

Continual development of CEO leadership skills is a key organizational strategy

By Rosie Steeves

IBM recently conducted face-to-face conversations with more than 1,500 chief executive officers worldwide to determine what was on their minds and in particular how they were responding to today's environment.

The results?

Eight in 10 CEOs expect their environment to grow significantly more complex, and they strongly believe that the ability to lead creatively will be critical. Indeed, these CEOs now believe that creativity trumps all other leadership characteristics.

No great surprise there, but what is of concern is the fact that over half of the CEOs interviewed seriously doubt their ability to cope with rapidly escalating complexity. They admit that they have never faced a learning curve so steep and are unsure how to handle the degree of complexity with which they will be faced. They must shake up their portfolios, adopt different business models, let go of their old ways of working and abandon long-held assumptions. They must be comfortable with ambiguity and experimentation.

However, although they know they must lead and interact in entirely new ways, it's the rare CEO that is confident of his or her abilities in this ever-changing world – despite the image he or she might outwardly portray.

Given such self doubt, you'd think that CEOs would be investing heavily in preparing themselves for this new reality. While it would be naive to expect that they instantly adopt a new style of leadership in response to the rapidly rising complexity, an expectation that they were aggressively working on developing the appropriate skills sets would certainly be in order.

Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. With a few notable exceptions, most CEOs I know fail to fully engage in their personal development. Oh sure, they read books, attend networking events and listen to eminent speakers, but none of this constitutes the intense developmental work that today's environment calls for. Even those that hire a coach, more often than not, use that individual as a business consultant rather than someone who can help develop their leadership skills.

We don't have to look far to find the reasons for this failure. Those at the top have many pressures drawing them away. Their responsibilities are vast, and they take them seriously. As such, there is a constant pull away from their personal needs to those of the organization. This centrifugal force is powerful, and most well-intentioned executives I know do not spend time on their own development simply because they see it as a luxury. The needs of the organization must come first.

But, unfortunately, it's not as simple as having insufficient time. Many of today's executives, raised in the era of the heroic leader, did not spend a lot of time early in their career in deep personal reflection and development. Rather, they were rewarded by achievement, driven by ambition, were likely good at maintaining public facade and waging office politics. This is not the profile of someone who commits

time and energy to examining and redefining his or her leadership style – as is now required in this increasingly complex world.

Those lower down the organizational hierarchy are often well aware that they need to develop their leadership. I always find that those new to leadership or for whom leadership development is a new experience to be thirsty for feedback and knowledge on how they may be affecting others. Rarely do I observe resistance among this population to developing their leadership abilities.

However, as these young leaders are promoted up the organizational hierarchy, something changes. Influenced by the organizational acknowledgment of their success as leaders, their drive for personal development decreases. By the time they reach the executive suite, many individuals assume they are effective leaders.

While one would hope they are effective leaders, the assumption that they have “arrived” is dangerous. As the IBM study suggests, the world is changing and, as such, CEOs, just like any other leader in the organization, must constantly reflect on who they are and how they need to lead in these new circumstances. The fact they are at the top of the organizational food chain should not be taken as an assumption of their effectiveness. Just the opposite is true; the immense responsibility they hold demands an equally large degree of self-development.

I don't expect those who are leading our organizations to have it all figured out. But I do expect them to do what it takes to prepare for the future. And that means committing time, energy and resources to a real and relevant personal development program. It's not a selfish act, but a critical strategy for their organization.

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