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How to Be a C.E.O., From a Decade's Worth of Them

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It started with a simple idea: What if I sat down with chief executives, and never asked them about their companies?...That led to 525 Corner Office columns...

I met an executive who grew up in a dirt-floor home, and another who escaped the drugs and gangs of her dangerous neighborhood. I learned about different approaches to building culture, from doing away with titles to offering twice-a-month housecleaning to all employees as a retention tool.

And I have been endlessly surprised by the creative approaches that chief executives take to interviewing people for jobs, including tossing their car keys to a job candidate to drive them to a lunch spot, or asking them how weird they are, on a scale of 1 to 10.

Granted, not all chief executives are fonts of wisdom. And some of them, as headlines regularly remind us, are deeply challenged people.

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So You Want to Be a C.E.O.?

People often try to crack the code for the best path to becoming a chief executive. Do finance people have an edge over marketers? How many international postings should you have? A variety of experiences is good, but at what point does breadth suggest a lack of focus?

It's a natural impulse. In this age of Moneyball and big data, why not look for patterns?

The problem is that the world doesn't really work that way. There are too many variables, many of them beyond your control, including luck, timing and personal chemistry.

The career trajectories of the C.E.O.s I've interviewed are so varied that spotting trends is difficult, and a surprising number of the executives do not fit the stereotype of the straight-A student and class president who seemed destined to run a big company someday. I've met C.E.O.s who started out in theater, music and teaching. Others had surprisingly low grades in school.

So what explains it? Are there some qualities — beyond the obvious, like hard work and perseverance — that explain why these people ultimately got the top jobs?

I've noticed three recurring themes.

First, they share a habit of mind that is best described as “applied curiosity.” They tend to question everything. They want to know how things work, and wonder how they can be made to work better. They're curious about people and their back stories.

And rather than wondering if they are on the right career path, they make the most of whatever path they're on, wringing lessons from all their experiences.

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Second, C.E.O.s seem to love a challenge. Discomfort is their comfort zone.

“Usually, I really like whatever the problem is. I like to get close to the fire,” said Arkadi Kuhlmann, a veteran banking chief. “Some people have a desire for that, I've noticed, and some people don't. I just naturally gravitate to the fire. So I think that's a characteristic that you have, that's in your DNA.”

The third theme is how they managed their own careers on their way to the top. ***They focus on doing their current job well, and that earns them promotions.***

...By all means, have career goals, share them with your bosses, and learn everything you can about how the broader business works. And yes, be savvy about company politics (watch out in particular for the show ponies who try to take credit for everything).

But focus on building a track record of success, and people will keep betting on you. “You shouldn't be looking just to climb the ladder, but be open to opportunities that let you climb that ladder,” said Kim Lubel, the former chief executive of CST Brands, a big operator of convenience stores...

The Most Important Thing About Leadership, Part I

Because leadership is so hard, there is a boundless appetite for somebody to come along and say, “Here's the one thing you need to know.” Such headlines are the clickbait of business websites.

If only it were that simple. But one thing isn't necessarily more important than another. And people are, well, complicated. Better to understand leadership as a series of paradoxes.

Leaders, for example, need humility to know what they don't know, but have the confidence to make a decision amid the ambiguity. A bit of chaos can help foster creativity and innovation, but too much can feel like anarchy. You need to be empathetic and care about people, but also be willing to let them go if they're dragging down the team. You have to create a sense of urgency, but also have the patience to bring everybody on the team along.

"We think about our values in pairs, and there is a tension or a balance between them," said Jacqueline Novogratz, chief executive of Acumen Fund, a venture philanthropy organization that focuses on the world's poor. "We talk about listening and leadership; accountability and generosity; humility and audacity. ***You've got to have the humility to see the world as it is – and in our world, working with poor communities, that's not easy to do – but have the audacity to know why you are trying to make it be different, to imagine the way it could be.***"

The Most Important Thing About Leadership, Part II

...I would put trustworthiness at the top. We all have a gut sense of our bosses, based on our observations and experiences: Do we trust them to do the right thing? Will they be straight with us and not shave corners of truth? Do they own their mistakes; give credit where credit is due; care about their employees as people as opposed to assets? Do they manage down as well as up?

"If you want to lead others, you've got to have their trust, and you can't have their trust without integrity," said James Hackett, the chief executive of Ford Motor Company, who ran Steelcase when I spoke with him.

A close cousin of trustworthiness is how much you respect the people who work for you. It's hard to argue with this logic from Jeffrey Katzenberg, the Hollywood executive:

"By definition if there's leadership, it means there are followers, and you're only as good as the followers," he said. "I believe the quality of the followers is in direct correlation to the respect you hold them in. It's not how much they respect you that is most important. It's actually how much you respect them. It's everything."

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'Culture Is Almost Like a Religion'

...when I ask chief executives about their companies' values, it's not unusual for them to struggle to remember them all if there are more than five bullet points. And if the boss can't remember them, will anyone else?

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"The best cultural lists are the behaviors you want to cultivate," she said. "The problem with values like respect and courage is that everybody interprets them

differently. They're too ambiguous and open to interpretation. Instead of uniting us, they can create friction."

At the end of the day, does the values exercise even matter? Many chief executives don't believe in them. And Tae Hea Nahm, managing director of Storm Ventures, a venture capital firm, thinks other signals are more powerful.

"No matter what people say about culture, it's all tied to who gets promoted, who gets raises and who gets fired," he said. "You can have your stated culture, but the real culture is defined by compensation, promotions and terminations. Basically, people seeing who succeeds and fails in the company defines culture. The people who succeed become role models for what's valued in the organization, and that defines culture."

