

The Path to Commercial Director

What Changes as Authority, Exposure and Organisational Consequence Increase

The higher the role, the less you are promoted for producing the answer and the more you are trusted to protect the organisation while others produce it.

PREPARED BY

Manu Reynolds — Director

Buildit Admin Solutions Pty Ltd | ABN 35 677 590 082

0406 066 652 | manu@builditadminsolutions.com.au | builditadminsolutions.com.au

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Document Status and Use

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Purpose

A career and capability map showing how technical delivery, people leadership, governance, work winning, business planning and executive trust change on the path to Commercial Director.

Audience

Ambitious mid-career and senior commercial staff.

How to Use This Manual

1. Read the relevant chapter before a live conversation, review or decision—not after the consequence has already landed.
2. Apply the method to current project work. The suite is designed to change observable behaviour, not merely increase awareness.
3. Record the decision, action, owner, evidence and review date produced by the exercise.
4. Use the related manuals where the issue crosses career, communication, judgement, leadership or stakeholder boundaries.

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1. The Commercial Career Ladder

Titles describe only part of the transition; the real movement is in consequence, field of view and people leverage.

Progression may run through project, business-unit, corporate, precontracts, claims or assurance pathways. The route matters less than whether the required evidence is accumulated.

A title is useful only when it reflects a genuine expansion in the level of outcome, risk and people entrusted to you.

Titles vary between organisations, but the underlying progression is recognisable. The individual begins by learning and producing, then owns packages, then a project commercial outcome, then several teams or projects, and finally enterprise risk and commercial direction.

The ladder is not climbed by doing the same work at greater volume. Each transition changes the nature of value. A brilliant package administrator does not become a Commercial Director by administering more packages; they must progressively learn to produce decisions, teams, systems, clients and business outcomes.

Typical stage	Primary unit of responsibility	The organisation is testing
Graduate / Cadet	Assigned analysis and administration	Learning rate, accuracy, work ethic and judgement about when to ask
Contract Administrator	A defined package or process	Technical independence, reliability and commercial discipline
Senior CA / Contracts Manager	Complex packages and coordination through others	Judgement, influence, foresight and informal leadership
Commercial Manager	Whole-project commercial outcome and team	Forecast integrity, client strategy, people leadership and accountability
Senior / Project Commercial Manager	Major project, portfolio or complex delivery environment	Enterprise judgement, governance, senior relationships and succession
Commercial Director	Business-unit or enterprise commercial performance	Capital protection, strategy, work winning, executive trust and leadership scale

KEY WARNING *Titles are noisy. Compare the actual decisions, authority, team, project consequence and evidence attached to the role.*

The route to senior leadership may run through projects, precontracts, governance, claims or a deliberate combination of them.

Project roles develop delivery judgement, client instincts and accountability for real outcomes. Business-unit roles widen the view across project performance, resources and pipeline. Corporate roles develop governance, assurance, systems and enterprise risk. Precontracts adds opportunity selection and risk shaping before the job exists.

A future Commercial Director benefits from understanding all of these lenses, but does not need to spend equal time in each. The practical aim is to identify the missing exposure and acquire enough of it to become credible, without drifting into a series of disconnected rotations.

EXAMPLE — USING ASSURANCE WITHOUT BECOMING AN OBSERVER *A project Commercial Manager took a twelve-month assurance role across four projects. The role widened their understanding of recurring forecast and governance failures. They then returned to delivery and applied the patterns to a live team. Assurance became a force multiplier because it was reconnected to operational accountability.*

2. The Five Career Transitions

Each transition requires letting go of the behaviour that made the previous level successful.

The path moves from doing, to owning, to reviewing, to leading a function, to protecting the enterprise. Technical depth remains important, but it becomes one input to a wider judgement system.

Every significant promotion requires you to stop relying on part of what made you successful at the previous level.

The difficult part of progression is not adding more skill; it is changing the unit through which you create value. Early careers reward personal production. Senior careers reward the quality of decisions, people and systems created around you.

