

who inspires the leader?

Walk through any Borders or Barnes and Nobles and you will find entire sections devoted to “Leadership.” The face of leadership, now, has as many identities as Sybil. Choose the Jack Welch style of leadership and “Go with your Gut” or choose Kevin Cashman’s “Leadership from the Inside Out.” You could become a “Servant Leader” and increase your “Emotional Intelligence.” You could follow the gospel of Rudolph Giuliani or live by the “21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership.” (I’m tired already!)

I spend considerable time helping CEOs define Leadership for themselves so that they can articulate and define their role as CEO, not only for themselves but as an orientation for their behavior and thinking. Each person is different and each person comes to the position with both assets and liabilities. There does seem to be, however, a common element in all the writings on leadership. The same element appears in profiles of CEOs who have successfully led their companies through both healthy and difficult times. That element is “Inspiration.”

The word inspiration comes from the Latin “spirare,” or to breathe, to live, to be inspired with. Words such as spirit, soul, animate, to breathe and inspire are all related. So why the Latin lesson?

An important leadership trait is the ability to inspire. Inspiration does not need to be loud and plastered on the front pages of *Time* magazine. Along with the competencies and traits of strategy, execution, vision and courage, inspiration adds to the components of effective leadership. Look at how the ability to inspire others contributes to your effectiveness as a CEO. Can you breathe life into an organization that has become complacent? Are your employees driven to high performance by fear or are they animated by pride and a belief in a future that is com-

PELLING? Does the spirit of innovation and creativity dwell and grow in your company and its employees? As CEO you are responsible for inspiring others. And finally, who inspires you?

In a 2004 study on what motivates Fortune 1000 CEOs, three key motivators surfaced: fear, power and money. For the sake of this article, let’s take a look at fear; fear of failing, of succeeding, of being embarrassed, fear of any of a million things. Mostly however, it is fear of not living up to the expectations of others – the shareholders, the customers, peers, family and even the news media. And fear is personal even as the results are public. With CEO turnover averaging 43 percent and an average tenure of 7-8 years (and shrinking), new governance regulations looming and an uncertain economy and a volatile global situation, little wonder there is fear. Too much is unpredictable. If you are a new CEO, you only have five earnings quarters on average to prove yourself. Who do you turn to in the quiet times when doubt whispers in your ear?

The first step in regaining your inspiration is to accept that you are human, your job is complex, and you are not your job or your title. Until you embrace your humanity, you will not be able to inspire yourself or others. Inspiration sources from within, and it is the humanity in all of us that responds.

Find a trusted advisor and confidante to act as a sounding board. This could be a professional consultant, coach or it could be a trusted friend or mentor. It must be someone who has no alternative agenda and who is not worried or afraid of holding up a mirror to you. Warren Buffet said, “CEOs want to be respected and believed. They will be – and should be – only when they deserve to be. They should quit talking about some bad apples and reflect instead on their own behavior.” Make time for reflection, nurture

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self-awareness and know that inspiration and success starts with you.

Take a “time-in” to reflect on what matters. Given how scheduled CEOs are, a simple walk could clear your mind. A weekend in the woods without your laptop may re-inspire you and open your mind to new perspectives that get your juices flowing again. This is not a waste of time – time for reflection is critical to taking the appropriate actions and making bold decisions, not to mention maintaining personal well-being. Peter Block, a philosopher and consultant, speaks of taking “profound action” versus “decisive action” in order to enact authentic change which shifts rather than reinforces old ways of being or doing. He says, “Profound action is about our way of thinking, our way of being with those immediately around us, and the nature of the conversations we engage in. Profound action exists in contrast to decisive action, where we choose to spend or save money, build or eliminate a structure, pick or refuse a destination.”

Re-discover what is truly important to you and inquire if you are in tune with what matters to you. Explore the requirements of your job and position and be honest about how you do or do not match the values and requirements for the position and the corporate culture. What was important to you when you began may not hold the same attraction for you now, in work as in life. Be honest with yourself and you will then have a place to start your re-orientation process using profound action.

Build resiliency. In times past, executives attended “stress management” seminars, only causing more stress by being away from work. I suggest you look at building 24/7 resiliency. There are elements that contribute to being the best “you,” when you know you are in the flow, when you feel on target and energized. What are those elements? Some clients will mention enough sleep, eating well and exercising. I know that these are the first elements to go during busy or stressful times but ironically, they are the foundation of being resilient during stressful times. Others mention staying organized, planning their days, having time to think, communicating well and a host of other activities that contribute to physical, mental and spiritual well-being. One client takes his kayak out early each morning before work during the warmer months (during the cold months, he works out indoors) and finds it is essential to his well-being and to maintaining peak performance as CEO. What contributes to your resiliency and your optimal state of being? Do that! Without nurturing one’s well-being it is difficult to nurture the well-being of a company. Know what elements contribute to your highest success and maintain these. When you reach the inevitable dip, re-assess and go back to those behaviors. As in airplanes, put your oxygen mask on first.

Re-orient yourself. Notice what beliefs you are holding and what behaviors have been standing in the way. Too often we rely on past, proven models of behavior, work or thinking even when the circumstances have changed dramatically. Become aware of your habitual patterns of behavior, leadership, communication and thinking and challenge yourself to consciously choose another model. Re-orienting around what inspires

you about your work and what matters to you personally will help you take a fresh approach and focus your energy. Think of a magnifying glass and the effect it has on paper once the rays of light pass through it. Light the fire for yourself.

Acknowledge yourself. Leadership books say much about acknowledging others but in a position known to be “lonely” the pat on the back may have to come from your own hand. If you keep raising the bar for yourself without acknowledging your achievements you will never be satisfied or realize that you have been doing tremendous work. Like climbing a mountain, pause to take in the view before moving higher.

Understand where you are in your life cycle. A point that is generally overlooked, but that I believe is becoming quietly more common is the influence of age on a person in a CEO position in the context of what values are held. In psychology, this phase of life development is called generative. It refers to a time in life when there is a desire to give back to others, when issues of stewardship and legacy come into play and when we begin to confront our mortality. Currently the average age of a CEO in the three hundred largest U.S. companies is 56. This represents the early boomers moving into the generative phase in life where the search for meaning becomes pronounced. This may be reflected in a desire to align with social values or community issues or to support a cause or to engage in philanthropy. In this life phase one also redefines the values of power and money, the other two elements that motivate CEOs. You may no longer be satisfied using power or money personally or professionally in the same way as you have in the past. Ask yourself if this component is missing for you and if so, explore how this aspiration could be filled.

Who inspires you? You do. If you have been feeling “tired from the inside out,” doubtful or drained, it’s time to reconnect to the person not just the title. Only then will you feel inspired enough to lead others and energized enough to navigate the complexities of being the CEO.