

Sydney Finkelstein

AUTHOR · BUSINESS SCHOOL PROFESSOR

Most organisations cannot explain why smart executives fail, and they cannot explain why a small number of leaders consistently produce extraordinary talent pipelines. Both gaps cost the same thing: the next generation of leaders. When the senior team cannot reliably diagnose executive failure or deliberately replicate talent-generating leadership, succession planning, strategic M&A and cultural change all become exercises in hope.

Sydney Finkelstein is a Dartmouth Tuck professor and Thinkers50 thinker whose research on why executives fail and how “superbosses” produce talent gives leadership teams a more reliable read on both risks.

Sydney Finkelstein's 2026 Biography

Why organisations work with Sydney Finkelstein

- His work is grounded in two decade-long research programmes: one into executive failure, published as *Why Smart Executives Fail*, and one into talent-generating leaders, published as *Superbosses*. Both give clients an evidence base that a typical leadership keynote does not.
- As Steven Roth Professor of Management at Dartmouth Tuck and Director of the Tuck Executive Program, he is embedded in the executive development the organisations he speaks to actually attend.
- Thinkers50 recognition, Fellowship of the Academy of Management, and multiple Best Paper Awards provide the independent external validation that boards and chief people officers look for before investing in a headline speaker.
- His client list, including American Express, Barclays, Boeing, Chevron, Deutsche Bank, GE, Glaxo and Heinz, means his material has been tested in front of some of the same leadership teams his audiences sit in.
- He presents research-heavy material in plain English, a point the Wall Street Journal called out explicitly in its review of *Why Smart Executives Fail*.

Biography highlights

- Steven Roth Professor of Management at the Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College
- Director of the Tuck Executive Program
- Author of *Superbosses* (Penguin Portfolio, 2016) and *Why Smart Executives Fail* (Penguin Portfolio, 2003), among 20-plus books and 90-plus articles
- Thinkers50 ranked management thinker

AVAILABLE FOR

- Coaching
- Executive Training
- Speaking

SYDNEY'S SPEAKING THEMES

- Executive Development
- Innovation & Disruption
- Leadership
- Talent Retention Strategies

LANGUAGES: English

- Fellow of the Academy of Management; Academy of Management Executive Best Paper Awards (1997, 2004)
- Regular BBC contributor; consulting clients including American Express, Barclays, Boeing, Chevron, Deutsche Bank, GE, Glaxo and Heinz

Biography

Why executives fail is a more answerable question than most organisations assume. Sydney Finkelstein's career has been built around answering it. As Steven Roth Professor of Management at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and Director of the Tuck Executive Program, he has spent two decades combining academic rigour with the specifics of named corporate failures, a body of work that is now a standard reference in leadership and strategy literature.

Why Smart Executives Fail, published in 2003 by Penguin Portfolio, remains the book that sets out the diagnostic pattern. The Wall Street Journal described it as "a marvel, a jargon-free business book based on serious research". His subsequent book, *Superbosses*, took the opposite question, why some leaders produce more outstanding talent than their peers, and spent ten years answering it through figures ranging from Ralph Lauren, Lorne Michaels and George Lucas to hedge fund founder Julian Robertson and chef Alice Waters. The thesis has since shaped how senior HR and CEO succession teams think about talent generation at the top of organisations.

Finkelstein is one of the recurring names on the Thinkers50 list, a Fellow of the Academy of Management and the recipient of multiple Academy of Management Executive Best Paper Awards in 1997 and 2004. His writing extends beyond books to more than 90 articles, and he contributes regularly to the BBC. The consulting and speaking work sits with organisations including American Express, Barclays, Boeing, Chevron, Deutsche Bank, GE, Glaxo and Heinz.

For boards and executive teams facing difficult succession, integration or leadership-change questions, the useful thing about Finkelstein is the combination of research archive and plain-language delivery. He arrives with frameworks his audiences have probably read in HBR, but with the corporate case material to apply them without slipping into abstraction.

