

7 Beliefs of a leader who will never be CEO

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In order to build a successful company, varying personality types must all be represented. This array of characters is more important than determining someone's title: instead of trying to check the box for CTO, CMO and VP of Engineering, you should focus on hiring rockstars, all different from one another. These leaders bring their range of expertise to the group, none more important than the next. That being said, common thinking patterns need to be tossed out the window, right from the start, in order to be the chief executive of a company. Many strong leaders are priceless assets to teams but aren't CEO material if they hold any of the following commonly-held beliefs.

It's real when you see it. To build a company, CEOs have to be visionary and forward-thinking. No different than an architect and builder can "see" a house before the foundation has been dug, a CEO sees the results only when he first believes in them. Whether this is an invigorated team, a world-changing product, or the acquisition of a competitor, a CEO rests at the helm, perpetually steering the ship forward toward the goals set out in advance.

If it's not broken, don't fix it. In the age of creativity, our world moves at mind-boggling speeds. To keep up with the crowd, let alone stay ahead of the curve, companies must constantly innovate. Stagnation is the surefire path to mediocrity. If a fix does not come until after something is broken, it's far too late. It's the things that work just fine that need the fixing. "Fix the stuff that works fine" is the modus operandi of a true innovator.

Failure is not an option. Failing (fast) must be encouraged in a company of five or a company of 50,000. Employees need to feel comfortable speaking up and sharing ideas with their teams and broader peer group, which is only cultivated through a well-developed culture of openness. Ultimately, failing isn't a nail in a coffin, but rather in a window into something otherwise unclear. Michael Jordan explains it succinctly, noting, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." It's not that failure is not an option, but rather that failure is the only option.

Risk is something that should be managed. Big risks lead to big rewards. The world's most successful people – and their companies – are those who take outlandish risks, often cast off as crazy by others, until they've won, changed the game, and proved their naysayers wrong. "Here's to the crazy ones..."

Figure out the best way to do something and stick with it. If you've always done something a certain way, it's probably wrong. Traditions are great at home with your family, but in the business world, they can lead to disaster. At ePrize, a digital promotions company I founded in 1999, we told the meatloaf story: a young girl asks her mom why she always cut off the end of her meatloaf before putting it in the pan. Without a good answer to her daughter's question, the woman calls her own mom, who also has no explanation beyond "it's just how I've always done it, because that's how my mom did it." Grandma calls great-grandma, who laughs hysterically at the question. Her response was a slap in the face: "I don't know why you're all cutting off the end of your loaves – I didn't have a big enough pan!"

Your best ideas must be protected. The best ideas are never stolen, because they must be shoved down people's throats. At first these plans will be ridiculed, then fought, and finally, accepted, but only once a critical mass has developed. Nobody wants to be the first one to the party. For customers you already have, remember that their feedback is a gift – use it to improve upon whatever you're doing, because the truth is, there's always room to improve.

Common sense is king. The best CEOs balk at the herd. If there's a trend doing something in "zig" fashion, visionary executives will jump at the chance to "zag," racing in the opposite direction. Even if it seems incremental (as opposed to disruptive or revolutionary), the status quo provides any company with the opportunity to do it better by doing it differently.

Fonte: Forbes, New York. Disponível em:

<<http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshlinkner/2012/09/25/7-beliefs-of-a-leader-who-will-never-be-ceo/>>. Acesso em: 25 Sept. Mar. 2012.

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