

Stuck in a Career Plateau? Use This 3-Step Framework to Regain Momentum

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Key Takeaways

- A Glassdoor survey reveals that 65% of professionals feel stuck in their careers, expressing frustration even at executive levels.
- A three-step framework is critical for overcoming career stagnation, involving diagnosis of underlying issues, defining success metrics and taking intentional action.
- For lasting change, executives must build on self-awareness, intentions and consistent actions tailored to their unique experiences and career longevity.

It's normal to feel stuck or underwhelmed in your career from time to time. In fact, nearly two-thirds (65%) of professionals report feeling stuck in their careers, according to a recent Glassdoor survey.

Career plateaus can take many forms, including feeling underutilized, lacking passion or even just feeling bored, to name just a few. Some executives who are feeling stagnant in their careers may look busy and “successful” on the outside, but on the inside, they feel frustrated, disconnected or unsure of their true impact. For example, I recently worked with a tech executive who was leading multiple company-wide projects but felt invisible since he was never involved in strategic meetings or decisions.

How exactly do you get out of a career plateau when you're an executive? For senior leaders with decades-long careers, traditional advice simply won't work. You need guidance tailored to your tenure and unique situation. Here's a proven, three-step framework to help you overcome career stagnation and regain momentum.

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1. Diagnose the plateau

Start by getting crystal clear on why you're in a career plateau in the first place. It's easy to fantasize about greener pastures and consider jumping ship to a new company to solve all your problems.

However, if the real issue resides in an issue like imposter syndrome or boredom, switching companies will only delay resolving it. You can think of this like getting a diagnosis from a doctor: You can't treat a problem effectively until you know what it is. This may require you to reflect on past roles or get feedback from trusted colleagues, friends and family members to identify your potential patterns.

Over the years, working with hundreds of senior leaders, I've found some of the most common causes of career stagnation among executives include:

- Underutilization of experience and skills, leaving you feeling undervalued or frustrated.
- Fear of failure, keeping you from pursuing growth opportunities.
- Being stretched too thin, resulting in stress and burnout.
- Limited strategic engagement, leaving you on the sidelines during key decisions.
- Misalignment with a company's values, causing

frustration or total disengagement.

- Wanting to make a greater impact, but not having the platform with which to do so.

Recently, a tech executive came to me frustrated about the lack of impact he was able to make at his company, and he wanted to look for a new role. As we diagnosed the issue, we realized that this was a recurring pattern across all his jobs.

Instead of immediately jumping into job search mode, we focused on building his executive presence and influencing skills. It took time, but he built trust with his boss and the C-suite and gained the opportunity to work on more impactful projects that truly energized him.

Without getting clear on the underlying issue behind your plateau, you're likely to feel the same regardless of where you go.

2. Define your success metrics

Next, you want to clarify which outcomes are most important to you at work and in life. In other words, how will you know that you've broken out of your plateau?

Consider priorities like oversight, impact, influence, team growth, job satisfaction, personal fulfillment and work-life balance. There's no "ideal" number of parameters here. Some leaders will have a long list, while others will have a brief one.

You'll also want to prioritize this list and reflect on how each entry intersects with the others. For instance, a role may allow additional oversight and impact but may also require you to put in more hours. It always comes down to balance.

The key is to be clear on what you really want in your career so you can shape one that aligns with it. Once you have your

list, compare it with your current role. If they're far away from each other, some serious adjustments may be needed. If they're close, your role might not actually be the source of your stagnation.

You want to be explicit about how you'll measure success. Set clear key performance indicators (KPIs), such as an increase in team engagement, number of strategic initiatives led or PTO days taken.

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3. Take action

Finally, take intentional action toward your success metrics, but don't try to tackle them all overnight. Break them down into bite-sized steps. For example:

- If your strategic influence is low, offer to lead a high-impact cross-functional project or mentor emerging executives.
- If visibility is an issue, schedule monthly updates with your boss or cross-functional leaders to highlight your key initiatives.
- If you feel stretched too thin, try delegating one project or sending a team member to one meeting per week, then track your energy levels.
- If burnout is exacerbating your stagnation, set a goal of unplugging by 8 p.m. daily or reserve Sunday for recharging.

These small, consistent actions will compound over time. Keep track of your progress and celebrate your wins.

Getting out of an executive career plateau takes self-awareness, intention, and action. It won't happen overnight, but it's absolutely possible if you're intentional and

methodical. You've got this!

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