Transition	Old source of value	New source of value
Learner → reliable producer	Effort and potential	Accurate output with declining supervision
Producer → package owner	Completing assigned tasks	Owning outcome, interfaces, evidence and forecast
Package owner → project commercial leader	Personal package control	Whole-project judgement and output through a team
Project leader → portfolio leader	Knowing one project deeply	Pattern recognition, governance and intervention across projects
Portfolio leader → Commercial Director	Operational commercial control	Enterprise strategy, capital, clients, work winning and leadership succession
EXAMPLE — THE MANAGER WHO WOULD NOT LET GO A newly promoted Commercial Manager continued rewriting every assessment and attending every package negotiation. Quality remained high but decisions slowed, the team stopped thinking and the manager had no time for forecast risk or the client. The promotion had changed the title, not the unit through which they created value.	EXAMPLE — THE MANAGER WHO WOULD NOT LET GO A newly promoted Commercial Manager continued rewriting every assessment and attending every package negotiation. Quality remained high but decisions slowed, the team stopped thinking and the manager had no time for forecast risk or the client. The promotion had changed the title, not the unit through which they created value.	EXAMPLE — THE MANAGER WHO WOULD NOT LET GO A newly promoted Commercial Manager continued rewriting every assessment and attending every package negotiation. Quality remained high but decisions slowed, the team stopped thinking and the manager had no time for forecast risk or the client. The promotion had changed the title, not the unit through which they created value.

Transition Review

Transition	Evidence held	Evidence missing
Doer to owner		
Owner to reviewer		
Reviewer to team leader		
Project leader to portfolio leader		
Portfolio leader to enterprise custodian		

3. Run the Complete Project Commercial Function

Director credibility begins with evidence that the whole project position can be made visible and controlled.

Lead forecast, cash, procurement, claims, client, subcontracts, approvals, people and closeout as an integrated system.

The first decisive test for director potential is whether you can produce a reliable whole-project commercial outcome through a team.

This means more than supervising package administration. The leader must understand head-contract position, procurement, subcontract performance, cost to complete, cash, claims, programme interfaces, risk and opportunity, client strategy, governance and team capability as one system.

A Commercial Manager who personally solves every hard matter may keep the project alive while concealing that the commercial function itself is weak. The stronger evidence is a team whose reports, decisions and escalations remain sound when the manager is not in every room.

EXAMPLE — NOTHING DRAMATIC HAPPENED During a Commercial Manager's leave, the team maintained the reporting rhythm, escalated within authority and handled two difficult package decisions without crisis. The quiet month was evidence that the manager had built a function rather than a personal dependency.

4. Build Enterprise Risk and Governance Literacy

The director must protect the company beyond the immediate project's preferred answer.

Understand delegations, board and executive reporting, audit, insurance, legal strategy, provisions, compliance, tax, joint ventures, reputation and portfolio concentration.

A Commercial Director must know when a project issue has become an enterprise issue and intervene before the reporting system catches up.

Enterprise judgement requires consistency across projects without pretending every project is identical. Governance provides authorities, review points and information standards; judgement determines where to focus when all projects can produce a plausible explanation.

The director asks whether the forecast is credible, whether contractual positions are evidenced, whether delegated authority is being respected, whether a client issue threatens wider work and whether the project leadership has the capability and objectivity to recover.

EXAMPLE — THE PATTERN ACROSS THREE PROJECTS Three projects reported unrelated design recovery assumptions. Viewed separately, each appeared possible. Viewed at portfolio level, all relied on the same stretched design resource and the same optimistic approval periods. The director-level value was seeing a shared enterprise exposure that no single project report revealed.

5. Manage Managers and Build the Function

A director creates leadership depth rather than becoming the senior reviewer of every document.

Assess managers, allocate authority, calibrate standards, build successors and intervene where project systems or people are failing.

Director-level leadership is measured by the quality, honesty and succession of the leaders beneath you.

Managing managers requires clear standards without taking back their jobs. The director sets expectations for forecast integrity, ethics, client conduct, people development and escalation, then coaches or intervenes according to consequence.

Talent allocation becomes a commercial decision. The strongest person is not automatically placed on the most prestigious project; they are placed where risk, development and succession produce the best enterprise outcome.

MANAGER PERSPECTIVE "The portfolio does not improve because I attend more project meetings. It improves because the Commercial Managers know the standard, tell me the truth early and are building people who can eventually replace them."

Leadership Leverage

Manager / function	Mandate	Evidence / risk	Development / succession

6. Lead Major Claims, Disputes and Settlements

Senior dispute leadership integrates legal strength, commercial value, executive appetite, client consequence and organisational precedent.

The director should understand the case deeply enough to set strategy, choose advisers, challenge assumptions, approve authority and communicate risk without becoming trapped in every evidentiary detail.

The senior commercial objective is not to maximise the claim; it is to produce the best risk-adjusted enterprise outcome.

