

Careers

# The Great Executive Rebrand

How Top Executives Are Rediscovering their Core.

By  
Richard WALKER



**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# The Great Executive Rebrand

## How Top Executives Are Rediscovering Their Core.

More executives than ever are taking the opportunity to ‘rebrand’ themselves. In the past, that meant a visit to a stylist and a new mantra to practise in front of the mirror. But now, instead of offering a simple makeover, a new breed of executive coaches are seeking out the real you, warts and all, to make that the centerpiece of your next career move. They refrain from extravagant claims, but they could redefine your career and make you feel more fulfilled than ever before.

### Brand On the Run?

Eelco van Eijck is Managing Partner of Amrop Netherlands and runs a coaching program for senior executives called Executive 2.0. He started it in response to a need he saw in the business community.

“I run searches for hiring organizations who are looking for top executives. We find really capable people with lots of high level experience. Sometimes when I present them to my clients, they meet and something happens - they don’t match at all! The candidate cannot convince the client.”

The problem is twofold. Potential employers are less than expert in the techniques of interviewing at this level; and candidates are not used to presenting themselves properly, finding it difficult to explain in a few words what they do and want. Too often resumés are Word documents started when the candidate was a graduate, with a line added annually since. The solution, says Eelco, is to see yourself as a brand.

### Volvo van Damme

I meet Eelco at his well appointed office in Amstelveen, just south of Amsterdam. Having presented me with an outline of his executive search business, he turns to the fifty-inch plasma TV screen mounted on the wall, upon which serenely appears the movie star Jean Claude van Damme. For those readers not among the 96 million YouTube viewers of this now classic video, we see the Belgian action hero doing the splits in mid-air, straddling two Volvo trucks gliding along in perfect parallel, backwards. The advert (shot in 15 minutes without special effects) proclaims the virtues of the manufacturer’s hi-tech reverse steering system, but for Eelco the film illustrates the importance of personal branding, in this case Van Damme’s, in relation to the company he fronts.

“Volvo deliberately chose him because he stands for power, safety, his ability to protect families, and of course he’s famous for doing the splits, which is the visualization of this technology. The actor and the car company are a perfect match because they both stand for quality, strength and safety. If you are a company looking for a new CEO this is what you have to think about. Does this person match our strategy and values? This is not often being done.”

### Hold on to Your Briefs

Presenting yourself succinctly and powerfully to a board is what Eelco van Eijck’s approach claims to prepare you to do. But isn’t this a skill at which experienced leaders are already adept?

“I had a candidate here recently who was head of a famous organization. He was very good at strategy and had recently integrated a company worth a billion dollars. I asked him to describe in two sentences who he is and what he stands for. He said yes of course, and he proceeded to talk for 25 minutes.”

There’s a phrase that translates as: “I wrote you a long letter because I didn’t have the time to write you a short one”.<sup>1</sup> For Goethe too, less was more.<sup>2</sup> Power really does lie in short messaging, says Eelco.

### Meltdown

Hardhitting oratory is one thing. The deeper facet of the personal brand Eelco tackles is motivation, both in a person’s career and wider life. Get one of your key drivers wrong and the results can be catastrophic, he says.

“I asked him to describe in two sentences who he is and what he stands for. He said yes of course, and he proceeded to talk for 25 minutes.”

---

<sup>1</sup> “Je n’ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n’ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.” Blaise Pascal (b. 1623, d. 1662) also attributed to Cicero, Mark Twain and T.S. Eliot).

<sup>2</sup> “In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, (b. 1749, d. 1832)



Executives make notes of previous jobs, things they liked and didn't like, using just single-word descriptions. They describe their favorite challenges, perhaps earning more money, or living in a great location. But critically, they must also list the *negatives* in those jobs.

"I had another candidate who was one of the most successful executives with one of the world's leading consumer goods companies. She built a famous global food brand and was set to become a board member. She lived abroad at that time because of the company's large factory there. Then the family wanted to return home, and so she took a job running a retail chain, which was a big change from her consumer goods background. Within five months she got into huge clashes with the non-executive board, it was in all the national newspapers, and she failed. It broke her and she left. She told me that if she had met me earlier she would never have taken this job because she would have realized it had very different demands to where her experience lay."

### Maps and Drivers

Eelco's method makes you analyze yourself using a career map in which you describe in single keywords the good and bad aspects of your last six jobs. This exercise, he argues, will lead you to a job that both matches your skill set and satisfies you, rather than working you to death through a series of ulcers and broken relationships.

Executives make notes of previous jobs, things they liked and didn't like, using just single-word descriptions. They describe their favorite challenges, perhaps earning more money, or living in a great location. But critically, they must also list the *negatives* in those jobs.

After three weeks, the candidate shares the document with a close partner over dinner and gets their input, bringing another layer of insight and focus. Patterns now emerge. The same likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, pop up across a career.

