

The cult of the faceless boss

Too many chief executives are instantly forgettable. It's the flamboyant, visionary bosses who change the world.

The European Union is not the only institution that prefers faceless technocrats to people with star power. The corporate world is increasingly rejecting imperial chief executives in favour of anonymous managers—bland and boring men and women who can hardly get themselves noticed at cocktail parties, let alone stop the traffic in Moscow and Beijing.

Some of the world's most powerful bosses are striking mainly for their blandness: Sam Palmisano at IBM, Tony Hayward at BP, Terry Leahy at Tesco, Vittorio Colao at Vodafone. These men are at the head of a vast army of even more forgettable bosses. Watch the parade of chief executives who appear on CNBC every day, or drop in to a high-powered conference, and you begin to wonder whether cloning is more advanced than scientists are letting on.

It is true that there are a few more women and members of ethnic minorities at the top of companies than there used to be. But physical diversity has not translated into cultural diversity or intellectual vitality. Almost without exception, today's bosses spout the same tired old management clichés—about the merits of doing well by doing right, the importance of valuing your workers, the virtues of sustainability and so forth.

The women who were profiled in a recent article in the Financial Times about the "top 50 women in world business" were every bit as adept with the cliché as their male colleagues. Indra Nooyi, the boss of PepsiCo, proclaimed that she spends her weekends "doing everything that normal people do". Andrea Jung, the boss of Avon, said her biggest inspiration came from "Avon's six million sales representatives worldwide".

The fashion for faceless chief executives is part of an understandable reaction against yesterday's imperial bosses, many of whom were vivid characters, capable of holding their own in a cocktail party with Tony Blair, but who collectively brought opprobrium on the system that let them shine. Some, such as Jeff Skilling of Enron and Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, broke the law and helped inspire a dramatic tightening of government regulation, in the form of the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation. Others, such as Home Depot's Bob Nardelli and Hewlett-Packard's Carly Fiorina, paid themselves like superstars but delivered dismal results.

The turbulent business climate is another factor that encourages today's chief executives to keep their heads down. Their average tenure has declined from ten years in the 1970s to six years today, and boards are becoming ever more likely to sack bosses if they get out of line, particularly in Europe. The financial crisis has also produced a wave of popular fury about over-paid executives and their unaccountable ways. In this sort of climate it is not just the paranoid, but the faceless, who survive.

Facelessness—or at least humility—is also the height of fashion among management consultants and business gurus. Corporate headhunters are helping firms find "humble" bosses. Jim Collins, one of America's most popular gurus, argues that the best chief executives are not flamboyant visionaries but "humble, self-effacing, diligent and resolute souls". Business journalists have taken to producing glowing profiles of self-effacing and self-denying bosses such as Haruka Nishimatsu, the boss of Japan Airlines, who travels to work on the bus and pays himself less than his pilots, and Mike Eskew, the former boss of UPS, who flew coach and shares an administrative assistant with three other people. It can only be a matter of time before somebody writes "The Management Secrets of Uriah Heep": be 'umble, be ever so 'umble.

Yet there is surely a danger of taking all this too far. A low profile is no guarantee against corporate failure, as the former bosses of two companies lauded by Mr Collins, Fannie Mae and Circuit City, can tell you. In general, the corporate world needs its flamboyant visionaries and raging egomaniacs rather more than its humble leaders and corporate civil servants. Think of the people who have shaped the modern business landscape, and "faceless" and "humble" are not the first words that come to mind.

Be bold, not bland

Henry Ford was as close as you can get to being deranged without losing your liberty. John Patterson, the founder of National Cash Register and one of the greatest businessmen of the gilded age, once notified an employee that he was being sacked by setting fire to his desk. Thomas Watson, one of Patterson's protégés and the founder of IBM, turned his company into a cult and himself into the object of collective worship. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are both tightly wound empire-builders. Jack Welch and Lou Gerstner are anything but self-effacing. These are people who have created the future, rather than merely managing change, through the force of their personalities and the strength of their visions. George Bernard Shaw's adage about progress depending on "the unreasonable man" applies just as much to business as to every other area of life, if not more.

The previous outbreak of the cult of facelessness was in the 1950s, when books such as "The Organisation Man" and "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" topped the bestseller list, and when two of America's biggest firms, General Motors and General Electric, were both run by men named Charles Wilson. Today's world is as different as possible from the one that produced organisation man: an unusual degree of turbulence requires unusual bosses, rather than steady-as-she-goes functionaries.

The best defence of these faceless bosses lies in the realm of public relations, rather than management—they are helping to defuse public anger at corporate excesses. But even here the case is weak. Few people pay any attention to the identikit bosses who keep popping up to hum their corporate muzak about doing well by doing right. The best ambassadors for business are the outsized figures who have changed the world and who feel no need to apologise for themselves or their calling. There is no long-term comparative advantage in being forgettable.

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