

Developing My Personal CEO Leadership Model

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CEO Leadership Model

On examining the question at hand; “What would my ‘CEO Leadership Model’ be if at age 40 I were elected CEO-Managing Partner of a mid-sized Architecture-Planning-Interiors firm,” I have come to an initial conclusion that I see potential for my model to go in a couple of different directions depending on the current situation of the firm in which I become the CEO-Managing Partner.

It would seem logical that prior to being elected CEO, I would have held a position of importance within the firm. At the same time, it could be possible that I came into this position through either the merging of companies or through the company determining that there was a need for an outside source to be elected into this position.

Should the latter situation be the case, I would foresee myself being much more of a Heroic leader as compared to an Anti-Heroic or Unheroic leader. The reason for this would be my need to gain an understanding of every aspect of the firm along with developing relationships with my partners and employees in order to see exactly how tasks and chain of command have developed within the firm prior to my taking office.

Should the former, more plausible situation occur, I would be able to be more of a well-rounded leader from the start. The reason for this is because I would already have an understanding of the “way things are done” within the firm and I would also already have a level of trust and understanding developed with the other partners and employees of the firm. Knowing what I would know about the firm would allow me to more readily delegate tasks along with letting the team move forward and continue with “business as usual” without interrupting the general flow of productivity.

Basing my CEO Leadership Model on having been elected to the position from within the firm; I believe that when I first come into the position of CEO my model mix will be about 40-45% Heroic leader with the rest of the model being divided fairly equally between Unheroic and Anti-Heroic leader.

My reason for believing this model to be true is due to a strong understanding of my personal strengths and weaknesses. I know that one of my main weaknesses is not being able to delegate tasks to people; or if I do delegate a task, I am likely to “clean up” behind the original person if it is not done the way I feel it should be. Over the years, I have come a long way in both recognizing the weakness and taking long strides to overcome the weakness and realize that my way isn’t always the only way or the right way of doing things.

It is my belief that by time I am 40 and CEO of a firm, I will have overcome this weakness enough that the Heroic side of my model will not over power the rest of the model by much or for very long. At the same time, I realize that because of my “go get ‘em,” “lead the pack” personality and ambition; the Heroic leader side of my model will generally be at least slightly higher than the Unheroic and Anti-Heroic sides of my model; this will occur regardless of how closely balanced the three sides of the model are.

CEO Action Item List

Before I can make any successful headway as the CEO of a firm, I need to have my own plan of attack. This plan of attack will be an Action Item list of tasks that need to be accomplished by myself and/or by the firm as a whole along with potential further development of each action item explaining how that action item is to be accomplished.

The beginning development of this Action Item List follows:

- Evaluate the current Business Plan
 1. Vision
 2. Mission
 3. Strategic Marketing Plan
 4. Tactical Marketing Plan
 5. Financial Operating Plan
 6. Client Relationship Management Plan
 7. Human Resources & Organizational Development Plan
 8. Ownership, Governance & Succession Plan

- Evaluate my personal vision/mission/business plan and determine how it fits within the firm's Business Plan.

- Work in tandem with the other partners and the employees to mold the current business plan along with my personal vision and the partner's visions into a unified business plan.

- Ensure that the firm's current projects, employees, workflow, finances, etc are maintained and that plans for continued growth and maintaining of size are integrated into the Core Business Plan, Vision, Mission, and Overall Values.

- Develop greater communication with all members of the firm in order to gain an understanding of the feelings that the members of the firm have for the firms practice and methodologies.

- Continue dialogue with employees in order to keep them well informed of the vision of the firm and how they play a role in that vision.

- Encourage development of employee input into the direction of the firm's growth and development.

- Allow the employees to develop a stake within the prosperity of the firm.

- Develop/redevelop communication with current and past clients in order to inform them of who I am and how I fit into the growth and development of the firm. This line of communication is also to be used to reassure the clients that having a new CEO does not mean there will be a loss in credibility and reputation. On the contrary, I will be taking every step possible to maintain and improve the reputation through further development and growth of the firm.
- Develop a dialogue with the clients (past & present) in order to learn what they feel to be the firm's strengths and weaknesses. Follow up with the client on steps that are being taken to learn from their observations.
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

It should be noted that the blank action items shown are intentional. This is due to the fact that the list is never complete; this list is continually growing and changing as new actions come to attention.