Men vs. Women (Sigh)

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Sure, there are differences in the way people lead. But in my experience interviewing executives for the past decade, they are more likely to be driven by other factors, like whether they are introverts or extroverts, more analytical or creative, and even whether they grew up in a large or small family.

That said, ***there is no doubt that women face much stronger headwinds than men to get the top jobs. And many of those headwinds remain once they become C.E.O.s.***

But the actual work of leadership? It's the same, regardless of whether a man or a woman is in charge. You have to set a vision, build cultural guardrails, foster a sense of teamwork, and make tough calls. All of that requires balancing the endless paradoxes of leadership, and doing it in a way that inspires trust.

And a suggestion: I believe it's time to give the narrative about whether men and women lead differently a rest. Yes, we need to keep talking and writing about why there are so few women in the top ranks. But this trope about different styles of leadership among men women seems past its expiration date.

And while we're at it, could everyone agree to drop the predictable questions about how female chief executives juggle family and work? Or start asking men the same questions, too?

I Have Just One Question for You

A big surprise has been all the different answers I've heard to the simple question I've posed to each leader: How do you hire? ...Daniel Schwartz, the chief executive of the parent company of Burger King, told me that ***he likes to ask candidates, "Are you smart or do you work hard?" (Yes, there is a right answer, he said: "You want hard workers. You'd be surprised***

how many people tell me, ‘I don’t need to work hard, I’m smart.’ Really? Humility is important.”)

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This has inspired a kind of running game I’ve played with many chief executives: If you could ask somebody only one question, and you had to decide on the spot whether to hire them based on their answer, what would it be?

I’d nominate a question that surfaced during my interview with Bob Brennan, an executive director at CA Technologies, a software firm, who was the chief of Iron Mountain, the records-management company, when I spoke with him.

“I want to know how willing people are to really talk about themselves,” Mr. Brennan said. ***“So if I ask you, ‘What are the qualities you like least and most in your parents?’ you might bristle at that, or you might be very curious about it, or you’ll just literally open up to me. And obviously if you bristle at that, it’s too vulnerable an environment for you.”***

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But I’m hard pressed to think of a better crystal ball for predicting how somebody is likely to behave in the weeks, months and years after you hire them. After all, people often adopt the qualities of their parents that they like, and work hard to do the opposite of what they don’t like.

The point is reinforced time and again in my interviews. When I ask executives how their parents have influenced their leadership style, I often hear powerful themes that carry through their lives and careers....

My Favorite Story

I heard it from Bill Green, who was the chief executive of Accenture, the consulting firm, at the time of our interview. I asked him about his approach to hiring, and near the end of our conversation, he shared this anecdote:

“I was recruiting at Babson College. This was in 1991. The last recruit of the day — I get this résumé. I get the blue sheet attached to it, which is the form I’m supposed to fill out with all this stuff and his résumé attached to the top. His résumé is very light — no clubs, no sports, no nothing. Babson, 3.2. Studied finance. Work experience: Sam’s Diner, references on request.

“It’s the last one of the day, and I’ve seen all these people come through strutting their stuff and they’ve got their portfolios and semester studying abroad. Here comes this guy. He sits. His name is Sam, and I say: ‘Sam, let me just ask you. What else were you doing while you were here?’ He says: Well, Sam’s Diner. That’s our family business, and I leave on Friday after classes, and I go and work till closing. I work all day Saturday till closing, and then I work Sunday until I close, and then I drive back to Babson.’ I wrote, ‘Hire him,’ on the blue sheet. He had character. He faced a set of challenges. He figured out how to do both.”...

“It’s work ethic,” he said. “You could see the guy had charted a path for himself to make it work with the situation he had. He didn’t ask for any help. He wasn’t victimized by the thing. He just said, ‘That’s my dad’s business, and I work there.’ Confident. Proud.”

Mr. Green added: “You sacrifice and you’re a victim, or you sacrifice because it’s the right thing to do and you have pride in it. Huge difference. Simple thing. Huge difference.”

The story captures a quality I’ve always admired in some people. They own their job, whatever it is.

Best Career and Life Advice

My vote for career advice goes to something I heard from Joseph Plumeri, the vice chairman of First Data, a payments-processing company, and former chief executive of Willis Group Holdings. ***His biggest career inflection points, he told me, came from chance meetings, giving rise to his advice: “Play in traffic.”***

“It means that if you go push yourself out there and you see people and do things and participate and get involved, something happens,” he said. “Both of my great occasions in life happened by accident simply because I showed up.”

Mr. Plumeri learned this lesson firsthand when he was looking for a job while in law school. He was knocking on doors of various firms, including one called Cogan, Berlind, Weill & Levitt. He managed to get an audience with one of the partners, Sandy Weill, who informed the young Mr. Plumeri that this was a brokerage firm, not a law firm.

Despite the awkward moment, something clicked, and Mr. Weill gave him a part-time job. And Mr. Plumeri moved up as the firm evolved into Citigroup, and he spent 32 years there, many of them in top jobs.

“I tell people, just show up, get in the game, go play in traffic,” Mr. Plumeri said. “Something good will come of it, but you’ve got to show up.”

As for life advice, my favorite insight came from Ruth Simmons, president of Prairie View A&M University. Her suggestion to students:

“They should never assume that they can predict what experiences will teach them the most about what they value, or about what their life should be,” she said. “You have to be open and alert at every turn to the possibility that you’re about to learn the most important lesson of your life.”