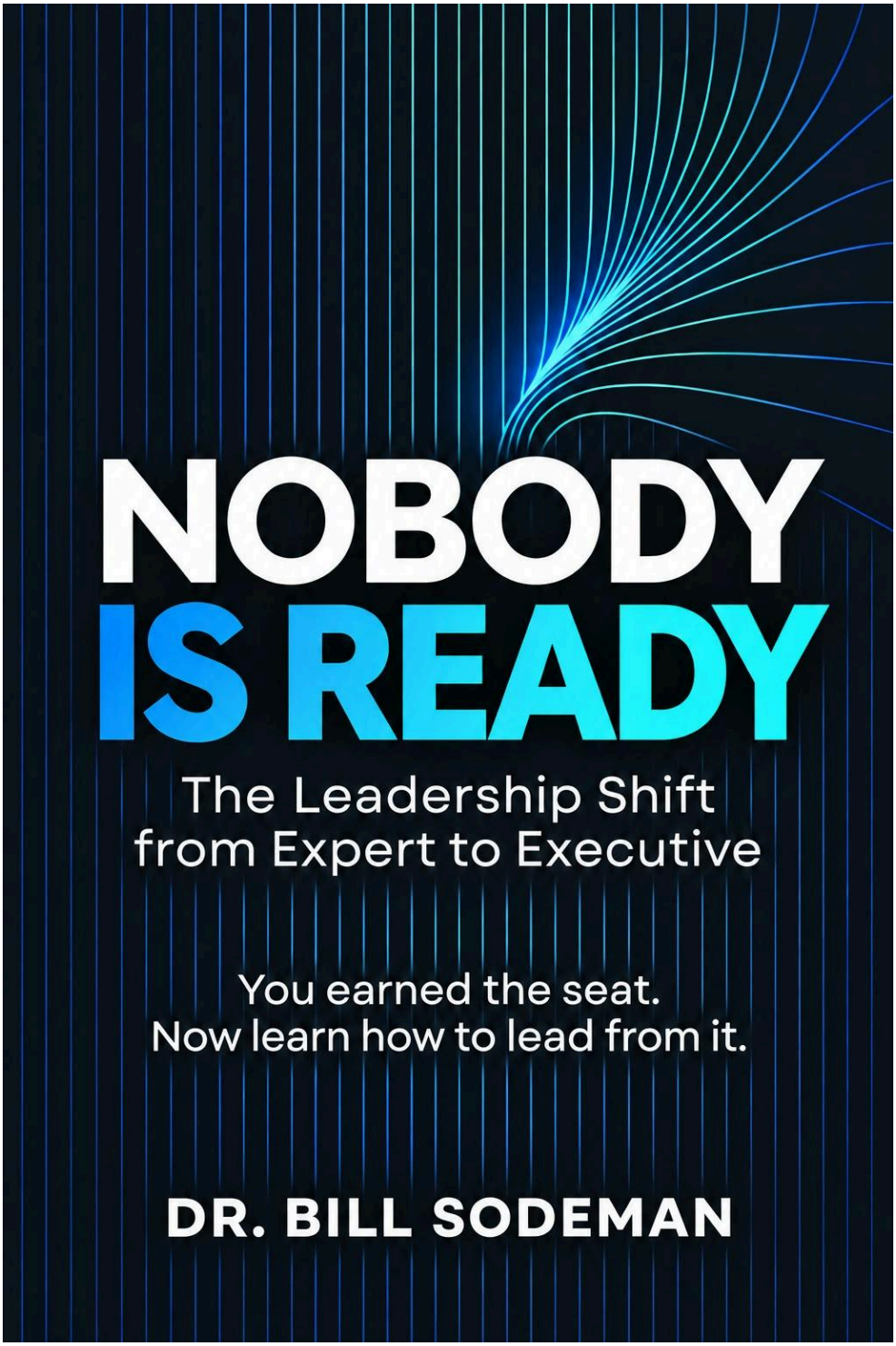
# Chapter 1


NOBODY
IS READY
The Leadership Shift
from Expert to Executive
You earned the seat.
Now learn how to lead from it.
DR. BILL SODEMAN

