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My two-cents toward sparking transformation

Your Path to Partner

Four essential road maps to help you reach your destination.

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Achieving Partner status is squarely on the minds today's young and ambitious CPAs. With baby boomers set to retire in droves, opportunities abound for those leaders who are ready to step up.

But what does it take to make partner? What are the qualities, the leadership skills, and the core competencies that CPA firms across the country look at when deciding who is going to make it? In short, if you're on the journey, what does it take for you to reach your desired destination?

A Roadmap is Key

As with any journey, it can pay to use a map to guide your way. The road to Partner, after all, is filled with speed bumps, potholes, and potential detours. Without a map, you could veer off course, delaying (or even preventing) arrival at your ultimate destination: Partnership.



Although one map may be sufficient for most journeys, on the road to Partner you'll need four. These different yet integrated maps provide a framework that you can use to create your personal itinerary as you identify your strengths (and areas for development) in the key skills that professional service firms require for admission to Partner.

I've developed these maps based on my experience as a former Partner in a CPA firm and now as an executive coach to many high potential and aspiring CPA firm Partners. I've had the opportunity to check out the expectations and core competencies that many firms demand of those in the Partner role.

Remember, the actual road you take to Partner will be as unique and individual as you are. Regardless of the path you take, there are distinct and important skills that you must develop on your journey.

It's a given that technical excellence in your area of specialty is foundational; however, your problem-solving and decision-making skills need to be top-notch as well. And of course, you must meet your firm's core performance metrics, such as billable hours, collections, and realization on jobs.

But as executive coach Marshall Goldsmith states, "What got you here, won't get you there."

Your technical skills will only get you so far. It's the skills incorporated in the four Road Maps that provide a framework that will lead you to your desired destination.

Use the following six-point scale to rate your mastery of the Partner skill areas listed in each of the four "maps" discussed in this article:

- 1 = Clear Strength: "One of the things I do best"**
- 2 = Hidden Strength: "Others rate me higher than I do"**
- 3 = Blind Spot: "I rate myself higher than others do"**
- 4 = Weakness: "I don't do this well"**
- 5 = Untested Area: "I need more exposure in this area"**
- 6 = Don't Know: "I need more feedback"**



Map 1: Your “I” Map: Leading Yourself

Understanding who you are, where you want to go, and why you want to go there is a good place to start. This first stage of your journey requires reflection and introspection. It is a process of getting clear about your vision for your desired future and the values that you want to live by.

There are many self-assessment tools you can use to identify who you are, what your strengths are, and which skills you need to develop. These may include a personality assessment such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a DISC personality assessment (another tool of this type), or an emotional intelligence assessment such as the EQi 2.0.

Third-party 360 assessments can be another important source of information about yourself, particularly how others see you. You can also take time to thoughtfully review your employer’s performance evaluations, which can provide valuable insight into what others believe to be your strengths and weaknesses. What’s more, they can help you recognize the attributes and skills that your firm values most. (Yes, some firms’ performance evaluation processes can be sorely lacking. If that’s the case, consider it an opportunity for you to be proactive: seek out regular informal feedback from your peers and supervisors.)

Both your own self-assessment and the assessments of others can help you understand where you stand in your ability to lead yourself. Soft skills such as self-awareness, adaptability, building trust, composure, and self-confidence are critical areas to master on your road to Partner.

Here’s an informal tool you can use to evaluate your intrapersonal skills on an ongoing basis.

Your “I” Map: Assessing Your Intrapersonal Skills

Skill Area	Ask yourself ...	Score
Self-awareness	Do I know what I’m feeling and why? Do I know how my actions and behaviors impact others?	_____
Self-confidence	Do I exhibit confidence in my everyday work?	_____
Trustworthiness	Do I keep confidences? Do I do what I say will do?	_____
Adaptability / flexibility	How well do I adapt to change? Do I insist on having things my own way, not listening to input from others?	_____



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Composure	How well do I cope with stress? How well do I handle pressure? Am I a calming influence in difficult situations?	_____
Proactivity	Do I speak up regarding my career wants and needs? Do I act on opportunities that come my way? Do I create opportunities for my professional growth and development?	_____
Empathy	Can I put myself in others' shoes? Do my actions demonstrate a genuine concern for the well-being of my coworkers?	_____
Ability to learn	Do I focus on continuous improvement (continually learning from my mistakes and understanding what to do differently next time)? Do I listen to negative feedback with an open, receptive mind (and without becoming defensive)?	_____
Communication effectiveness	Do I effectively present ideas in clear, concise language? Do others readily grasp my comments?	_____
Persistence / resilience	In the face of a setback or disappointment, how do I react? Am I persistent and resilient in the face of adversity?	_____

When you look at your "I" Map, where does it take you? What are your areas of strength? What are the areas you need to develop? Your ratings can help you understand what you need to keep doing, what you need to start doing, and just as important, what you need to stop doing.

