

Looking In to Lead Out: Revitalizing CEO Leadership

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Throughout history, many of the world's greatest leaders have acknowledged they have come to really know themselves and meet their full leadership potential when they've been faced with the most difficult circumstances. Truly impactful leadership is often established when making sense of those more challenging moments and carrying that learning forward. Each loss or bruise contains a seed, its own lesson on how to enhance one's growth and performance. As Camus elegantly wrote: "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me lay an invincible summer."

CEOs are at this place now after leading through a relentless year of hardship and disruption. The advantages of leaning inward to assess more clearly the personal tolls exacted and the lessons they bear are significant, especially as leaders prepare to emerge as an even better version of themselves in what will undoubtedly be a complex period of both ongoing challenges and opportunities ahead.

A Time to Check In

Most CEOs have had little chance to really stop and take stock of how their leadership choices have impacted their own sense of self because they've been deeply immersed in making critical decisions that affect the lives and livelihoods of so many others—their many employees, their stockholders and other stakeholders, and now, quite often, society at large. Meanwhile, the pressures are advancing apace. As the pandemic rages on, CEOs are being asked to be increasingly proactive and visible; the

expectations upon them have never been greater. Eric Spiegel, the former CEO of Siemens, recently shared that he is regularly talking with CEOs now about the importance of staying accessible and present, how more than ever the world needs them "to be the person connecting on a regular basis, showing confidence and sharing a clear path forward."

CEOs have been meeting the rising expectations, but many are expressing how all-consuming the work has been. When they begin to look personally within, they are seeing how they may have denied attention to their own inner resources. Some have told us they feel that they can't keep waiting to attend to their development needs until the crisis is fully behind us. "It is so obvious to me at this point," one CEO recently shared. "If I don't take care of my personal development from within, I won't be in a good enough space to really help the organization thrive beyond this."

Living through the crises of last year has been traumatic, and leading through it no less. Carrying the weight of so many life-altering decisions can be depleting, wearing down an individual's awareness and forward momentum. "Trauma is a hostage of time," Thomas Hübl, the renowned teacher, leadership advisor, and author of several works on collective trauma, reminds us. It stays locked within us and can surreptitiously hold us back. When CEOs allow themselves the space to sufficiently mark and better understand this, they and their organizations can benefit. Conversely, if left unaccounted for, the weight of the past can chip away at their strengths and drain their reserves, leaving them more susceptible to

weakened judgment and reactivity.

Applying a Three-Lens View to the Self

“I really see this as a time of inner repair and inner restoration,” Amy Fox, CEO of our partner company, Mobius Executive Leadership, shared recently. “As a mending time, in a way.” Leading ahead with renewed presence and sharpened judgment entails integrating the unconscious parts of oneself. By conducting an inquiry across three sensory lenses into the state of their self-awareness, CEOs can better detect where the losses or gaps are and how they got there.

- **Cognitive:** Often people are unaware that their thinking may have become impaired. Coming to renewed clarity takes reflection and patience, by challenging one’s reasoning through questions like: How often is your hardworking “inner risk manager” in the driver’s seat? What’s holding you back? Have you given the right amount of breadth and depth to each situation? When you sense that your judgment is cloudy, what do you do about it? Or do you just solve through it? Assessing the quality of your thinking and discerning how it might have become compromised is a critical exercise.
- **Emotional:** The toll on one’s emotions can be as great as on one’s thinking. The journey of discovery revolves around revealing which emotions are actually leading and detecting the triggers beneath these. It is worthwhile to pay attention to the “go-to” patterns and reflexes. When you are afraid or overwhelmed, do you bypass your feelings through avoidance or numbing, for instance? Do you forge ahead like an automaton? Asking what you and others really feel (rather than think) about an issue or decision, granting yourself the curiosity to really explore the answers, opens up a whole new important landscape. Claiming these emotional insights and marking their sources provides actionable clarity and restores peace and authenticity.
- **Somatic:** Finally, our bodies are quick to show if we are harboring pain, despair, guilt, or other debilitating emotions. But many of the ways in which the body and the nervous system react to challenges are outside of our conscious awareness, altering the state of self that we imagine ourselves to be

projecting. This greatly affects one’s presence, and people can sense the unease. Ask yourself: What is your energy conveying about what you think and feel? How

could others be impacted by how you show up? In our experience, many CEOs have a propensity to place value on what they *know* and *do* over the felt sense of *being* the leader. But their teams and other followers really need to receive that leadership presence and essence (especially in times of uncertainty). Working to sharpen the somatic senses, leaders become increasingly responsive to their subconscious patterns so they can authentically embody the change they envision.

When self-awareness and self-confidence are well balanced, much more is possible.

Recalibrating for the Journey Ahead

At this moment in time, CEOs might ask themselves: How have I boxed myself in as a leader? What have I learned about myself? What is now possible? They can gain the conviction they need to reach new ground by drawing on the lessons they have been able to uncover—cognitively, emotionally, and somatically—and integrating them to recalibrate their leadership approach for the future.

Several key areas often come into focus once CEOs unblock their thinking and reclaim their emotions and physical responses.

- **Recognizing “I Am Not Enough”:** CEOs come to see that their self-authoring leadership is insufficient at this juncture and that they must learn to rely more on the constellation of leaders around them and concentrate on the multilateral and transformative work ahead. Up to this point, most leaders have been like a cup, holding the responsibility for the entire organization, feeling the need to touch and carry every decision. At this juncture, it will serve them and the entire enterprise well to become more of a channel—the vessel through which the organization’s growth and purpose flows and is given greater meaning and import.
- **Committing to Ongoing Self-Transformation:** Leaders don’t get to the point of self-transformation without a deliberate commitment to it. They must

consciously create the space to grow into and become part of something bigger than themselves. Part of this evolves as a natural response to their letting go and trusting others. And part comes from curiosity, always looking to question and transform their own thinking and assumptions. CEOs need to cultivate and maintain that space so they can take in diverse ideas and perspectives, which they will need to make sense of the more promising patterns and connections from which they can lead going forward.

- **Instilling Well-Being:** The job of refurbishing one's self certainly exposes the need to make room for regular well-being and coping regimens. Practicing mindfulness to ease distractions and regain energy and presence is essential. Now more than ever, regular exercise, attention to diet, quality sleep, and the vital connectedness of family and friends will serve CEOs well as part of their regular routines. Modeling this attention to self-care and mental health has also never been more important.

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Capitalizing on a Better Version of Self

History has shown us repeatedly that greatness is accumulative, born over time and across experience. And there may be no better time to learn and grow than in challenging circumstances. As John Mackey, the Founder and CEO of Whole Foods, recently shared with us, "Crisis is a tremendous opportunity to accelerate your own life growth, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually."

We know from working with our partners at Mobius on our joint transformational development programs that after leading through peril for almost a year, most CEOs have been pressing on with a fraction of their total inner capacity. Given the space to sort through the effects upon the self and to recalibrate, they can invest fully in the value they can bring forward. "I have discovered my better self," one CEO recently told us. "I came in closed and am leaving open. I have started to fill in those missing puzzle pieces." This is a very promising moment in time for CEOs to really consider how they want to keep showing up as leaders, to really listen for and look into the opportunities for refinement and greater insight—to revitalize themselves to lead their organizations and the world out of crisis, to thrive in the evolving world beyond.

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