



The Successful CEO:

As a CEO, how should you develop yourself and your team, and how can science help?

Article 5

Successful CEOs are often said to have certain traits, to behave in a certain way. However, such assertions do not hold up to real world scrutiny.

In the real world, each CEO succeeds, or not, in a unique context. So, there can be no set of general traits or way of working that will lead to his or her success.

In our 'The Successful CEO' series **Christian Nyhlen**, the CEO of **Krínova Incubator & Science Park** and **MU's CEO, Richard Moore**, look at how you, the CEO, can be assured to succeed. In this article they are joined by the **CEO of Smart DCC, Angus Flett** and the leadership development expert **David Deegan** who is the **Executive Development Director at Cranfield Executive Development**. To read other articles in the series visit [The Successful CEO](#).

David

The first question with leadership development – is why do you feel you need it? Where does the perceived need come from? For example, maybe you know you need to work on something, maybe you've been told you have a gap, or maybe it's a general belief in the value of self-development, life-long learning or possessing a growth mindset? And of course, why work on it now?

If it is not a specific prompt or recognised need, I'd propose you firstly find out more information – but at CEO level it is not so easy. How will you get feedback? Who will honestly be able to tell you what you need to do better and how you can develop? What expectations do you have of yourself and what do others expect from you?

Angus

I would add that another common time when a CEO should seek development is when they are new in their appointment. As a CEO in your first appointment, you may hesitate to ask for development help – a coach or a mentor – even formal training. As you become more confident and experienced you understand it is a source of strength to ask for a development programme for yourself. CEOs fail for many reasons, but a common reason is that the first CEO role is a big jump. Of course, each person's step up is unique to them, but the nature of the CEO role is different and de-risking your appointment through having an effective personal development plan is vital. For example, the role of owners, NEDs, governance, regulatory affairs may all be new to a first appointee CEO – they were to me!

Christian

As a CEO it's also very important to understand your Board and/or owners' perspective on your development needs – and those of your Executive team. Science tells us that successful development is focused on specific outcomes that should be achieved and that are understood to be relevant and important to the context in which the leader must perform. So as Angus commented, it is very important to start with the specific need and not jump into zeitgeists. Effective leadership development is not the latest trend or model, but it is about you and your team's unique needs, context, and opportunities.

Even though science guides us that leader development is unique to each leader and their situation, are there any general important competencies for most CEOs to develop?

David

Effective decision making is an essential CEO skill, even if the context in which decisions are made are wildly different. To develop decision making capability, it is valuable to think about how you generally make decisions – for example, consciously and methodically, or responding ad-hoc to new stimuli? Reflecting about how you make decisions and strengthening your skills in gathering hard and soft facts will enable most CEOs to make better decisions. I would offer this guidance to a CEO thinking about developing their decision-making effectiveness, a similar logic can be used for other development needs of course:

- Set your goals: Firstly, know what it is about your decision making you want to improve, what business and personal goal should be met? Reflecting on your decision-making approach has developed, and what experience has taught you so far is a good way to understand what your goals should be.
- Know how you will measure reaching your goals: Secondly, anchor your decision-making development goals with relevant stakeholders and decide how to measure progress.
- Think about how to achieve your goals: Thirdly, gather more information – through introspection (knowing what you stand for, what is your stance) and through collecting structured feedback. When you are clear about your beliefs and the values you operate with and how you are perceived, smart development actions can be selected. Use the data-sifting skills you have and apply it to your own development needs and activities.
- Get the help you need and follow up: The fourth and final part is to get the help you need based on your actions and follow up on your progress. Who else needs to be involved for your development in this area to succeed? How will you follow up your goals?

Christian

I would only add that when it comes to decision making for CEOs, another aspect is the size and level of the decision – to learn what decisions you should, and should not – directly be involved in. And when you should be directly involved, how to be inclusive of the necessary stakeholders in the process. One thing I consider for large decisions is 'how shocked will people be?' – this opens up the question about who needs to be involved and about your own motivation i.e. – 'why am I being so radical?' or 'why am I not rocking the boat?' or even motivations that are more ego-centric 'am I being radical for selfish reasons?' Challenge yourself that there is not some desire to leave a mark creeping in? It will not be long before the 'decision challenge' turns into the 'communication challenge', so starting with a clear purpose and thinking through the impact of the decision will help you make the best possible choice and prepare for the communication task that lays ahead.