While completing a periodic self-assessment is important, what's even more important is how you use what you learn about yourself. Your results provide an opportunity to be proactive — to study your results to develop an objective and clear awareness of your personal strengths and opportunities for your professional development.



Map 2: Your Internal “We” Map: Leading Your Team

Now we’ll shift to high gear, from “I” to “We,” from details to big picture, from task to team. The Internal “We” Map includes requirements for leading teams within the firm. You may find yourself the leader of many different audit engagement teams or perhaps an industry-focused team or a member of a tax department team. In short, being an effective team leader is another skill that a Partner must possess. How would you evaluate your team leadership skills?

Your Internal “We” Map: Assessing Your Team Leadership Skills

Skill Area	Ask yourself ...	Score
Inspiring and motivating	Do I bring out the best in people by providing the inspiration and motivation my team members need to deliver high performance?	_____
Conflict resolution	Do I handle conflicts directly and constructively? Do I act promptly to resolve conflicts?	_____
Coaching and developing	Do I take an active role in coaching and developing my staff? Am I aware of each team member’s goals?	_____
Delegation	Do I delegate effectively?	_____
Management style	Do I trust people to perform or do I micromanage? Do I provide direction or help and give realistic expectations for completion? Do I hoard work thinking that only I can do it?	_____
Accountability	Do I set direction and hold my team accountable for meeting their goals and completing their projects?	_____

While this self-assessment can help guide you in your development, who can provide you with feedback on your team leadership skills?



Map 3: Your External “We” Map: Leading Your Clients

Sam Walton had it right: “There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.”

Your ability to develop and grow client relationships will be one of your most critical roles as a partner. It’s all about establishing and maintaining effective relationships with your clients and using regular communication to build confidence, earn their respect and gain their trust.

Let’s see how you would evaluate your skills in this critical area.

Your External “We” Map: Assessing Your Client Leadership Skills

Skill Area	Ask yourself ...	Score
Client service	Do I consistently meet and exceed the expectations and requirements of my clients? Do I always act with the client in mind?	_____
Strategic agility	Am I future oriented? Do my clients look to me to solve problems for them by looking at their challenges from a variety of angles, not just one perspective?	_____
Business development	Am I able to connect with clients and potential clients, understanding their needs and identifying and developing proactive solutions?	_____

Based on my work with a number of CPAs on their business development skills, one thing is clear: There is no one-size-fits-all right way to develop business. But understanding your unique strengths, listening to learn your clients’ unmet needs, and taking the initiative to address those needs are critical elements of effective client leadership.



Map 4: Your External “We” Map: Leading Your Firm

Many leaders looking for promotion forget about the important role they play in being the face of the firm to the community. Supporting the firm’s mission and vision both internally and externally is a critical element of your role. This is where you have an opportunity to display your strategic and visionary leadership skills: enrolling others in the firm’s mission and vision.

Your External “We” Map: Assessing Your Firm Leadership Skills

Skill Area	Ask yourself ...	Score
Commitment	Do I display a commitment to my firm’s values? Do I demonstrate that commitment in my interactions with team members, partners, clients, and others in the community?	_____
Managing up	Do the Partners in my firm trust me to deal with clients’ senior leaders effectively? Do I deal comfortably with more senior professionals?	_____
Corporate politics	Am I sensitive to how both people and our organizations function? Do I understand that corporate politics is a necessary part of organizational life?	_____
Firm support	Do I support the firm’s mission and vision, both internally and externally? Am I a cheerleader for the firm among my coworkers and within the community?	_____

Keep Your Eyes on the Road

How did you measure up? Did you identify any speed bumps or potholes that could potentially derail you? Build on your 1’s and 2’s. Watch out for 3’s and 4’s and seek ways to develop and further assess your 5’s and 6’s.



As you address your developmental needs, here are some key strategies to employ:

- Identify your firm's required core skills. Work to make sure they are consistent with your strengths or the areas you're focused on developing.
- Seek out stretch opportunities to develop further.
- Act on feedback from assessments and performance evaluations.
- Ask mentors and advocates to give you direct and honest feedback.
- Listen to what they say!

Bottom line, many opportunities lie ahead on your own journey to Partner. Current economic challenges may slow your progress a bit (as it will for everyone), but it's important you don't allow that to distract you from your ultimate goal: Partnership.

The opportunities are there for you. The baby boom generation is approaching retirement age (many have already reached it) and with such a competitive marketplace, firms no longer tolerate poor performance from any team member. But you must be proactive in creating your own opportunities. Don't sit back and wait for them to come to you.

Get clear about your strengths. Understand your blind spots. Focus on building your core skills. Seek opportunities to gain experience in an untested area. Solicit feedback (and use it to enhance your growth and continuous learning).

Your destination lies ahead.

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