essential.

The third element is Alignment. Leaders provide direction. They translate strategy into clear priorities so that teams understand where they are going and why it matters.

The final element is Reorientation. Careers and organizations evolve. Leaders need to regularly reassess their direction, learn from experience, and consciously shape the next phase of their development.

Many careers stall not because leaders lack talent, but because they never stop asking whether they are still moving in the right direction.

## **From high performer to builder of teams**

Another important theme in the conversation was the shift leaders must make as their responsibilities grow.

Early in a career, success often depends on individual performance. High performers advance because they solve problems quickly, deliver results, and operate with strong personal discipline.

Leadership at higher levels requires a different mindset. Success increasingly depends on the ability to build strong teams and enable collective performance.

Marc shared a defining moment from early in his career. As a young leader, he tried to stay involved in everything and found it difficult to delegate. A health issue forced him to step away from work for several weeks. When he returned, he realized the team had managed well without him.

It was a powerful lesson. Being at the center of everything is not leadership. As leadership is more about creating an environment where the organization can perform without depending on one individual.

### **Thinking like a CEO before becoming one**

Another turning point in Marc's career came through a mentor who told him something simple but transformative.

*" If you want to become a CEO, start behaving like one now! "*

That advice changed how he approached his role. Instead of focusing only on his own responsibilities, he began looking at the organization more broadly. He started identifying problems outside his immediate scope and contributing solutions that helped the business move forward.

Over time, this mindset became a habit. When organizations search for leaders, they rarely choose someone who performs well only within a narrow role. They look for people who are already thinking beyond it.

Leadership potential becomes visible through the way people approach challenges, not through their job title.



## The realities of the path to the top

The conversation also highlighted several realities that aspiring leaders often underestimate.

First, leadership development requires effort. Early stages of a career are often the best moment to explore different roles, industries, or geographies. These experiences expand perspectives and help leaders build adaptability.

Second, communication becomes increasingly important at senior levels. Leaders must be able to translate complex ideas into simple messages. Strategy only becomes effective when people understand it. Storytelling and clear communication are therefore essential leadership skills.

Third, talent remains the central challenge for most organizations. Despite the growing influence of technology and artificial intelligence, leadership remains deeply human. CEOs spend much of their time thinking about people. Who are the right individuals to solve tomorrow's problems? How do you build teams capable of navigating uncertainty?

Technology changes the environment. It does not replace leadership.

## **CEO readiness begins long before the title**

One conclusion from the discussion is that becoming CEO is rarely about chasing a title. It is about gradually expanding your perspective, building the right capabilities, and learning to operate with broader responsibility.

Titles often follow the value leaders create rather than the other way around.

The real question for leaders is therefore not whether they want to become CEO one day. The real question is whether they are already developing the mindset, discipline, and perspective required to lead at that level.

### ***About the Author***

Léonard Collon is the global Executive Recruiter of ABB Motion, where he supports business leaders worldwide in hiring senior executives who drive performance and growth. He previously worked with global companies such as Google, Swisscom and Michael Page, and brings deep expertise in strategic leadership hiring. Léonard also leads the Leadership and People Council of the SwissMBA Association, where he contributes to strengthening the community's focus on leadership excellence, AI & HR and career development matters.

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