

How to be a Successful CEO

Authentic leadership does not come easy. **Robert Leeming** asked a number of current and former CEOs to identify the attributes required to be a successful CEO

Business leaders need to walk a fine line between articulating a strong vision while also demonstrating a degree of humility, as their ultimate success will depend on the people around them.

Adam Winslow, Chief Executive of AIG Life UK, comments: "The day a CEO stops learning and evolving is the

day they may as well pack up and go home." It's that desire for improvement, both in themselves and others, that marks out high-performing chief execs, combined with an authenticity that wins hearts and minds.

David Grounds, Relationship Manager at Criticaleye, says: "A business needs a

leader who is nimble and fleet of foot, who is passionate and approachable, but also cerebral enough to reflect on past decisions."

We asked a number of current and former senior leaders to identify the attributes required for a CEO to be successful. >



Andy Dunkley

CEO
Construction Materials Online

Balancing Data with Gut Feel

Every good CEO knows that it is always important to make a decision, no matter how hard that may be. When people say that a choice that needs to be made is 'difficult', what they really mean is that the decision will be hard to implement. Making a judgment call is easy, it is the implementation that is the hard part.

While making tough choices, it is necessary to show a level of personal compassion. When it comes to fundamental calls, such as who stays within the business and who leaves, a good CEO will recognise the circumstances that surround such a choice and think about them carefully. However, on the other side of that coin, you must adhere to a process. You cannot run a business on empathy alone, you must do what it takes to deliver value for your stakeholders.

Looking back at my decisions from the past, I worry the most about the choices I made without gathering as much information as I should have. When I was younger, I made

too many choices based on gut feeling alone. As I have got older, I have learnt when to trust that feeling and when to seek out more facts, without slowing the organisation down.

In the wake of tough choices, a good CEO will temper self-doubt with reflection. It is crucial to reflect on decisions without fundamentally doubting your abilities, and this will always require a degree of inherent confidence.

“Employees will quickly see through a CEO who is fake or false. No one wants to work for a robot”



Jane Furniss

Lay Commissioner, Judicial Appointments Commission
and Criticleye Board Mentor

A Sense of Integrity

No matter what type of organisation a CEO is leading, they must have a strong set of values and a willingness to demonstrate those beliefs, whatever the pressures and challenges they face.

One of the reasons that people are so shocked and disappointed about the recent scandal at Oxfam, is that they see an organisation with an obvious set of values, but with leaders that seem to have failed to live those ideals demonstrably.

A good CEO must be able to inspire others, both inside the organisation and outside of it, to ensure that people buy-into their vision. A CEO should do this, in part, by living their values on a day-to-day basis and by making their commitment to them visible in the choices they make.

For example, when I was at the Home Office, people in senior grades would be eligible for a bonus if they and their staff achieved ministers' policy objectives. I personally believe that bonuses are the wrong way to incentivise people in the public sector; that's not what motivates staff, and it can be very divisive and undermine teamwork.

My staff worked hard, and in return I was awarded a bonus that was, for the public sector at least, sizeable and comparable to the yearly salary of many. I opted to give the money to charity and asked my staff to vote for which organisation they wanted it to go to.

Two of my values are public service and selflessness, and the fact that I demonstrated those beliefs in this way showed staff I was genuinely committed to those values, and it meant a lot to them.



Paul Brennan

NED, JHC
and Criticaleye Board Mentor

The Ability to Communicate Well

A good chief executive will be able to communicate crisply and energise a company on any day of the week, at any stage of a project, without rehearsal.

It is common to find leaders who are great at walking confidently into the boardroom to talk about objectives and strategy with non-executive directors, or the senior leadership team, but then fail to be as inspirational when they communicate with staff lower down the ladder. A CEO must be able to communicate effectively with people at all levels of the business.

A chief executive must also recognise that each company moves at its own pace, so they have to understand how to gauge that and, if necessary, make changes.

As someone who has flipped between public and private businesses, I know that these two arenas require a completely contrasting commitment of time. In a public

company there is much more to do when you are, for example, making an acquisition, because you are about to go and spend an awful lot of shareholders' money. This requires an appropriate level of due consideration and risk analysis, which, naturally, leads to a deceleration of pace.

“A CEO must be able to communicate effectively with people at all levels of the business”



Adam Winslow

CEO, AIG Life UK
and Chairman, Laya Healthcare

Be Authentic

A CEO should be willing to seek feedback on their style of leadership to improve their approach. I use an employee engagement survey which gives me, from a standardised set of questions, a view of what my team are saying about me. But more crucially, whenever I have a meeting with my team I ask them, face to face, what I could be doing better and where our relationship is at.

I learnt very early on that if you respond negatively or aggressively to this feedback then the less likely it is that people will feel able to give you their unvarnished, honest opinion. And, as soon as that happens, the connection with the team is lost. The day a CEO stops learning and evolving

is the day they may as well pack up and go home. I have learnt a lot from the things that I have got wrong, and the value of that feedback, be it formal or informal, has been crucial. Any high-performing CEO will be able to listen, watch and learn from the things that are going on in the company.

A good CEO will also know that the key to success is to be yourself. Don't try to play a part at the top of a company. It is not necessary to be an Oscar-worthy actor at work and then someone entirely different at home. Employees will quickly see through a CEO who is fake or false. No one wants to work for a robot.

The Criticaleye CEO Retreat, held in association with Accenture and E.ON, will take place on the 17th and 18th May. To find out more, please click [here](#)