

# The Aspiring COO's Playbook

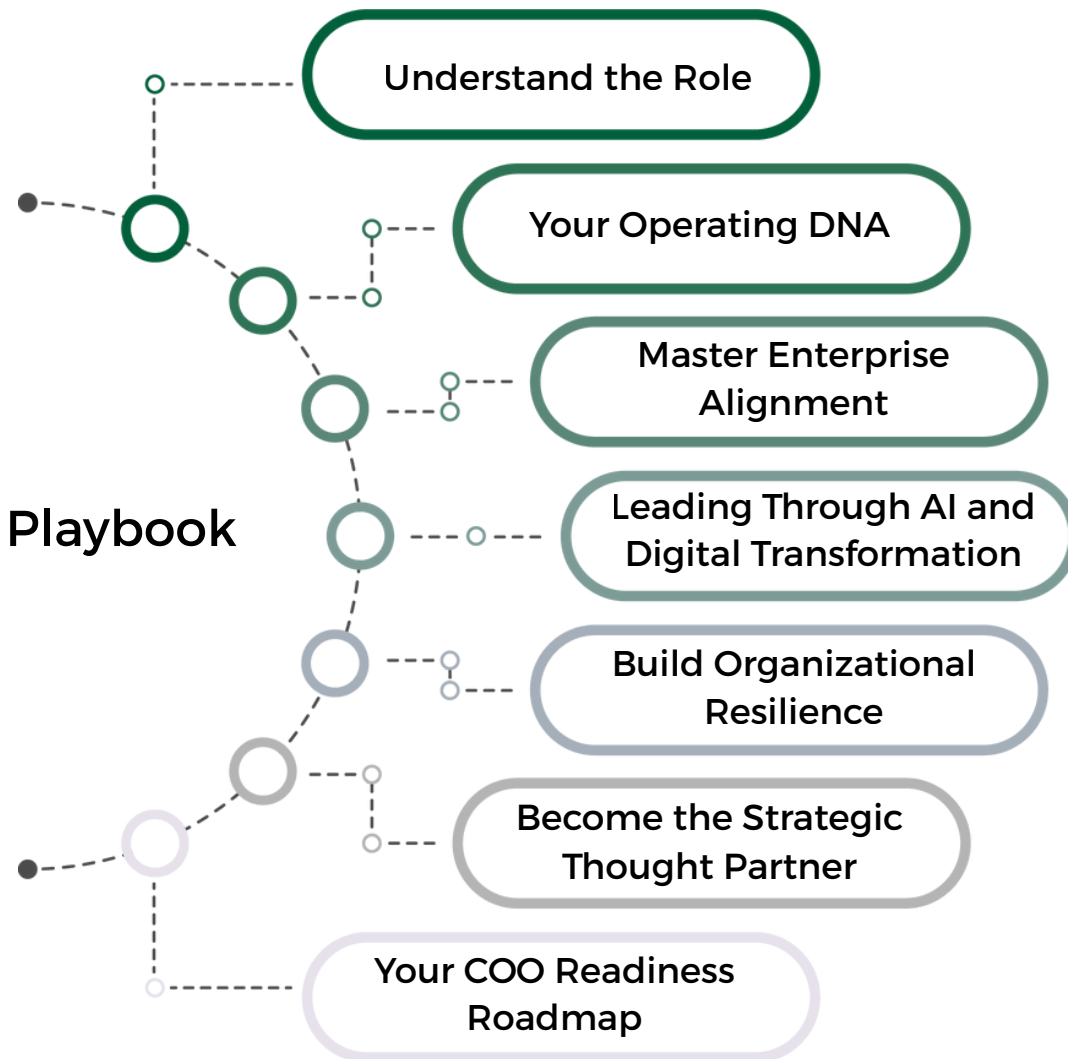


**Preparing For the New Role of Operator-in-Chief**

# Overview:

Here's what we'll cover in this playbook:

## The Aspiring COO's Playbook



# Introduction:

Becoming a COO used to be a matter of seniority, tenure, or simply being “the best operator in the building”. Not anymore. The modern COO role requires speed, adaptability, intellectual range, and a willingness to navigate complexity that would make most leaders tap out. The aspiring COO must prepare deliberately, almost like an athlete training for a sport that didn’t exist five years ago.

The good news is that the path to the COO role is often as unique as each individual. At COO Forum, we have members that started at the front desk, shipping and receiving, accounting, sales and many other entry points. COOs often find themselves “falling into the role”, but each journey had deliberate steps that created the pathway.

This playbook is built for that journey. It will help you understand the role you’re aiming for, evaluate your current capabilities, uncover your blind spots, and build a plan to become the type of leader today’s CEOs - and organizations - desperately need.

Every exercise is meant to push you beyond comfort. The job will do the same.

# Section 1: Understanding the Modern COO

## The Role You're Aiming For Isn't the One You Read About

The COO of ten years ago managed execution. The COO of today manages execution, transformation, technology, culture, risk, and alignment. You are preparing for a role that sits at the intersection of operational excellence and enterprise reinvention. Your job will involve translating chaos into clarity, AI disruption into capability, and cross-functional friction into forward motion.

Take a moment to articulate what role you believe you're preparing for. Then articulate the role as it is actually becoming.