Major disputes combine entitlement, evidence, causation, programme, quantum, cash, legal cost, management attention, precedent and relationships. Director-level judgement determines what position is defensible, what outcome is commercially rational, who should lead the process and when continued escalation destroys more value than it creates.

The strongest settlements often require a person who can remain firm without making the other side publicly surrender. This draws together technical substance, communication, ethics and political judgement.

EXAMPLE — WINNING LESS AND KEEPING MORE A project could pursue a larger claim through years of dispute or settle the evidenced core immediately while preserving a strategic client relationship and releasing management attention. The Commercial Director did not choose the smaller number because the case was weak. They chose the stronger enterprise outcome after pricing time, cost, collectability and future work.

7. Develop Precontracts and Risk Selection

The best loss is often the project the business understood well enough not to win on unsafe terms.

Commercial Directors influence bid strategy, qualifications, pricing risk, delivery model, supply chain, client selection and handover from tender to project.

The cheapest project risk to manage is the one understood, priced or refused before the contract is signed.

Commercial Directors help decide which opportunities deserve the organisation's capital and reputation. They test contract terms, delivery assumptions, partner capability, design maturity, market capacity, programme, contingency and the client's likely behaviour.

Work winning is not the art of removing every qualification to achieve the lowest number. It is presenting a credible solution, understanding where the organisation has an advantage and avoiding work whose risk cannot be responsibly priced or controlled.

EXAMPLE — THE PROJECT NOT WON A bid team wanted to accept an uninsurable liability and unresolved access risk to remain competitive. The commercial recommendation was to qualify the position even if it cost the tender. The project was not won. Two years later the successful contractor was carrying precisely the exposure identified. Commercial discipline sometimes creates value through work declined.

8. Understand Business Planning, Margin and Cash

Enterprise leadership requires fluency in how project decisions accumulate into business performance.

Read pipeline, overhead, utilisation, working capital, provisions, cash, margin, risk appetite and market capacity. Understand the difference between winning revenue and winning executable value.

At enterprise level, commercial leadership connects project truth to capital allocation, earnings quality and future capacity.

Directors must understand how project forecasts aggregate into business performance, how cash conversion differs from reported margin, what bonding and working capital constrain, and how pipeline quality affects people and risk decisions.

This requires comfort with numbers without reducing leadership to spreadsheets. The figures are a compressed account of operational reality. The director's job is to know where they are reliable, where they are lagging and what intervention the business can still make.

EXAMPLE — MARGIN WITHOUT CAPACITY A business unit appeared to have a strong pipeline, but the work concentrated mobilisation across the same six months and required commercial leaders who did not yet exist. The director-level response linked bidding decisions to workforce capacity rather than treating revenue growth as automatically desirable.

9. Build Executive and Client Trust

At senior levels, stakeholders must trust the judgement before they can inspect every detail.

Communicate bad news early, protect confidentiality, understand institutional objectives and remain consistent under pressure. A director's reputation is carried across projects and market cycles.

At senior level, relationships carry strategy, risk and reputation across conversations where the detail cannot all fit in the room.

Executives and clients need confidence that the Commercial Director understands the substance, will not hide the downside and can distinguish a negotiable project issue from a matter requiring enterprise attention.

The communication standard is concise without becoming superficial. Lead with the outcome, risk and decision; retain enough command of the detail to survive challenge; and know when the relationship requires a private conversation before the formal record.

EXAMPLE — THE FIVE-MINUTE EXECUTIVE BRIEF A director briefed an executive on a major exposure using one page: current probable outcome, evidence range, cash consequence, client posture, recommended strategy and required authority. The supporting analysis ran to several folders. Executive communication did not remove the detail; it made the decision accessible without losing the ability to defend it.

10. Accumulate Scale, Mobility and Difficult Assignments

Breadth should deepen judgement, not merely decorate the CV.

Seek exposure to project phases, delivery models, sectors, claims, distressed work, precontracts, portfolio governance and different leaders. Record what decision and consequence you personally carried.

A career portfolio records the range and consequence of what you have proved, not only where you were employed.

A CV lists projects and titles. A career portfolio records the contract forms, procurement decisions, packages, negotiations, forecasts, client exposures, disputes, systems, teams and outcomes behind them. It makes gaps visible before a promotion panel does.

The portfolio should contain evidence, not mythology: the decision you influenced, the scale of responsibility, the people who observed it, the measurable result and what you learned when the result was poor. Its purpose is not self-celebration. It is to help you choose the next experience deliberately.