CEO Guiding Principles

Before further explanation of my Leadership Model and my Action Item List can be done, it is important to highlight key principles referenced from Joan Capelin's *Communication by Design*. I make reference to them here because there is a great deal of overlap in the practice of these principles and clear identification of them may be difficult due to the blurring of the division between each principle.

In chronological order from Joan Capelin's book:

1. Principle 1 Define *success*
2. Principle 4 If you don't ask, you don't get
3. Principle 5 FUBB (Follow-Up Beyond Belief)
4. Principle 12 Just do it
5. Principle 13 Tell 'em who you are
6. Principle 14 *Therefore* is the most important word in marketing
7. Principle 17 Shoot to where the duck is going
8. Principle 20 First, you must market internally
9. Principle 22 Don't Start anything you can't finish
10. Principle 28 Let Go

Evaluate the Business Plan

Before I can go very far as a good CEO, I must evaluate where the firm currently stands in all aspects and not just in the business plan. While Joan Capelin discusses her “Define *success*” principle as defining what constitutes success for a client on a specific project, I am going to take this principle and apply it one step further. Success must be defined in all aspects of the firm. It must be imbedded into the core business plan and the entire firm must be sold on the concept. Without a set of benchmarks and milestones, the firm will not be able to gauge where it stands in relationship to the goals that want to be obtained.

In order to define and achieve this success, the views of every person in the firm need to be heard. Every person needs to feel that they have a voice in the direction the firm goes. They need to be sold on the mission of the firm and gain a sense of self worth for what they are doing. The employees helping with the firm’s success will in turn help them succeed within the firm.

Not only do I need to hear what the employees have to say about the firm, I also need to hear what the past and current clients have to say about the firm. What we as a firm perceive the results of a project and of a relationship with a client to be may not be the same as what the client perceives those same results and relationships to be.

It is crucial to tap into that wealth of knowledge about how the practice of the firm is seen by both the employees and the clients and then use the knowledge to implement improvements for the future. On the same note it is crucial to follow up with both employees and clients in order to keep them well informed on implementations that are being made. While in this follow up and all follow-ups, it is worthwhile to keep an open ear for potential new work from the clients.

Gathering of information from the employees and the clients is only the beginning of an on going communication with the clients and employees. Right now at age 26, I already ask a lot of questions of the people around me. I know that I will keep that trait going at age 40 when I am CEO of a firm. This trait will help greatly because it will allow me to continue to get a feel for how the firm is being received by the employees and the clients. Being able to ask these questions will allow me to feel out the direction the firm is going and where the firm wants to be positioned.

After this initial round of information gathering is done, these ideas gathered need to be compiled with my personal ideas and that of the partners. From here we will flush out the Current Business Plan so that it holds true to the current ideals of the firm. Not every idea that came up is going to be integrated into the business plan; only those that fit into and help maintain the scope of the firm will be adopted. Once the business plan is in place, it must be shared with the employees so that they are on the same page as the partners. At the same time it is beneficial to keep the continuing dialogue with the clients, informing them of the improvements and revisions to the firm’s core values.

Maintain

It is essential for the firm to be able to maintain its size and position itself for growth. As CEO, I will not allow the firm to become a “feast or famine” firm. Projects will not be taken on if we do not have the resources to accomplish the task. The firm will not grow just to take on a larger project and then, when that project is done; let people go because we cannot afford to keep them on payroll.

There are several steps that need to be taken to continue a maintained level of work while promoting growth. One of the first steps to maintaining the firm has to occur from day one, even while the firm is revising the business plan. As the new CEO, I need to make contact with the past and current clients and inform them of the change in leadership.

I must be able to sell the clients on the fact that the reputation of the firm is in good hands with me and that they are not getting second rate work because of a new name being put in charge. The client purchased the services of the firm, not the name; the name was simply one selling point. The client saw the work that the firm has produced in the past, and the firm was able to sell the client on what we are able to do for the client at present and in the future.