# Advance praise for *Nobody is Ready: How Successful Professionals Become Effective Executives*

*Most leadership books assume you're ready.* ***Nobody is Ready*** *admits nobody is, and that the skills that earned your promotion can quietly undermine you once you arrive. Bill Sodeman writes with a coach's candor and a researcher's discipline: he traces the famous "60 percent of new managers fail" statistic back to its source and shows what it actually says. The stories ring true, the exercises are built for this week rather than someday, and the graphics make the ideas stick. Essential for every specialist about to become an executive, and for anyone promoting one.*
Dr. Sergio E. Sanchez, CIO and CISO

*Becoming an executive doesn't make you ready; it makes you honest about what you haven't learned yet. With a rare willingness to share his own first-week panic as a newly minted CIO, and with relatable coaching stories that show the same doubts surfacing years into a career, Dr. Bill Sodeman turns the imposter experience from a verdict into useful information. Grounded in Katz, Watkins, and Senge yet refreshingly practical, this is a book I'd put in the hands of anyone about to step into their first executive seat.*
Paul Hickman, Senior GovCon Advisor

***Nobody is Ready*** *is a masterclass in grounded, authentic leadership. With a rare blend of executive vulnerability and academic rigor, it dismantles the illusion that real leaders never doubt themselves. … I plan to use this book in the Master's-level Leadership class that I teach.*
Kimberley Barker, PhD, MBA, Senior Lecturer & Director, Institute for Culture, Change, and Leadership

*Sodeman describes common management promotion challenges in a humble, thoughtful format based on research and his own experience. I resembled some of these composites as I reflected on my own public accounting journey. … This book would have been useful.*
Stephen Theuer, Retired Partner, Deloitte LLP

*An executive title changes your responsibilities overnight. Changing how you lead takes more work.* ***Nobody is Ready*** *explores the challenge of letting go of being the person with every answer and learning to build that capability in others; a transition many accomplished professionals underestimate.*
Amber Little, CHRO, Nation's Best

*What makes someone successful isn't always what makes them an effective leader. Dr. Sodeman understands that distinction and brings it to life with honesty, insight, and practical wisdom.* ***Nobody is Ready*** *reminds us that great leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about asking better questions, exercising sound judgment, and creating the space for others to succeed.*
Stephen Fusco, Data Privacy Officer & Senior Counsel for an international FMCG

***Nobody is Ready*** *is a learning and coaching guide for new executives, or anyone recognizing they are in a change moment. … I'll be recommending it to leaders I support as a tool that offers grounding and a scaffold for trusting your next step in a moment of change.*
Jerry Philip, CPCC, Executive Coach and Learning and Development Leader

*Becoming a leader feels a lot like getting your diploma: pride, excitement, and a quiet fear that someone will find out you're not ready. We study years for a diploma, yet leadership lands on us with no lessons at all. You couldn't study for it then. With this book, now you can.*
Argenis Bauza, author of *Now, All Makes Sense* and Founder of Creativa Enterprises

*One can feel the trepidation, the discomfort, and the insecurity that were part and parcel of his journey. I sighed deeply realizing that I was not the only one who has gone through this harrowing imposter experience.*
Larry Silver, President of Contractor Marketing Inc.

*This book is perfect for any leader who is struggling to get out of the weeds, climb to a strategic altitude, and lead a team toward successful execution. Let's face it, when you have strong technical skills, there is comfort in continuing to use them to swiftly move an initiative along.*
Heather O'Connor, Assistant Vice President, Digital Content Operations, LPL Financial

*Bill finds a way to help us connect with the fear of letting go, while also helping us come to terms with the notion that letting go lets someone else grow. … Bill's writing style and examples give you much needed perspective to understand that those feelings are normal.*
Tom Schin, Owner, Build Better Culture

*We invest considerable time and resources in onboarding new employees. But are we investing as much in onboarding new leaders? … This book delivers the right message at the right time.*
Chris Chaia, ACC, Founder, Onwards Consulting

*One of the most useful features is the exercises at the end of each chapter. They give readers an opportunity to think about how the lessons apply to real-life situations.*
Kerry Loeffler, Insight Leader & Facilitator, TalentTrust

# Nobody is Ready

*How Successful Professionals Become Effective Executives*

Dr. Bill Sodeman

n3ed.com
Toledo, Ohio

*Nobody is Ready: How Successful Professionals Become Effective Executives*

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Austin, Mary, Meridian, and the other Meridian characters in this book are fictional composites drawn from the author's coaching and leadership experience. Any resemblance to actual persons or organizations is coincidental. In the author's personal stories, the names of organizations and individuals have been changed, and some identifying details have been altered.