Angus

And this brings us onto another key CEO development area – engaging your team. Every CEO should focus on efforts to build a leadership team, in whatever context that team must lead. Each CEO needs to engage their team – whether it be existing leaders or new appointees they select. To do this well you need to think about influence. Of course, science tells us much about influence, good influence approach is to be very visceral and bring things to life – for example storytelling, using emotion to describe what the future feels like. Alternatively, another approach is to role model the change you seek, to be the example. Each person and each engagement situation is unique, so developing your range and depth of influencing approaches is very helpful to all CEOs.

Richard

Much of the CEO and Board coaching MU conducts focuses on leaders' needs around strengthening engagement and influencing skills. The contexts and the people involved are diverse, but securing followership is a universal challenge. Knowing your own influencing style – your dominant approach, and then how to control it and use different methods is very valuable. As Angus describes, two of the most powerful influence methods are role modelling and using emotion. Additionally, 'challenging others' or using logic and facts are another two important methods. In fact, science tell us there are more than 20 different methods to influence others – knowing yourself and being able to adapt and use different approaches increases the chances of success in whatever leadership context you find yourself.

Christian

As a CEO, you normally work with experienced people who know their business and know what they are doing. Knowledgeable people with strong views. To have influence on experts and engage experienced people it's important to recognise their expertise and knowledge. That's why 'the why' is often the key. However you approach the task of engaging and influencing, a clear sense of purpose is a valuable and powerful starting point.

David

This also makes me think about the other side of the coin, being influenced by others – another common CEO strength, or weakness...

Curiosity, listening, and learning are also vital CEO skills. Have you got people around who will question you? Christian is of course right; you will almost certainly have knowledgeable people around you – but do you have people around you that will ask you 'why' or will challenge you? Creating the confidence that you own what you are doing and the same time are inclusive and open to be challenged is a powerful capability to develop. Building your skill to clearly explain 'the why' to different people and forming a brand as 'open to challenge' will help you succeed in making better decisions and implementing them more effectively. Inclusive leadership is a vital part of building inclusive workplaces and is necessary for diverse teams to be high performing. 'Are you ensuring you create diversity of thought around you?'

Christian

Finally, when you have made the decision, taken on board any important challenges and engaged your team to deliver, you will review and follow up execution. This is also an important opportunity to develop yourself and your team – beyond only checking to see if the decision worked out:

- What did you learn?
- How did you learn and adapt?
- How can learning become systematic so future decisions and implementation will be improved?
- Which further development needs in you or your team can be identified?

One recommendation I would make is to think broadly about what success is. For a CEO this is often financial results, but it could also be implementation speed, effect on cultural maturity or impact on the development of leaders or yourself. It is also useful to reflect on timing of evaluation – how fast do you measure success as a CEO? Because something worked well short term does not necessarily make it structurally effective. Evaluating success broadly, and over the long term, are useful abilities to keep developing. And as a CEO of course your task is beyond today's results, culture, and success. Think about what legacy you and your leadership team will leave. How will your decision effect future success?

What is important for CEOs to consider in developing their team?

Angus

Strategy and structure is important, but as a CEO it's people that really impact your effectiveness. Your leadership team is essential as their impact on success is large and systematic. Relationship breakdowns and ineffective teamwork will slow things down, people run out of energy or are excluded. On the other hand, a motivated and engaged team can really outperform. Purpose, motivation, energy need to be actively managed by the CEO. Your talents have power in a 'knowledge economy' so engaging diverse talents and forming high performing teams is key. High performing teams are well selected for the role, have clear goals, an effective dynamic and learn continuously. Now it's no longer enough to select people who can do their tasks well, they must be able to grow, adapt and work effectively in teams. Development of leaders is not 'another task' for a CEO, it is [the task](#).