Key speaking topics

- Why smart executives fail
- Superbosses and talent-generating leadership
- Leadership decision-making under pressure
- Strategic renewal and "built to change" organisations
- Succession, talent pipelines and HR strategy for the C-suite
- Innovation leadership

Ideal for

- Boards, CEOs and executive committees working through succession, turnaround or post-M&A leadership decisions
- CHROs and heads of executive development designing senior leadership and succession programmes
- Corporate universities and executive education programmes looking for a Thinkers50 headliner with teaching credentials
- Industry conferences and CEO summits where research-grade leadership content is expected

Audience outcomes

- A specific framework for identifying the decision patterns that precede executive failure
- The *Superbosses* model of talent generation, translated into practical leadership behaviours
- Named case material drawn from high-profile corporate failures and successes, usable in the audience's own context
- Reference points that connect academic research with clients including American Express, Barclays, Boeing and GE
- A sharper view of the link between leadership behaviour, talent pipeline and long-run organisational performance

Sydney Finkelstein's 2026 talks & topics

Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent

A keynote drawn from the ten-year *Superbosses* research project.

Key takeaways:

- The common behaviours that separate exceptional talent-generating leaders from average ones
- Specific examples from named figures including Ralph Lauren, Lorne Michaels, Julian Robertson and Alice Waters
- A practical view of what organisations can copy from these leaders and what is individual to them

Why Smart Executives Fail

A keynote based on the book, on the repeatable patterns behind major corporate failures.

Key takeaways:

- The decision-making patterns that appear in almost every major executive failure
- Case material drawn from named corporate collapses and near-collapses
- Early-warning indicators that boards and executive teams can monitor in their own organisations

Why Good Leaders Make Bad Decisions

A related session on the cognitive and institutional forces that drive strong leaders into weak decisions.

Key takeaways:

- The predictable biases that appear under pressure, even in experienced executives
- Specific structural interventions that reduce the likelihood of avoidable errors
- How boards can design their own processes to counter these patterns

A New Model of Leadership: Masters and Apprentices

A session on mentorship and talent development as a leadership discipline.

Key takeaways:

- The master-apprentice dynamics that show up in superbosses' teams
- How to structure sponsorship and coaching relationships that actually develop senior talent
- Where modern leadership development programmes miss the point

Not Built to Last, But Built to Change

A session on why the "built to last" frame has aged, and what replaces it.

Key takeaways:

- The evidence against long-duration corporate strategy as a default
- The characteristics of organisations that reinvent themselves successfully
- How to design a strategy process that assumes change rather than stability

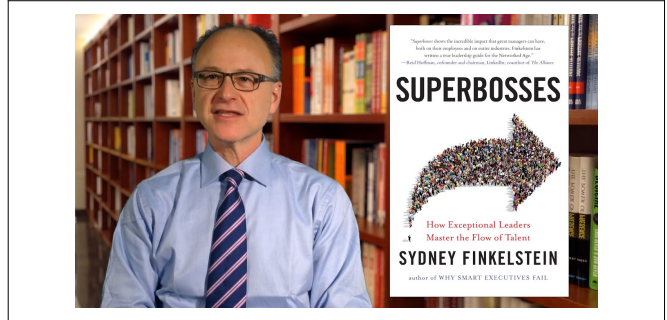
The Secret to Unleashing Innovation

A session on the leadership behaviours that produce innovation outcomes.

Key takeaways:

- The specific managerial and cultural patterns that separate innovators from followers
- Examples from organisations that consistently generate talent and ideas
- A practical set of prompts for executive teams reviewing their own innovation pipeline

Sydney Finkelstein's Videos



What Sydney Finkelstein's clients say

Testimonial for SUPERBOSSSES: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent: Superbosses shows the incredible impact that great managers can have, both on their employees and on entire industries. As masters of career development, superbosses are both talent magnets and launchpads, remaining valued allies with their proteges long after their official relationships have ended. Syd has written a true leadership guide for the Networked Age.

Reid Hoffman
Co-founder and Chairman, LinkedIn

Testimonial for SUPERBOSSSES: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent: Superbosses gives leaders a playbook to bring out the best in their people.

Jeff Immelt
Chairman and CEO, GE