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# Preface

Getting promoted to an executive role doesn't mean you're prepared to be an executive.

I learned that the hard way.

I spent nine years wanting an executive position. When I finally got one, I spent my first week sitting in a windowless office wondering what, exactly, I was supposed to do next.

The skills that earned me the promotion weren't necessarily the skills I needed to succeed in the role.

That's the challenge this book addresses.

Most aspiring and first-time executives are excellent at what they already do. They know how to solve problems, manage people, and deliver results. Then they step into executive leadership and discover that the expectations have changed. Suddenly, they're responsible for decisions without clear answers, relationships that require a different kind of influence, and an organization they can no longer lead by doing the work themselves.

The good news? Executive leadership is learnable.

After eleven years in C-level roles, decades of teaching and developing leaders, and years of coaching aspiring and first-time executives, I've seen the same challenges surface again and again. I've also seen what happens when capable people learn to approach those challenges differently.

**Nobody is Ready** is organized around four stages of that transition:

1. **You're an Executive Now:** Understanding why executive leadership is a different job, not simply a bigger version of your previous one.
2. **The First Days:** Learning to read the organization, its people, and its culture before deciding what needs to change.
3. **The Core Executive Skillset:** Developing the emotional intelligence, communication, judgment, and relationships required to lead effectively.
4. **Staying There and Growing:** Recognizing what can derail your leadership, recovering from setbacks, and continuing to develop yourself and others.

Throughout the book, you'll follow Austin and Mary, two fictional executives whose experiences reflect common challenges I've encountered in leadership and coaching. You'll also hear stories from my own career, including mistakes I wish I'd avoided. Together with practical research and coaching guidance, these stories will help you recognize what executive leadership looks like when the decisions aren't easy.

You can read the book from beginning to end or return to individual chapters when a particular challenge arises. Each chapter offers practical actions you can apply to your own leadership.

Whether you're preparing for your first executive role, finding your footing in one, or helping someone else make that transition, this book is designed to help you approach the job with greater confidence and better judgment.

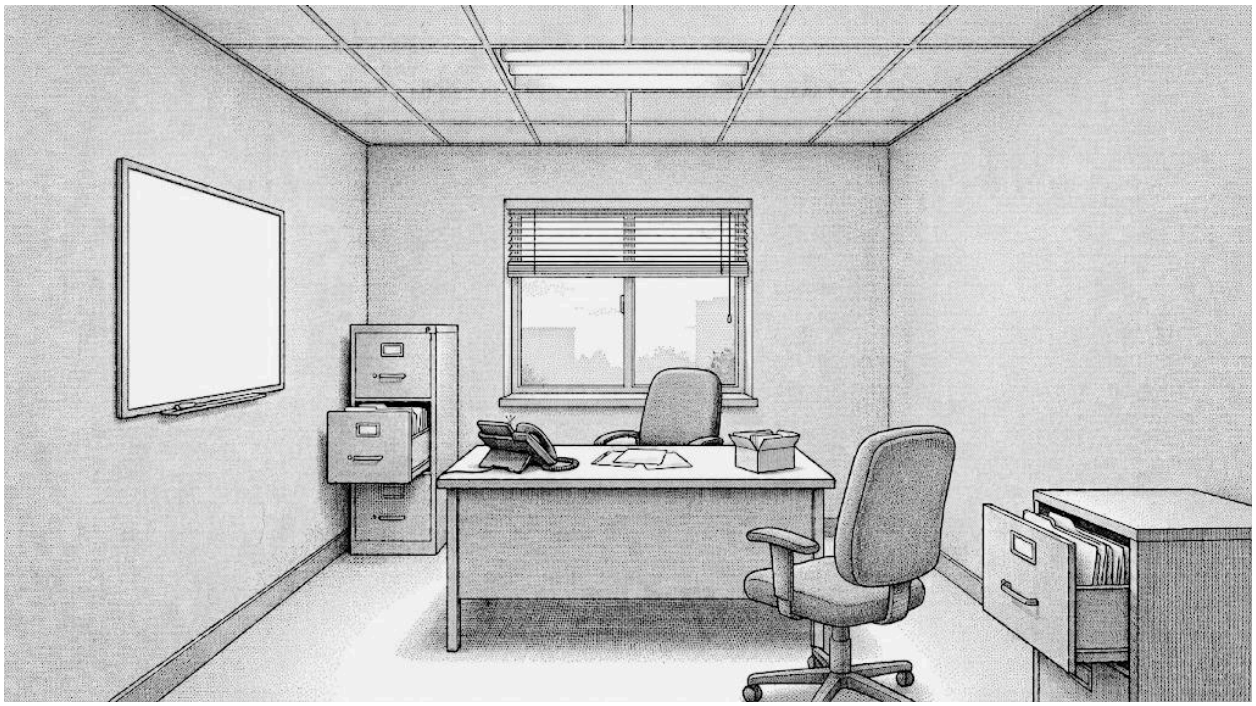
You don't have to figure everything out on your own.