### Reflection Exercise:

1. Write a paragraph describing the COO role you imagined five years ago.
2. Write a second paragraph describing the COO role you believe will exist two years from now.
3. Compare the two. Identify what's changed and how you might think differently about the role.

### ► Do you know a current COO?

Consider interviewing a current COO to get their perspective on where the role is headed.

## Section 2: Your Operating DNA

The Hardest Truth: Not All Operators Think the Same Way

Great COOs share certain traits - pattern recognition, calm under pressure, systems thinking - but they also bring distinct approaches shaped by their careers. Some rise from engineering. Others come from finance, HR, sales, product, consulting, or even the front desk.

Your job is not to mimic someone else's path. Your job is to understand how you think as an operator.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise:**

1. Describe the three most defining experiences of your career so far.
2. For each one, explain what it revealed about how you approach problems, people, and execution. This becomes the backbone of your “operator identity”.

### **Capability Mapping**

1. Identify what you believe are your five strongest operational muscles.
2. Then name five that need the most development. Seek out resources and training to improve your effectiveness in these areas.

## Section 3: Mastering Enterprise Alignment

### You Can't Lead Operations Without Leading Relationships

The modern COO spends as much time influencing sideways and upward as they do leading down. You will depend on cross-functional partners who don't report to you. You'll need a strong working relationship with a CEO who looks to you for perspective as priorities evolve. And you'll become the unofficial therapist for half the executive team.

This section forces you to evaluate the relationship side of operating.

#### Relationship Inventory

1. Identify the five stakeholders you rely on most today. Write a sentence about the quality of each relationship.
2. Describe one thing you must do to strengthen trust with each of them.

## Section 4: Leading Through AI and Digital Transformation

If You Ignore AI, You Are Volunteering to Be Irrelevant

Today's COO is expected to orchestrate AI adoption, guide digital transformation, and make sure the company doesn't become the case study no one wants to discuss. You don't need to be a full-blown technologist, but you must be the most AI-literate operator in the room.

This section helps you benchmark your readiness and build a learning path.

### AI Literacy Check

Write down how AI will improve your company's operations in the next twelve months. Are you able to articulate a plan with specificity? Are there gaps in your understanding of how to put together a strategic AI plan for your company?

If so, this is a gap that you will need to close. Seek out training so you are prepared to guide an organization on the strategic execution of AI.

# Section 5: Building Organizational Resilience

## The COO Is the Point of Stability In Organizations

Supply chain shocks, workforce shifts, environmental pressures, economic swings, geopolitical instability - these used to be periodic challenges. Now they're just Tuesday. You must build an organization that bends without breaking.

### Systems Stress Test

Can you visualize instability in systems and processes and clearly identify prevention and if needed, recovery plans?

1. Pick one of your core operational processes. Write down what would happen if it failed for 24 hours. Then 72. Then a week. Identify your single point of failure.
2. Create one action you could take this month to reduce the risk.

### Culture Under Pressure

Describe the moment in your career when your organization was under the most stress.

Next, describe how people behaved. What would you change if it happened again? That's the culture work every COO eventually faces.



## Section 6: The Strategic Thought Partner Your CEO Needs

You're Not Just the Executor. You're the Co-Architect.

The CEO wants someone who can see around corners, challenge assumptions, and turn big ideas into executable strategies. They want a thought partner who can apply AI, data, judgment, and operational wisdom in equal measure. This section builds your strategic muscles.

### Strategic Foresight Exercise

Identify one emerging trend that will impact your business in the next two years. Describe the threat. Then describe the opportunity. What you would do first if you were COO today?

### Tactical to Strategic Shift

Write down something you're doing today that is tactical. Then rewrite it as a strategic initiative. How would you approach the challenge from a strategic viewpoint? Are you prepared to delegate the details and decision-making to another person on your team?

If you hesitate to relinquish control over day-to-day activities and tend towards fighting fires, you may need to develop strategic thinking skills or build leadership habits that free your time to work at a higher level.

## Section 7: Your COO Readiness Roadmap

If You Don't Have a Plan, You Don't Have a Path

Becoming a COO requires intention. You'll need new capabilities, deeper relationships, sharper frameworks, and a stronger leadership presence. You close this workbook by creating your own readiness roadmap.

### Role Gap Assessment

Write the three things that would keep you from succeeding as COO if you were given the job tomorrow. Don't sugarcoat it. The role won't.

### Capability Development Plan

Describe the five actions you will take in the next ninety days to elevate your readiness. Make them specific enough that someone could verify you did them.

### The COO Commitment

Write a one-paragraph personal commitment to the type of COO you intend to become. Make it clear, make it real, and make it something your future team would recognize. Reference our article: <http://www.cooforum.net/what-is-your-coo-type>

## **Conclusion: Becoming the Operator the Future Demands**

The COO role is not static. It is evolving faster than almost any other C-suite position. The world will continue to shift, technology will continue to accelerate, and the demands on operators will continue to multiply. But the aspiring COO who prepares deliberately, who seeks range, builds trust, learns relentlessly, and leads with resilience, will find themselves not only ready for the role, but uniquely capable of shaping it.

Your job isn't to chase the COO role. Your job is to become the leader a modern COO must be. The seat will find you when you're ready.