***PRACTICAL ACTION** For each major project, record five things: what you owned, what changed because of your work, the hardest judgement you made, who can verify it and which next-level capability remains untested.*

Experience Portfolio

Assignment	Scale / complexity	Decision / consequence	Witness / gap

11. Build Reputation, Sponsorship and Succession

Director promotion requires credible people to believe the enterprise is safer with you in the role.

Sponsors need repeated evidence across contexts. Successors prove that leadership has multiplied capability rather than merely accumulated personal control.

Advice helps you improve; sponsorship places another person's credibility beside your name when opportunity is allocated.

A mentor explains the terrain. A sponsor argues that you should receive an opportunity. An advocate speaks positively from direct experience, sometimes without knowing they are doing it. A gatekeeper controls access to a project, meeting, role or decision.

Confusing these relationships creates frustration. A generous mentor may have no authority to move you. A senior sponsor cannot responsibly support you without evidence. A gatekeeper may need confidence that your move will not damage the current project. Understand what each relationship can legitimately provide.

EXAMPLE — ADVICE MISTAKEN FOR SPONSORSHIP A director met regularly with a Senior CA and offered useful career advice. When a role opened, the CA assumed support was automatic. The director had never seen them lead a forecast, handle a client or develop another person. The relationship was real; the evidence required for sponsorship was not. The next six months were spent deliberately creating it.

Build More Than One Sponsor

A portable promotion case is supported by several credible witnesses who have seen different parts of your performance.

Relying on one manager creates a single point of career failure. That person may leave, become overloaded, lose influence or have only a narrow view of your capability. The stronger position is a network of people who can independently verify your judgement, reliability, leadership and client impact.

This is not an invitation to collect senior contacts. The relationship must rest on useful work and observed behaviour. Three unconnected people reaching the same conclusion carries more weight than one enthusiastic supporter repeating it loudly.

Witness	What they may credibly verify	How the evidence is earned
Current manager	Readiness, judgement, reliability and growth	Consistent delivery and honest development conversations
Project / Operations leader	Whole-project contribution and leadership potential	Solving material issues beyond the narrow package
Former manager	Consistency across time and environments	Leaving cleanly and maintaining the relationship
Client / consultant	External credibility and communication	Predictable, fair and solutions-focused dealings
Peers / site leaders	Whether you make work move in practice	Respect, responsiveness and shared problem-solving
KEY TAKEAWAY Do not ask people to sponsor a story they have not personally witnessed. Create the evidence first.	KEY TAKEAWAY Do not ask people to sponsor a story they have not personally witnessed. Create the evidence first.	KEY TAKEAWAY Do not ask people to sponsor a story they have not personally witnessed. Create the evidence first.

If nobody can take over your current work, your indispensability may become the ceiling above you.

Senior roles require output through others. A professional who protects all important knowledge, decisions and client relationships may appear essential while quietly proving that the organisation cannot move them.

Developing a successor does not mean making yourself replaceable in the disposable sense. It demonstrates that you can create capability, systems and continuity. The organisation can then promote you without leaving a hole behind.

EXAMPLE — PROMOTED BY GIVING THE ROLE AWAY A Senior CA documented the package controls, coached a CA through the monthly forecast and gradually transferred the routine subcontractor meetings while remaining available for the difficult calls. When a Commercial Manager opportunity arose, the project did not resist losing them. They had already built the person and system that could carry the work.

12. Understand the Trade-offs

A senior role is attached to a life, not just remuneration and status.

Travel, mobility, pressure, availability, accountability, family, health and personal orientation affect whether the director path is desirable or sustainable. Technical master, specialist, consulting, client-side and business ownership paths may be better destinations.

A comparison is useful only when the people being compared want the same destination.

One of the most corrosive promotion comparisons is: 'I am more rounded than that Senior CA, so why am I still a CA?' It compares your future case with somebody else's settled position. The Senior CA may have reached a role they perform well and intend to keep. They may not want people leadership, enterprise risk, geographic mobility or the pressure above them. Their title is not re-tested each time you seek promotion.

The relevant comparison is the standard of the next role today: the work, judgement, relationships, evidence and organisational risk attached to appointing you. Being stronger than the weakest incumbent does not establish that case.

Performance, Potential, Readiness and Appetite

These four ideas are often treated as though they are interchangeable. They are not:

18. Performance — the value you produce in your current role.
19. Potential — the level you may eventually have capacity to reach.
20. Readiness — the evidence that you can carry the next role now, with acceptable support and risk.
21. Appetite — whether you actually want the work, pressure, mobility and consequences attached to that level.