Along with maintaining clients and business relationships, there are internal tasks that need to happen in order to help maintain the firm for the future. During the redevelopment of the business plan, the plan for succession will need to be evaluated. It is key that the younger generations are groomed to take over the firm.

Promotion from within to allow for ease of retirement and transition will not only secure the future of continued success but also give the employees the benefit of personal growth and success through climbing the corporate ladder within the firm. If there is not a plan for succession, the only survival of the firm will be in the form of buyout. Buyout is not an option under my leadership.

Growth

In order to begin the growth process, the SWOT's of the firm need to be evaluated. Many of these points will be covered with in the redevelopment of the business plan, but there needs to be a specific identification of the SWOT's in order for the firm to identify where we have room to grow and where we need to hold back in order to improve and maintain.

We never want to take on more than we can handle because if we were to take on too much, we may finish the projects but based on possible differences in our definitions and the client's definitions of success, we may end up a failure regardless of the completion of the project.

Now, knowing the direction of growth that the firm wants to take, it is time to do it. Steps need to be taken with internal marketing and potentially external marketing in order to sell the company to potential clients. There are so many different subcategories of marketing that it is difficult to say where to spend the firm's resources in developing the marketing. The key form of marketing that needs to be solidified is firm branding or reputation.

The identity of the firm starts with the core values and builds from there. The branding of the firm tells potential clients who the firm is and what the firm does. The marketing is used to promote this brand and to tailor it in order to tell the potential client the "so what." The client doesn't care about us as a firm; they care about what we can do for them as the client. They already gained interest in the firm by our reputation, our brand. Now we need to sell them on the "here's what we can do for you."

We tell the client who we are and then
We tell the client what it is that we can do to help them.

Marketing and publicizing in the general thought of marketing should not be a large overbearing task; it should be an integral part of the business. Marketing happens through applying for awards, personal reference from clients, case study advertisements of projects that the firm has done. Even as simple of marketing methods as the employees just talking about the firm and the work that they do within the firm to their friends and acquaintances can be a powerful "Brand-builder" over time.

The firm needs to be looking to the future, and staying "cozy" is not the way to do it. Business intelligence reports are a key component to developing new areas for the firm to grow into. The firm has to plan for growth within target areas. These target areas have to coincide with the current project type and staffing capability. It is not practical to shoot in the dark at a new market segment if the firm has no experience in that segment or a similar segment.

It is essential for the firm to develop a "waiting list" along with establishing a reserve fund. Clients who know the firm's brand and reputation are willing to wait in order to have that firm do the project. Having that waiting list allows for continued supply of work for the firm.

At the same time there are always highs and lows in the market which affect how quickly work comes and goes. While having the projects retained and in the queue to begin, there also has to be a financial reserve established and maintained in order to allow for the firm to continue business as usual when the economy is low. The reserve is there in order to keep the employees funded so that we don't have to let people go because there is a slow market. Along with the financial reserve, the development into other market areas will help mitigate the highs and lows that occur with a changing market.

The firm also needs to evaluate the potential for further diversification within the firm. The firm currently offers Architecture, Planning, and Interiors for the client but is that all that the client needs? What else can the firm offer the client that he would otherwise have to get someone else to do? The firm needs to research partnership ventures with other small to mid-sized companies in order to offer a wider range of services.

Other research needs to be done to determine what services can be brought in-house. These services could include full engineering capabilities, design-build development capabilities, or even more unique options that could create a niche for further work.

I mention these unique options because at present I have already been thinking about what kind of company I want to be leading when I am 40. I realized that DESIGN is not just limited to that of architecture and a client is not just looking for a functional building. Yes, there are the landscape and interior disciplines that want to be a part of the firm but what about all of the other design potential that could help the client.

Many top name Architects have gone as far as developing the furniture for the projects that they have worked on. Why not even going a step further? Many projects of a large scale have to go through marketing development and create their branding. What if we could offer that under one roof? This would allow a greater level of uniformity for the project along with a more diverse scope of options that can be provided to the client. There are of course some aspects that may be too widespread for the company to consider, but just like doing business intelligence models for potential new project areas, the firm will need to create business intelligence models for new disciplines as well.

