

When opportunity doesn't knock, build your own door: the four horizons of leadership growth in slower markets

An Article of the Swiss Association of MBAs



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You've built a strong track record, delivered results, and yet... no new role is on the horizon. For many leaders, that's when careers stall. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In today's business environment, with flatter hierarchies, longer tenures, and fewer top seats, even outstanding leaders often face years without a promotion. The real risk isn't the pause itself. It's mistaking stability for safety and slowly losing relevance.

As Peter Drucker said: "The best way to predict the future is to create it." The best leaders use plateau years to create the future, for themselves, and for their organizations.

A story of growth without a title change

Take Laura (name changed), a senior leader in technology. She hit a plateau, no promotion in sight. Instead of waiting, she wrote a book. It didn't directly advance her career, but it gave her visibility with industry peers. Soon she was invited to speak at major European tech conferences.

At one of them, she met her future boss. Her next opportunity didn't come from a job posting. It came from the visibility and relevance she built while "standing still."

This is the difference between leaders who remain marketable, and those who fade.

The 4 horizons of leadership growth, a guide for plateau years

Think of leadership growth as a compass. When vertical moves pause, you can still expand in four directions that drive both personal growth and business impact.

1. Capability growth: build the skills of tomorrow

- Learning a new language builds global influence and cultural adaptability.
- Acquire technical fluency in data analytics, automation, or AI: enables smarter business decisions.
- Develop AI literacy: Gartner estimates 80% of executives will need AI fluency to remain effective in their roles by 2030.
- Be brave to start new things: write, publish, or podcast. The courage to learn publicly often accelerates thought leadership.

Business impact: Leaders who continuously learn create organizations that adapt faster than competitors.

2. Influence growth: expand beyond your role

- Lead cross-functional projects or prepare a business case for a joint venture, acquisition, or innovation pilot: direct visibility with the board.
- Host an industry roundtable: convening peers positions you as a thought partner, not just an operator.
- Speak at conferences: McKinsey research shows leaders who share insights externally are 30% more likely to be seen as industry innovators.

Business impact: influence is not personal visibility only; it positions your company as forward-thinking and opens strategic opportunities.

3. People growth: multiply your impact through others

- Mentor intentionally: female leaders, alumni, or high-potential talent.
- Sponsor the next generation: succession readiness is one of the board's biggest concerns.
- Volunteer with a non-profit: broadens empathy and strengthens cross-sector perspective.

Business impact: A leader who develops other leaders builds resilience into the organization, one of the most valued currencies in uncertain markets.

4. Network growth: stay connected and visible

- Attending key industry events: not just to listen, but to benchmark and spot trends early.
- Engage with peers across sectors: cross-pollination sparks innovation.
- Share insights publicly: visibility accelerates credibility, for you and for your company.

Business impact: An invisible leader cannot attract talent, capital, or partners. Presence is power.

The recruiter's lens

As an executive recruiter, I work with global Leaders & C-Suit. They rarely ask: "What title did this leader hold?" They ask: "What impact did this leader have when the organization wasn't moving?"

Leaders who say "I waited five years for a promotion" often struggle to demonstrate relevance. Leaders who say "I used those five years to learn, mentor, influence, and expand the company's reach" stand out immediately.

Those are the leaders companies fight to hire.

Final thought

Not every year will bring a new title. But every year can bring new growth, if you choose to invest in your capabilities, influence, people, and networks.

Which horizon have you invested in most recently, and which one deserves your attention next?

Leaders, we are not defined by titles, but by the growth we create, for ourselves, our people, and the businesses we serve.

About the Author

Léonard Collon is global Executive Recruiter of ABB Motion, a global leader in motors and drives. He helps business leaders seamlessly hire top executive talents worldwide. He is passionate about driving business growth through strategic leadership hiring and has worked with global leading companies such as Google, Swisscom and Michael Page.

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