

No CEO is an Island:

Leading a Collaborative Enterprise

— Volume 3, September 2019

“By willingly abandoning the old style of top-down power and redefining their mandate as more participatory and democratic, new leaders today are better applying their positions and personalities to serve their employees and meet the professed goals of their companies.”

— Dr. Kati Najipoor-Schuetz

CEO leadership is, by its very nature, a collective and relational endeavor. There can be no CEO leaders without followers and vice versa. Still, we often speak of CEOs as if they are forces unto themselves, and we judge and evaluate them accordingly. In point of fact, “Leadership is a group sport, not a heroic activity,” MIT professor emeritus and renowned author of organizational development, Dr. Edgar Schein, recently said in an interview with us and his son and co-author Peter.

The tendency to focus on a “hero” at the helm rather than the breadth of leadership is changing as a tenacious management culture becomes more obsolete. The old structure has been largely transactional and role determined. To better operate in this world of ambiguity, agile companies promote adaptable, lateral relationships between people and teams.

CEOs are still visionaries. They lead the corps around a binding purpose and set the tone to bring it life, and

they encourage others to be curious. To realize the new and challenging dreams, the old efforts will not work. Collaboration is, at its core, a problem-solving process; it relies on motivating people of different talents to devise and deliver solutions. It is also generative. By their examples, CEOs unleash the core creative momentum of their organizations and empower an emboldened followership to drive sustainable innovation. It is the CEO who creates a cultural environment encouraging experimentation, beyond the fear of failure and embracing both personal and collective responsibility. Great CEOs create a shared feeling of “winning with the winners” by fostering joint support and accountability in the realization of their collective purpose.

With the weight of responsibility shared collectively in organizations today, people need to trust. They get there by building relationships that bind—by taking pains to better understand who their colleagues are, how they work and the nuances between them. “It’s the infinite

variability of human interaction that enables great human inventions to happen,” Peter Schein explained.

Trust too starts at the top and trickles down. Employees trust CEOs they feel they know, understand and respect. Data from the recent Edelman Trust survey confirmed that CEO authenticity is solidified by their relatability, including their values (79%), the obstacles they have overcome (71%), and their success (67%). According to the Scheins, what it all comes down to is getting to know each other better which they have coined “*personization*” or going past the role to see the whole person, moving beyond the transaction to unlock communication and productivity. Here again, this begins with the CEO’s own efforts to show interest and curiosity in others and strengthen relationships.

Collaborative organizational culture isn’t simply a humane development, it’s an economic necessity. “[T]he nature of the work is what has forced all this,” Dr. Schein stressed. Greater transparency and connectivity are necessary to operate in an intensely complex world where issues do not resolve quickly or easily; it is the bedrock of the innovative eco-system called for. As such, CEOs today are learning to boldly enable others. They are working more in connection with—not aloof or separate from—those around them, as John Donne put it in verse long ago, “a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” In short, they are becoming engines of human collaboration and, by their own courageous examples, are setting the tone for resonant leadership far and wide.

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