The document helps the individual find her personal drivers, and crucially, ensures against revisiting familiar negatives in her next job.

## Know Thyself

It took a former boss to tell the highly sought-after 'Interimmer' Annemieke Rijke: 'You don't know it but you're really good at quickly translating strategy into action'. With Eelco's help she learned that listening to the people who know her best is crucial.

"How do you discover your talent? The best way is to ask the people who work with you", she tells me while negotiating some tricky Amsterdam traffic.

"I worked for a number of companies, including Google, for two years. I got a reputation for being a job-hopper, that I couldn't stay in one place. But I learned that actually this is my strength and that I'm an 'Interimmer', doing jobs for one or two years and then moving on. I discovered I like unexpected change, I like to manage change, and I need freedom."

"I worked for a number of companies, including Google for two years. I got a reputation for being a job-hopper, that I couldn't stay in one place. But I learned that actually this is my strength and that I'm an 'Interimmer', doing jobs for one or two years and then moving on.

## Understand the Brand

The nexus between the candidate and his or her next career move lies in identifying key drivers, according to Eelco.

We spoke with a branding expert who has repositioned some of the world's leading brands. It is essential to first understand the identity of both the individual and the company, he said. "A brand is the expression of a company's culture. So to be able to work on brands I realized I had to understand who this organization is – what's their deeper identity, rituals, culture. The starting point must be a respect for a person's DNA and history.

"There are some very disruptive concepts around that we like to put on the table when we meet with executives. No matter what sector they are in, the world has become very competitive for everyone. It is hard to stand out, to justify their position. So they look for ways to differentiate themselves, typically by changing things. Our philosophy is: it's not about change." He is keen to connect this example back to the concept of excellence. "If you want to brand something you must understand these deep connections between the dynamics in the life of a person or a company."

“I worked with a CEO who realized he couldn’t do his job. He needed quite a lot of cynicism to reduce the size of his organization. This was not his thing. He was much more verbal, interactive and relationship based. And much more suited to things going in a positive direction than in a negative one.”

### Authenticity or Adaption?

The importance of authenticity emerges clearly. It is at the core of every good leader, he tells us. “Personal branding has a lot to do with authenticity. Companies and individuals are trying to be something they are not, and hide who they are because they see it as a weakness. That weakness is in reality part of their strength. What we’re doing is looking for those contradictory facets, then finding a way to leverage them to turn them into excellence.” One simple and beautiful way to return to a person’s uniqueness is to ask them about their hobby, he adds. It turns out his own hobby is to

prune *niwaki* (similar to bonsai trees). Shaping something impressive out of something otherwise overlooked.

### Now and Zen

In the absence of a spiritually nurturing Japanese pastime, what psychological and emotional barriers could await executives during the rebranding experience? And what becomes of those who get lost in the *mêlée* of their efforts to rebrand themselves? I spoke with a business psychologist who admits a number of the executives he meets have a challenge to find their inner excellence is a challenge.

“It’s an extremely difficult journey and many don’t accept the consequences and prefer instead to stay in this fantasy of who they are and what they are capable of doing. Others end up going down a completely different route. They might pursue a board career instead where they still make use of their experience but then go into art, music, whatever it might be.”

How much is it possible to rebrand yourself? Having worked in development for twenty years, he believes that people do not usually change the core of their approach. He says part of living a happy life is to accept who you are, to accept your inner demons. There is a delicate balance between sticking to who you are and what you are capable of doing and enjoying, he tells me.

“I worked with a CEO who realized he couldn’t do his job. He needed quite a lot of cynicism to reduce the size of his organization. This was not his thing. He was much more verbal, interactive and relationship based. And was much more suited to things going in a positive direction than in a negative one. So he decided to step out of that role. Now he works with start ups as a business angel. It took him some time to realize this. And now he says that had he not run into those earlier challenges he would still be in the CEO job, blinded by the power and glamour.”



