Company Builders: The Leadership Model That Scales

Inside the leadership model that drives lasting value across across private equity, and other growth-oriented private and public organizations.

By Jamey Cummings, Chuck Egoville, and Tom Figueroa

Two companies, same industry, similar financials.

One has a Chief Executive Officer who drives every major decision, a Chief Financial Officer who is reconsidering his next chapter, and a leadership team that would need to be rebuilt if anyone left.

The other has a CEO who's developed three people who could step into expanded roles tomorrow, a CFO who's energized about the road ahead, and a bench of leaders who grew up inside the organization.

Same numbers. Completely different bets.

Whether you're a private equity investor evaluating an acquisition, a board planning for a CEO transition, a family business navigating a generational handoff, or a founder thinking about what the company looks like without you, the question is the same: **Does this organization have the depth to succeed beyond the current leadership?**

The value of depth shows up on a balance sheet.

We've seen it drive valuations, de-risk transactions, and separate companies that hold their value through transitions from ones that don't. We have over 45 years of experience finding leaders who create that kind of value, across PE and other growth-oriented private and public organizations. The leaders who develop the people around them – who create depth instead of dependence – those are the individuals we call **company builders**. And finding them is about hiring differently.

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The Reflex That Holds Companies Back

When results fall short, the instinct is almost always the same: find someone new.

In PE, the compressed timeline makes that instinct especially strong. In public companies, board pressure and activist investors create the same urgency. For family-owned businesses, the impulse often comes from a board that's watched a generational transition stall. And often, the decision to bring in someone new *is* the right call.

We frequently get pulled into these situations. The CFO who got the business to $50 million is not equipped to help it reach $500 million. The complexity has outgrown the person, and the role needs fresh capabilities.

But the hire that actually solves the problem may not always be the most obvious one. Sometimes the biggest gap isn't a missing skill set; it's a leader who can develop the talent already in the building.

And then there's the other version of the problem: the leader who can do it all. They fix everything and drive every result. It works, until they become the ceiling. One person only has so many hours.

When leaders build other leaders, the organization stops depending on any one person. It has a bench, and can absorb a departure, push through a growth inflection, execute an add-on, without the whole thing wobbling.

Who you hire, and specifically, whether you hire someone who will build the people around them or someone who will do everything themselves, is one of the highest-leverage decisions a company can make. The right external hire doesn't replace the need for internal development. They accelerate it.

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The Proven Dividends of a Deep Bench

The cost of a thin bench shows up most clearly in the moments that matter: a transaction, a transition, or a sudden departure.

Our experts see this constantly. An investor has a solid CFO, but that CFO has already had a big liquidity event and isn't motivated to go another round. The next buyer looks at that seat and sees day-one risk: they'd need to find a replacement before they even get started. That can drive down the potential value of the company.

Now compare that to a company where the CFO is energetic about the next chapter, the Chief Revenue Officer is already developing the people behind them, and the CEO has been building bench strength since they walked in. That team reduces risk and moves the multiple.

In public and family-owned companies, the timeline is different, but the dynamic is the same. A buy-and-hold investor wants to know the company can weather a CEO transition, a market shift, or a generational handoff without the business stalling. A board evaluating its own leadership bench is asking the same question an acquirer would: if we lost someone tomorrow, does the organization hold? A company that's one resignation away from a potential crisis doesn't command a premium. The best leaders in those environments treat succession as something they're always doing.

The through line is simple: organizations with real leadership depth are worth more.

Research cited by InStride suggests that proactive succession planning can increase company valuations and investor returns by 20 to 25 percent. Whether the next transition is three years out or thirty, the ones who've built their bench are the ones who hold their value.

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How We Identify Company Builders

Most of the time when a client partners with us, the conversation starts with the job spec: background, experience they're seeking in a candidate, technical requirements, and cultural fit. These factors are critical in identifying the right leader, but it's not where we find the difference between a great hire and an exceptional one.