A person can be a high performer with no desire to move, high-potential but not yet ready, ready but uninterested, or highly ambitious without the evidence to support the next step. The organisation is assessing the combination, not one quality in isolation.

EXAMPLE — SAME TITLE, DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES Two Senior CAs produce excellent work. One is coaching a CA, building sponsors and seeking whole-project exposure. The other prefers difficult package work, does not want people management and values a stable commute. The title is the same; the destination is not. Neither person establishes whether a third employee is ready for promotion.

Common Work Orientations

People usually carry several orientations at once, and the mix changes as health, family, finances and opportunity change. These are lenses, not fixed personality types.

Orientation	What work mainly provides	Common career choice
Upward progressor	Scope, title, income and influence	Pursues promotion and accepts some mobility or pressure
Mastery specialist	Expertise, autonomy and difficult work	May remain a high-value Senior CA or specialise in claims, procurement or disputes
Delivery leader	Team outcomes and the satisfaction of finishing	Often moves toward Commercial Manager or Project Management
Provider / security seeker	Reliable income and protection of family commitments	Values continuity, certainty and sustainable conditions
Lifestyle integrator	Funding for a life whose centre may sit elsewhere	Prices commute, hours, health, flexibility and location heavily

Orientation	What work mainly provides	Common career choice
Independent builder	Autonomy, ownership and upside	Moves toward consulting, contracting or a business of their own
Purpose / belonging seeker	Identity, contribution and social connection	Stays where the work, team or mission feels worthwhile
Structure / continuity seeker	Routine, absorption and a place to remain useful	May keep working late in life or return after retirement

Choose Your Own Destination

Commercial Director is one destination, not the definition of success. A durable career may lead into project management, specialist claims or procurement, client-side work, consulting, business ownership, or a deliberately chosen Senior CA or Commercial Manager role. Ambition is not hierarchy alone; it can also mean mastery, independence, contribution or a life that remains intact around the work.

***PRACTICAL TEST** Do I want the next role's work, or only its title and pay? What am I unwilling to trade for it? Am I comparing myself with someone on the same trajectory? Will my next move add capability, or only a stronger label?*

***RESEARCH BASIS** The framework draws on established research into job, career and calling orientations; career anchors; and the human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. It is a discussion tool, not a personality test.*

13. Commercial Director Readiness Review

Readiness is a portfolio of enterprise evidence, not a title held near the top of one project.

Rate the quality, scale, recency and independent witnesses behind each capability. Identify assignments that close multiple gaps without manufacturing an artificial career move.

Director readiness exists when enterprise leaders trust your judgement, leaders and systems—not merely your personal technical output.

Before pursuing the role, test the evidence honestly. Have you run a complete project commercial function? Developed managers? Contributed to work winning? Protected forecast integrity under pressure? Handled a major client or dispute? Operated across projects or a business unit? Built a successor?

The gaps should determine the next assignment. Another large package may add less than a year in precontracts, a difficult project recovery, a portfolio role or responsibility for developing two managers.

PRACTICAL ACTION Ask two people already operating at enterprise level: 'What would make you hesitate to appoint me as a Commercial Director tomorrow?' Listen for the repeated answer and build the next twelve months around it.

Rate the evidence accumulated across the director-level capability groups.

22. Complete project commercial leadership.
23. Portfolio governance and enterprise risk.
24. Managing managers and building succession.
25. Major claims, disputes and executive settlements.
26. Precontracts, work winning and risk selection.
27. Business planning, margin and cash.
28. Executive and client relationships.
29. Ethics, judgement and reputation under material pressure.

Director Readiness

Capability	Evidence quality 1–5	Next assignment / witness
Complete project function		
Enterprise governance		
Managing managers		
Claims / settlements		
Precontracts / risk selection		
Business planning / cash		
Executive / client trust		

Commitments and Review

Use this page to convert the manual into a small number of observable commitments. A manual has no value if the reader cannot identify what will be done differently, where it will be practised and what evidence will prove the change.

Commitment	Practice ground	Evidence / reviewer	Review date

Related Buildit Manuals

- 30. 01 — The Promotion Framework
- 31. 08 — Commercial Judgement
- 32. 11 — The Commercial Manager's Field Guide

Closing Position

The higher the role, the less you are promoted for producing the answer and the more you are trusted to protect the organisation while others produce it.

Notes
