Reid Hoffman on Being CEO

Idea In Short

LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman loved being CEO of a small startup and liked it far less as the company scaled, despite holding the same title throughout. His candor points to a broader truth: CEO of fifty people, five hundred and five thousand are three different jobs wearing one label.

Three Types of CEO

In a podcast interview, LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman made a comment about the three types of CEOs that stuck: he enjoyed the role early on and enjoyed it progressively less as the company grew, despite the title never changing. The honest explanation was simple. It was a different job wearing the same name.1

Self-Awareness as an Asset

Admitting that a role, even one carrying the same title as before, no longer fits is a genuinely useful form of self-awareness rather than a weakness. Life rarely moves in a straight line, and CEO of a fifty-person startup is simply not comparable to CEO of a five-thousand-person company, an apples-to-oranges comparison dressed up as the same job.

A Title Is a Placeholder

Titles are a holdover from static organizational thinking. In a more dynamic environment where meaningful work increasingly happens in self-forming teams, what appears on a business card is often the least interesting fact about the person holding it.

Small: Under 100 People

At this stage, the CEO knows everyone by name, likely hired most of them personally and stays directly embedded in the work, helping out and leading by visible example. This was the stage Hoffman genuinely enjoyed, working on product strategy, business strategy and hands-on problem-solving, doing whatever made the thing work. His own framing was that the CEO title only interested him insofar as it was instrumental to accomplishing something he actually cared about.

Medium: 100 to 1,000 People

Numbers here are approximate, but the shorthand captures rapid growth: multiple layers now exist in the org chart, and a CEO increasingly manages people they hired who then hired other people the CEO has never personally met.

Large: 1,000-Plus, Headed Public

This is the stage Hoffman liked least. At this scale, the CEO role shifts toward organizational structure, decision rules, hiring practices and empowering others to execute, rather than solving specific problems directly. Listening to a typical quarterly earnings call makes clear that most CEOs at this stage function more as publicists than evangelists, with a handful of notable exceptions. Legendary leaders like Steve Jobs, Andy Grove and Jeff Bezos were known for holding both a macro mindset, building company and culture, and a micro mindset, staying granular on specific problems, a combination that also earned some of them reputations for control and even obsession.2

Don't Fall Victim to the Peter Principle

It is entirely fine to be genuinely good at one, two or all three of these CEO stages, or none of them, since no leadership style is universally average or universally exceptional. The same logic extends to other C-suite roles: a great CFO, CIO or CMO at one company size is not guaranteed to be great at another. Rather than forcing personal growth into a role that no longer fits, it can be the smarter move to hire someone suited to the next stage and step aside from that specific function, the way Hoffman effectively did as LinkedIn scaled.3

The Same Logic Applies Below the CEO

The pattern is not unique to the top job. A first-line manager promoted into a director role, then into a vice-president role, is technically climbing the same ladder while doing three genuinely different jobs, and the skills that made someone excellent at the first rung do not automatically transfer to the third. Organizations that treat every promotion as simply "more of the same job, with a bigger title" tend to promote skilled individual contributors into management roles they are poorly suited for, and then wonder why performance drops. The honest question Hoffman modeled at the CEO level is worth asking at every level: is this actually the next job I want, or just the next title available.

Life Moves in S-Curves

Growth does not scale linearly. A company twice the size is not simply double the ingredients, double the time and double the heat, the way a recipe might suggest; it is functionally a different cake altogether. Recognizing which stage of that S-curve genuinely suits your strengths, and being honest when a later stage does not, is a far more useful skill than forcing yourself to enjoy a role simply because the title stayed the same.

- 1Reid Hoffman
- 2Andrew Grove
- 3Peter principle

Summary

Reid Hoffman's candor about disliking the CEO role as LinkedIn scaled reveals a broader truth: a title is a placeholder, and the job underneath changes completely with size. Know which stage you actually enjoy, and hire someone else for the rest.