Here's what we're looking to answer – and how we verify it:

Who have they developed?

Where are the people who used to work for this leader? Did they grow and step into bigger roles? A company builder's legacy consistently demonstrates professional development of people, encouragement of upskilling to increase value-add, and fostering of relationship equity that improves teamwork at all levels.

Do they own the outcome?

When results slip, the easiest move is to point at the team and start making changes. Company builders do the opposite. They take the result as theirs, look honestly at what they could have done differently, and work the problem from the inside before reaching for the roster.

Can they see what's in the building?

In many of the organizations we work with, especially those going through rapid growth or a transition in ownership, there's more internal talent than anyone's had time to develop. The best leaders figure out who inside is capable of more than their current title suggests, and bring in the right people from the outside to fill any remaining gaps. And they don't wait for a vacancy to think about who's next, they're actively developing the people who could step up.

Do they know when to let go?

Some of the most talented executives we meet are also the biggest bottlenecks. They're brilliant, driven, and they can't stop doing everyone else's job. Company builders delegate and empower others on purpose, because that's how you find out if what you've built can actually run. The best of them use technology the same way – as a means of pushing visibility and decision-making down to give their teams more room to lead.

Are they motivated to do it again?

Capability alone doesn't tell you much if the person has already made their money and is mentally halfway to the beach. In a PE context, we find out if this person wants to build through another three-to-five-year cycle, or are they looking for a soft landing? In a public company, we determine if this is someone who sees the next decade as something they want to shape, or just survive? In a family business, are they committed to stewarding the legacy, or checking a box? Most interested executives are unlikely to tell a PE board "I'm not sure I want to do it again." They may be more forthcoming, however, with their search partner. That honest read on motivation is something we're often uniquely positioned to get.

None of this shows up cleanly in a traditional interview. It comes out in the patterns of a career and in the stories people tell when you push past the bullet points. And because we do this across hundreds of searches a year, we've seen enough placements play out to know the difference between a leader who talks about building people and one who actually does it.

Company Builders In Practice

Ask the best leaders we've placed about their proudest accomplishment, and they rarely point to a number. They talk about the people who used to work for them, and where those people are now. That answer is what tells us we're talking to a company builder.

In family businesses, we've watched second-generation leaders tasked with "professionalizing" the business choose to invest in the existing team rather than replace it. By honoring the institutional knowledge already in the building, they create organizations that hold their value through the handoff.

In founder-led organizations preparing for institutional capital, the founders who succeed are almost always the ones who spent the year before the raise quietly building the leadership layer that would let them step back.

The same instinct is visible at the largest scale, in the institutions that endure across decades.

- Jamie Dimon has spent nearly twenty years at JPMorgan Chase building a deep leadership bench – deliberately rotating top executives across the firm's major businesses to ensure continuity at the highest level as senior leaders eventually move on. It's a strategy that analysts and observers have pointed to as a key factor in the firm's sustained performance, including record annual profits in recent years.
- Nick Saban's legacy in college football isn't just his collection of championship rings. All four coaches in the 2025-2026 College Football Playoff semifinals – Indiana's Curt Cignetti, Oregon's Dan Lanning, Miami's Mario Cristobal, and Ole Miss's Pete Golding – were former assistants under Saban. He didn't just build a winning team; he built a system that developed leaders who could go out and build programs of their own.

What unites all of them is a sense of what the job actually is. They understand that the team they leave behind is the truer measure of what they built, and they spend their tenure accordingly.

Final Thoughts

Every hire is a bet on what the organization becomes next. The leader who fills a role solves today's problem, but the leader who builds the next layer of leadership behind them solves the ones you haven't encountered yet.

After 45 years of placing executives and watching how those bets play out, the difference is clear. The question worth sitting with isn't whether your leadership team can handle what's in front of them right now. It's whether anyone is building the team that handles what comes after.

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About JM Search

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