Potential disciplines that could be looked into include:

- Marketing
- Graphic Design
- Rendering (digital/ 3D/ hand)
- Web design
- Structural Engineering
- MEP Engineering
- Civil Engineering
- Furniture Design
- Art Production
- Design-Build
- _____
- _____
- _____

Let Go

Joan Capelin discusses letting go as a temporary leave of absence for people in the firm to go and take a break but at the same time grow and learn and develop their personal skills and potential. I agree completely with this concept because it allows for growth of the individual within the firm and the firm itself.

The “sabbatical” has value not only to the person on sabbatical but it lends itself to being a tool for the firm to grow in a new direction when the employee returns to the firm.

It also allows for the firm to work with the business development and succession plans so that it is not reliant on any one person. The chain of command and the operations of the firm should be a fluid process that allows for a person’s absence.

At the same time I feel that the principle of letting go should be expanded further. Letting go is more than just letting people take a sabbatical. It is a concept that needs to be applied at all levels within the firm. Earlier, I mentioned a character weakness that I have with delegation; this factors further into the realm of micro-managing. As the CEO, I need to be able to “let go” and trust the members of my firm to do what needs to be done. If I micro-manage, I will spend more time spinning my wheels and I won’t be able to focus on what matters; furthermore it will lead to burnout and loss of motivation to perform up to or beyond par.

Letting go also must factor into the general day to day workings of the firm. “Work hard, Play hard.” This is a common catch phrase which has very practical application. As CEO, I need to ensure that my firm is not in constant work overdrive. There must be times of rest where the employees can work at a slower pace and recoup from the constantly on mode. There also need to be “play” activities that the firm participates in to allow a time for socializing, bonding, and a break from the daily business of the business.

The firm must provide a balanced work place where employees enjoy coming to work. Continued education and general activities need to be developed within the firm to allow for a break within the regular routine of the work. Other activities need to be formulated to allow for interaction with clients on an informal more relaxed level. This will help foster better communications and interaction with the employees and the clients when they are back in the day to day workplace.

Transition from new CEO into year 2-10

Throughout the above descriptions of developing my CEO leadership model there was a lot of mentioning of “I.” As mentioned at the beginning, it was believed that my initial CEO Model will be about 40-45% Heroic. Because of this I would take responsibility for initiating a lot of what needs to be done. Even within the first 12-18 months let alone years 2-10, I foresee major delegation of tasks occurring.

Without being able to trust the team to take on the tasks, I would not be able to accomplish anything that needs to be done. As the team develops into a well-tuned system, very little will be a task of “I,” it will be a task of “we” and “us.” The members of the firm will help keep every other member of the firm “in check” so that we accomplish the firm’s goals as a firm and not as individuals.

As the CEO, I will be the spokesperson, the figure head, the advisor, the person who isn’t afraid of the “blank page” and can get the wheels turning on a project. I will most likely always be more of a Heroic leader than anything but I will become more balanced between all three styles of leader as the team melds together. Knowing my strengths and weaknesses will allow me to keep myself in check for the greater good of the firm.

It is my belief that like in the TVS business model and the very different business model of Randall-Paulson, the future is in the Employees of the firm. Making the firm “their firm” is my goal and in order for the firm to thrive as their firm, they need to be groomed and the vision needs to be instilled on all of them, so that they can continue the growth and development for the future.

The points discussed so far are major aspects on how my leadership model will be developed to benefit the sustainability of the company. What hasn’t been discussed is the style in which this leadership model will be implemented.

The style in which I see myself falling into would be a blend of the styles of Michael Randall and Roy Abernathy. The ability that Michael Randall has to take the input from everyone on staff and mold it into the objectives of the firm and keep the firm growing is an essential ability that I will need. At the same time, the very broad range of experience that Roy Abernathy has is very reminiscent of the range of skills that I have been developing. Being able to bring the outside of the box concepts into the company in order to expand the scope of capability into the company will allow the company to grow and provide.

While my leadership style will vary over time and as needed, I see a blend of both Michael and Roy’s leadership styles being a base for me to grow from.

* * * * *

Every principle from Joan Capelin’s book is cyclical. Every aspect needs to continually be checked and double checked. Follow-up is a must. Asking questions will lead to improvements and potential for further projects. Letting go will help the firm grow.

AND

Success WILL be Continual!