Let's begin.

**Dr. Bill Sodeman**
Founder and CEO, n3ed.com

# Part I: You're an Executive Now

## Chapter 1: The Myth of Readiness



**"Where do I start?"**

I love the expression "I was born ready." It brings up feelings of confidence, bravado, and a commitment to get the job done.

The truth is that sometimes we think we're more prepared than we actually are.

A promotion can expose your readiness gap quickly. The title changes overnight, but your confidence, judgment, and understanding of the role do not. When reality fails to match the picture you had in your mind, it is easy to assume something has gone wrong. You may blame the timing, question your qualifications, or wonder whether everyone overestimated you.

That uncertainty often gets labeled as the *imposter experience*. You begin to suspect that you are not suited for the responsibility you have been given. Doubt creeps in. Your sense of self-worth can suffer a significant blow. You start to second-guess yourself.

All of the discomfort that you feel may not mean you are unqualified. It may simply mean you are encountering the role honestly for the first time. That's an important step.

## 1. Becoming a CIO Overnight

The owner of Pearl City Services, a thriving government and commercial contractor on the island of Oahu, approached a professor who specializes in management and information technology and whom a colleague recommended. The company's IT director had recently moved to another city on the mainland, and there was an opportunity to hire staff and upgrade the director position to an executive role.

The owner and professor quickly negotiated a part-time position that allowed the professor time for his faculty responsibilities. When the owner asked the professor to suggest a new title for the role, the professor thought for a moment and responded, "Chief Information Officer." When the owner said yes, the professor smiled while he thought, *"OK, now what do I do?"*

I was that professor. I lived in Honolulu twenty years ago, and I remember the first few moments in my new office, realizing that this was my first executive role, and panicking.

The office itself didn't help. It was a windowless room down the hall from the executive suite, furnished with whatever the previous director hadn't taken with him: a desk, two mismatched chairs, and a phone that still carried his voicemail greeting. Nobody had briefed me on a budget, a strategic plan, or even a list of active projects. I had a title that outranked most of the people I'd be working with, and nothing yet to justify it beyond the owner's confidence and my own resume. That gap, between the authority the title implied and the credibility I hadn't yet earned, is the specific discomfort this chapter is about.

During those initial days, I relied on basic survival instincts: taking stock of what was in front of me. I found no established team awaiting guidance, merely a filing cabinet containing leftover project documentation and agreements from a predecessor who had operated as a solo act. The first concrete task on my plate involved bringing on a junior staffer. Before drafting a job specification for this new position, I was forced to discern what the organization actually required. I had originally imagined the C-suite distinction demanded immediate, polished answers. Instead, those opening days required an unvarnished assessment of what remained, long before I could define the support required to move forward.

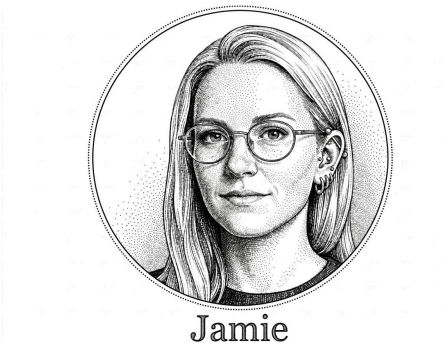
That initial week, I consulted two trusted peers. One was a past associate who had navigated a comparable transition several years prior, offering some excellent perspective and her best wishes. The other, a close university colleague, patiently sat through my rambling worries about vendor contracts I didn't yet understand and asked, at some point, whether I thought I couldn't do this, or whether I was just tired of not knowing yet. It was a fair question, and I didn't have a good answer for her that night. What I had was a stack of paper and a blank job description, and the sense that both were solvable if I stopped waiting to feel ready before I started.