What always works in developing leaders, in my experience, is to use self-awareness. Using psychometric tools, multi-source feedback and other similar methods helps leaders find out about themselves. This self-awareness not only helps each individual leader but in sharing our own strengths and development areas with peers and in teams we learn more about each other and how to work with each other well. Diverse teams achieve better results when leaders are self-aware, curious and aligned in their purpose and values. Inclusive leadership of diverse teams are helpful CEOs because they bring the diversity of thought and experience.

Richard

CEOs know that their team may not have the skills they need in new situations. It is important that CEOs are regularly asking their team if they have the skills they need and create an environment where it is OK to ask for help. For example, if you ask your Head of Operations to open a new APAC business – are they able to tell you they don't know how to do that or do they feel you expect them not to need help and so say nothing? With every new decision, strategy or situation ask yourself: What development do we need? Assessing, track record, knowledge, skill and capacity is an ongoing process that needs to be done not only when you hire leaders but every time you ask them to work differently or achieve something new. As change is ever faster, ongoing leader development is ever more important.

Angus

I think the book "Leadership Pipeline" is an excellent book on leader development. If you have read it you'll remember the story of the rising star who was running the highest performing bottling operation for a major soft drinks company in the US. She was given coaching and support, and her role expanded to take on Canada. Things went from good to great, until they asked her to take on the regional South America role. Then she resigned citing an inability to cope with workload. What the CEO did not know was how her leader achieved results – it was an exceptional intellect and extraordinary hard worker. In the new role, she needed others to be able to run operations, and she needed to hire them and develop them. As successful as she was leading operations herself – hiring and developing others to do it was not her strength. Without development she could not succeed, with it she may have.

Leadership development is one key element to sustaining strategic momentum. As CEO, keeping leadership development in focus and active is as important as getting the strategy right. Whilst being a purpose driven organisation is important the inevitable ups and downs of the day job along with the ebb and flow of challenge can drain leaders as the strategy and purpose on their own is not enough to sustain momentum. Understanding your team's positive and negative triggers and making sure your leaders know why they should develop is key to knowing when to push, when to ease up and – critically – when to support.

Christian

From my experience, do not underestimate the importance of getting a balance between leadership team dynamics and the individual development of the team members. The development of the team is an own organism, but CEOs also need to take into account that individuals are in different development phases in their lives and their careers – and of course have different personalities. In developing your team, and individual leaders, the balance between individual effectiveness in role and contribution beyond own role to the team and organisation's development is important. Truly successful leaders grow as leaders and as team builders.

David

From our experience at Cranfield, I cannot stress enough, that the most important leadership development topic for any CEO is their own personal development. To develop your team, develop yourself. To role model leadership development by developing yourself creates an environment where learning is normal. It role models a growth mindset, and there is plenty of research around about growth vs fixed mindset. This means to self-reflect on how you work, and how you can increase you own self-awareness, knowledge, or skills. As a CEO people may not always tell you when you are effective or less effective. So having development goals and regularly asking for feedback sets a good example to others that they should also develop themselves. Where you lead, your team will follow.

'The Successful CEO' series

Nearly half of new CEO appointments fail.

For practical advice to succeed as a CEO – Sofia Hjort Lönnegård, MU's Head of Communications, interviews **Christian Nyhlen**, the CEO of **Krínova Incubator & Science Park**, and **MU's CEO, Richard Moore**, **Smart DCC CEO Angus Flett** and **Executive Development Director at Cranfield Executive Development, David Deegan**.

As well as being CEOs themselves, Christian and Richard have spent decades working with CEOs from high growth start-ups to global leaders in the private and public sector. They have found that by applying what science tells us about performance at work, more CEOs succeed.

To find out which steps to take to ensure an impactful leader development, click here:

[Research Shows That Only 10% of Leader Development Has Impact – 3 Steps to Succeed](#)

To find out more about influencing approaches, click here:

[Understanding and measuring your influence at work](#)

To learn more about how to reliably improve leader development, click here:

[Reliably Improve Leader Development – LinkedIn Pulse](#)

We hope you find this second article in our 'The Successful CEO' series valuable. Our next article in the series is outlining "How to build a successful strategy, and how can science help you get it right?".