## In a Nutshell

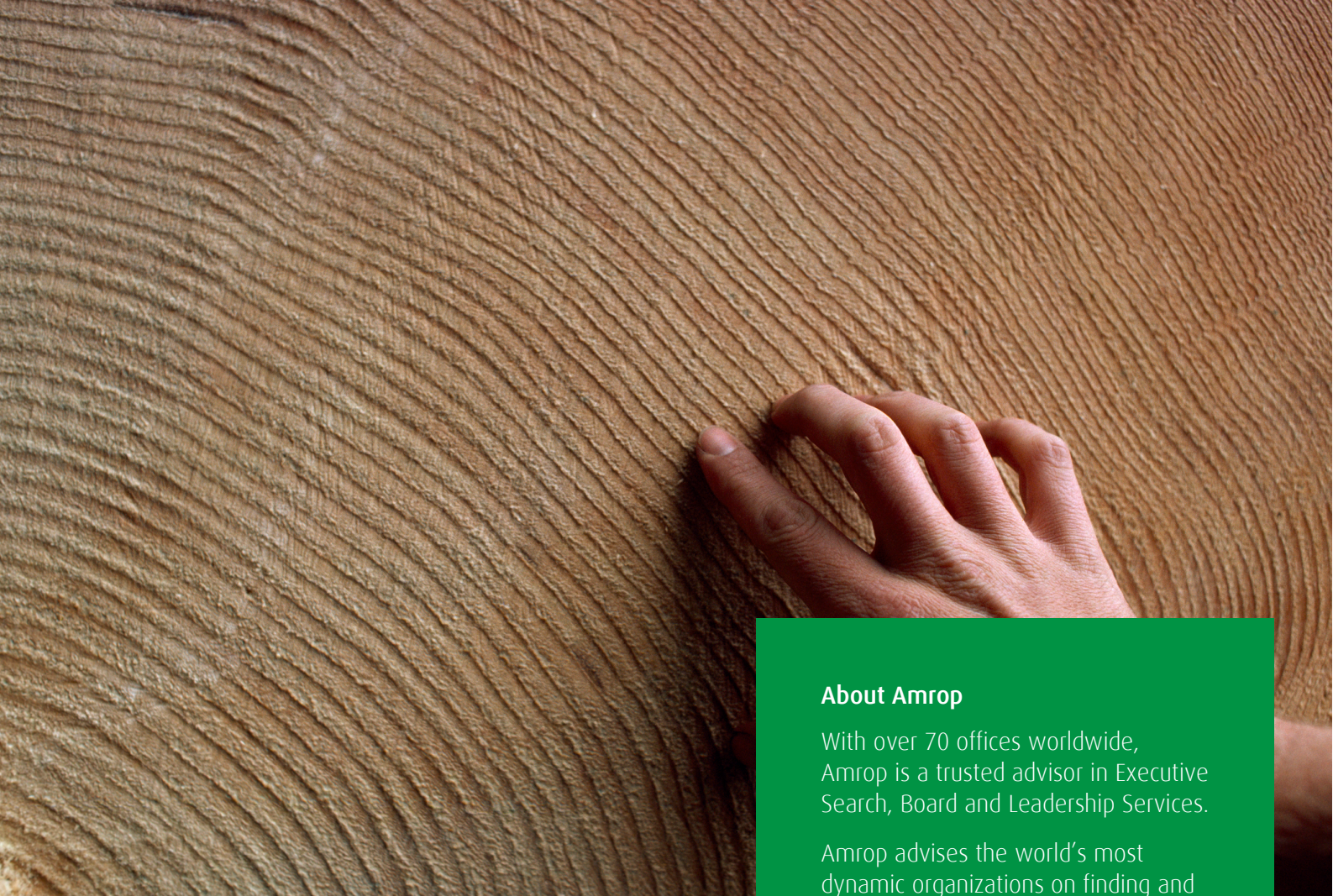
To rebrand the executive is to seek out the excellence - and weakness - within. And the best way to do that is to listen to your partner, the team around you, and yourself. It reminds me of something Eelco van Eijck said, "the best CEOs have the best partners at home." Some good professional coaching couldn't hurt either.

### Management Messages, Leading Questions

- 1 Can you summarize yourself in two sentences? Rather than a CV in Word, a personal brand has a hardhitting message and a sustainable promise - based on deep and honest analysis.
- 2 Personal branding in leadership means identifying key motivational drivers, and triangulating these:
  - Map your past career with a professional coach. Describe in single keywords the good AND bad aspects of your last 6 jobs
  - Check your conclusions with key selected colleagues
  - Go deeper, with your closest friend or partner.
- 3 Transform branding *negatives* into *positives* wherever appropriate, and plan your next step accordingly :  
(Are you a 'career hopper'? Or rather, someone who is quick to translate strategy into action, is energized by the unexpected, and needs freedom?)
- 4 Beyond 'seeking change' the quest is to 'find your core excellence' wherever that may lead.
- 5 People are two-sided coins. Every strength has a pitfall. Whether creativity vs. chaos, analysis vs. paralysis, what are your personal paradoxes, and how can you work 'pitfalls' to your advantage?
- 6 Strive for authenticity, transparency and credibility.
- 7 What is your hobby? It may hold the keys to your core.
- 8 Be realistic - the journey may reveal uncomfortable truths as well as 'aha' moments. The challenge: to strike the balance between who you are, and what you are capable of (and not).







**About Amrop**

With over 70 offices worldwide, Amrop is a trusted advisor in Executive Search, Board and Leadership Services.

Amrop advises the world’s most dynamic organizations on finding and positioning Leaders For What’s Next: top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.

[www.amrop.com/offices](http://www.amrop.com/offices)