## 2. Earning the Title

It wasn't my first professional management role. I had recently stepped down as a graduate program chair at my university, after three years of negotiating with fellow faculty members, building schedules, reviewing plans, and taking action. I felt good about what we'd accomplished in that time. But I also knew, sitting in that new office, that the program chair job had really been a lower-middle-management position. Even a dean of a school or college at a university can be a middle manager, depending on the size and scope of the institution. A C-level position was a different kind of opportunity to lead and to decide, and I didn't yet know what that difference required of me.

The owner, to his credit, gave me room without disappearing entirely. Two weeks in, he stopped by my new office, looked at the whiteboard I'd started filling with vendor names and open questions, and asked what I'd found. I told him honestly: no strategic plan, a couple of vendor contracts I thought we were overpaying for, and a security gap nobody had flagged. He nodded slowly, said, "That tracks," and left. It wasn't praise, exactly, but it also wasn't the correction I'd been bracing for. I realized afterward that I'd spent two weeks assuming his silence meant I was failing quietly. It meant he was letting me work.

The moment came a few weeks in, when I sat across from the owner with two finalists' resumes on the desk between us. I'd run the interviews myself, decided who I wanted, and now I had to make the case. I laid out why I wanted to hire Jamie: not just the skills on the resume, but what I thought the department would need in its first year, more troubleshooting instinct than polish, someone who could grow into the role rather than someone who already looked finished. The owner listened, asked one question, and said, "Sounds right to me." That was it. No pushback, no second-guessing. Walking out of that office, I realized the shift wasn't that I suddenly knew more. It was that my judgment, on something that mattered, had just been treated as the final word. That was the first time my title felt earned rather than assigned.


Jamie

I still remember driving home that night replaying the sentence “sounds right to me” more than the hiring decision itself. It was such a small thing, three words, delivered without ceremony. But it was the first time since the CIO title went on my door that someone had treated my read of a situation as sufficient on its own, without asking me to show my work first. I’d spent three weeks assuming I needed to prove the title was deserved. It turned out the title had already been given. What I needed was practice using it.

## 3. Naming the Experience

I didn’t have the vocabulary for what I was feeling that first week, but I have it now. What I was experiencing has a name and a research base. Psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes first documented it in 1978 as the impostor phenomenon, and study after study of high-achieving professionals has confirmed it since. I call it the imposter experience.

(Note: I prefer the name ***“imposter experience”*** to a better-known alternative, “imposter syndrome.” A syndrome implies that something is wrong with a person and that it can be cured or fixed somehow. The imposter experience recognizes that the imposter feelings may be *temporary*, and partly due to that person’s environment. It can involve several factors, including the higher stakes that come with a promotion, a smaller peer network of people to consult, and less information for decision-making. Dr. Clance admitted in a 2015 interview (Cuddy, 2015) that if she were given an opportunity to rename this term, she would call it the imposter experience!)

## 4. What the Research Shows

Part of what made the panic so disorienting is that it wasn’t irrational. I’d been promoted because the owner trusted my judgment on the technology side of his business, the same instinct that had made me a decent program chair. But the qualities that get you promoted and the qualities the new role requires are rarely identical, and

organizations are not particularly good at telling the difference. Economists Alan Benson, Danielle Li, and Kelly Shue studied this directly in a 2019 paper in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, tracking sales organizations that promoted their best performing salespeople into management. The highest-performing salespeople were more likely to receive promotions. However, the researchers found that stronger individual sales performance did not necessarily translate into stronger managerial performance. In fact, among workers on the margin of promotion, higher sales performance was associated with lower managerial effectiveness. Organizations were placing considerable weight on the old scoreboard, individual sales results, even though other qualities, including the ability to collaborate, were better indicators of managerial potential.

If you have ever wondered whether you were promoted for the wrong reasons, the honest answer may be yes, at least partly. The same is true for many people standing where you are. That isn't a personal failing. It's closer to a design flaw in how most organizations fill their executive seats, and I think about it every time I picture myself in that windowless office: a strong candidate on paper, and a complete unknown in practice.

The research on the imposter experience itself deserves the same kind of care. A 2024 systematic review in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, led by Daniel Gullifor and four coauthors, pulled together decades of studies on what they called the "impostor phenomenon" at work. The review brings together research showing how the impostor experience can affect people at work, including its associations with anxiety, burnout, and patterns of overpreparation or overwork. The findings also reveal a more complicated relationship with performance than we might expect. Feeling like an impostor does not automatically mean someone is performing poorly, and researchers continue to examine how those feelings influence behavior and outcomes. The impostor experience is not a clinical diagnosis, and it should not be treated as proof that someone lacks the ability to succeed.

