

Every CEO Must Have a Leadership Strategy

By John R. Boyle

Regardless of a CEO's tenure – or the purpose of his or her mission – it's essential that these organizational players at the very top have a well-thought-out and broadly articulated leadership strategy.

Without this type of strategy, it's very difficult to create the primary conditions necessary for sustainable business performance and growth.

Most leadership tenures at the top are set up from the start, driven by a board of directors, or private equity or venture capital structures. And new CEO's often spend a good deal of time proving that they were the right person for the job.

That's why it's so important for new CEO's to choose a durable theme that highlights their leadership role; it's why it's so important to make strategic and systemic changes that will punctuate this theme; and, it's why it's so important to maintain the instituted changes.

A leadership strategy is usually viewed as a human resources or talent plan; but it isn't. Instead, a leadership strategy is a holistic and longer-term plan in which the CEO consistently articulates, executes, and elevates all the elements of leadership to the highest level; these elements include innovation, markets, business models, global and local communities, and the culture within the enterprise. All senior executives work to engage the organization's leadership strategy, but it's the CEO, the company's chief strategist, who sets the direction and structures it for success.

It's also critical for the CEO to take an architectural approach when it comes to crafting his or her role; and this approach should, ideally, begin even before he or she accepts the top job. This urgency can help shorten the time to high impact and sustained performance, from 2.5 years to 12 months, while ensuring the viability of the overall enterprise going forward.

There are three steps that come into play when a CEO architects a leadership strategy:

1. In the first six months, discover the top team and design it to perform – This is not the typical executive team, characterized primarily by domain expertise. This team is characterized by mutual accountability to a common leadership charter; necessary expertise; diversity in all aspects; and positive collaborative relationships. As the CEO assumes the reins of responsibility, his or her initial success is dependent on this top-team connectivity. A lot of intense experimentation and learning takes place during this early proving

period, and a well-knit top team must shoulder the real work. This will set the tone for the CEO's tenure at the top.

2. In the next three months, design the leadership strategy and navigation plan – The CEO and his or her top team must choose a durable theme that personifies the next phase for the company and reinforces the tone for leadership within the company and in the marketplace. The team decides on the most impactful work for the enterprise, work that it will share, and work that will determine success or failure over the next three years.
3. In the final three months of the first year, engage and enable the organization to perform – We call this the convergence phase, and it's at this point that the CEO, working through the fabric of the top team, can begin to integrate the company's leadership, culture and strategy. Convergence, in turn, ignites possibilities, establishes alignment, and ensures business viability; and this creates a well-grounded organization that is agile, self-sustaining and enduring.

It's important to note that there's often some blurring between these three steps, and the lines of demarcation aren't always sharply etched; yet it's the convergence phase that allows the organization to realize its uniqueness in the market, as well as its impact as an employer.

The key for CEOs, however, is to recognize that there is a leadership lifecycle, and that it's essential to compress it in order to accelerate time to performance while creating the conditions that perpetuate sustainability.

It's also valuable for CEOs to recognize up-front how important it is to frame-out their first three years on the job; these years are defined by the leadership strategy, and they should be chunked out in key six-month intervals. This framing process should be a top priority from day one.

Indeed, right from the get-go, a CEO needs to make a quick assessment at the strategic and systems level that takes into account the organization and its customers.

Then, he or she must shape the landscape and culture for the company – meeting the enterprise where it is, but also taking it where it needs to go.

This involves a leadership plan, which covers the visible horizon and includes several pivotal dimensions for him or her – personal, organizational, shareholder/stakeholder and business.

In more specific terms, the architecture of the plan should encompass many layers, including what the CEO hopes to do; what he or she stands for; how he or she wants to show up; and what the company's vision and values are.

Unfortunately, though, most CEOs just starting out have trouble focusing on the broad sweep and arc of the initial 36-60 months of their tenure.

But, by putting a plan with bi-annual cycles and milestones in place from the onset, and then enabling trusted advisors and top-team members to share the major organizational responsibilities, CEOs can accelerate performance, and create strong and sustainable business results.

Just as importantly, in my view, this usually leads to the critical convergence of leadership, culture and strategy – a prerequisite for companies in today's relentlessly competitive global marketplace.

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