That distinction matters more than it sounds like it should. It's the difference between treating the feeling as information and treating it as a verdict.

## 5. Three Years In

Here's what some of the research tells us, and what I didn't understand at the time I received that executive opportunity: the feeling of not being ready is not evidence that you aren't ready. It's also not a feeling that expires once you've settled into the role.



Mary

I started coaching a VP named Mary shortly after her first ninety days at Meridian. Her CHRO brought me in, not because anything was wrong, but because the company wanted her transition from outsider to trusted insider to stick. We worked together for several years, and what I observed in her third year revealed something important: the insecurities that accompany an executive transition don't necessarily disappear with experience.

Meridian had hired Mary away from a vendor to replace a VP who was retiring. By her third year, she had developed a habit of walking the floor and personally solving problems that landed in front of her, decisions that involved time and money, moving fast because fast decisions felt safer to her than slow ones.

When we finally talked about it, she said something I've repeated to other clients since: *"I know I'm not supposed to be the one who fixes this stuff anymore. I just don't trust it to get fixed right if I'm not the one doing it."* That sentence is the imposter experience wearing a competence costume. It doesn't always look like hesitation or self-doubt. Sometimes it looks like someone who is extremely good at their job, refusing to stop proving it.

Mary already knew the habit was taking growth opportunities away from her managers and staff. She kept doing it anyway, because being the person who could fix anything was the thing that had gotten her hired, and she wasn't convinced, three years in, that Meridian wouldn't eventually notice they'd made a mistake bringing in an outsider. That's the Gullifor review's overwork finding almost exactly: her floor-walking wasn't incompetence dressed up as diligence, it was *real competence aimed at the wrong target*.

What changed wasn't a lecture about delegation. It was naming what she was protecting against: the fear that the day she stopped proving her competence out loud was the day someone would ask why Meridian had hired an outsider in the first place. If she kept solving every problem herself, she would spend her whole tenure proving she belonged, one fire at a time, and never build the thing that answers that question: a team that ran well because of decisions she'd handed off, not ones she'd made herself. Once she saw the habit as a trust question instead of a competence question, she started catching herself mid-stride on the floor and asking a manager what they'd do first, before she told them what she'd do.

## 6. What Letting Go Looked Like

A few months later she told me about a shipment problem that could have cost Meridian a meaningful contract if it went wrong. Old Mary would have been on the floor within the hour. This time she asked her operations manager what he recommended, listened, and backed his call. It worked. She told me the story with a strange mix of pride and mourning in her voice, proud of him, and a little unsettled by how easy it had turned out to be to let go. That mix, I've come to believe, is what it feels like to outgrow your own competence. Nobody warns you that it comes with grief attached.

Separated by two decades and operating from entirely different perspectives, Mary and I were wrestling with the same foundational tension, viewing it from opposite edges of a shared vulnerability. I was a novice C-suite leader persuaded that I lacked genuine standing in that initial role, largely because I had no prior blueprint for it. She was a seasoned leader whom Meridian had entrusted with maintaining momentum in a flourishing division.

Even so, Mary was still convinced the room would notice the day she stopped personally proving she deserved it. Both feelings pointed to the same blind spot: neither of us was looking clearly at the evidence already in front of us, the contracts I'd read, the managers she'd trained. The feeling doesn't go away with tenure. It just finds a new argument to make.

## 7. Wherever You're Standing

Whether you are anticipating a future promotion or navigating the early, unsettling days following a new title, these internal tensions may sound familiar. You might find yourself measuring your present capabilities against an intimidating new designation, listing every area where your expertise feels incomplete. Alternatively, after years of demonstrated success, you may still catch yourself instinctively jumping in to

solve problems directly rather than empowering your team. Neither instinct makes you a fraud. They are simply natural responses to managing elevated stakes, surfacing in ways specific to your current path.

That's the argument this book opens with, and the one I want you to sit with before we go any further. Readiness, in the way most of us picture it, doesn't exist. Nobody walks into their first executive role with the job already mastered, because the job doesn't work that way. What separates the executives who find their footing from the ones who don't isn't the presence or absence of that first-week panic. It's what they do in the months after it, which is where the rest of this book lives.

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