

The 12 Characteristics of Strategic CEOs

No one in an organization has as much leverage as the CEO. From the moment you walk into the building on your first day (and probably before), everyone is scrutinizing your actions and behaviors, looking for patterns and inconsistencies.

Others will rapidly follow the standards you set, and I have seen the culture and attitude across several businesses change within a space of a few weeks following the arrival of a new CEO. As the philosopher, Albert Schweitzer, once said, *“Example isn’t the main thing in influencing others. It’s the only thing.”*

In my experience, the business leaders who are best able to tackle and drive strategy, which I call Strategic CEOs, are those who display the following behaviours and characteristics:

1. **Strategic CEOs continuously raise the bar.** Today’s successes are not enough for Strategic CEOs, who are forever looking for ways to reach the next level.
2. **Strategic CEOs share a bigger picture.** Strategic CEOs use metaphors and analogies and appeal to their organization’s sense of what being at its very best really means, helping their people to buy into how the company can succeed and what role they can play to make that happen.
3. **Strategic CEOs create options.** By raising the bar and sharing the big picture the Strategic CEO helps teams from across the business to develop new possibilities, to create new growth opportunities and to identify new options.
4. **Strategic CEOs relish the uncertainty and ambiguity.** They know that nothing is certain or forever in today’s markets, but equally understand that the chaos and the turbulence will create as many opportunities as threats. They are pragmatic optimists who are willing to shine the torch into the darkness and lead their teams forward. They know they don’t know everything, and are at their best leading in those situations that are the most uncertain.
5. **Strategic CEOs are consummate storytellers.** They constantly use stories and anecdotes as a way of engaging their people and their stakeholders and know that people respond to emotion far better than they react to logic. Nobody remembers the detail of a pie chart, but they will remember the details of a story where a colleague took a specific action that brings alive the company’s values.
6. **Strategic CEOs are willing to make clear choices and trade-offs.** They know that they can’t necessarily have it all and must choose how they wish to compete. They are as clear about what the business won’t do, as what it should focus on.
7. **Strategic CEOs don’t simply rely on the numbers for their insights.** They spend significant time with customers, colleagues and suppliers to drive their understanding of the business.

8. **Strategic CEOs embrace serendipity.** They deal with facts, rather than hope, but are also open to new ideas, possibilities and concepts. They use their strategy to drive their actions, but, at the right time, will also use new opportunities to shape their strategy.
9. **Strategic CEOs build a strong team around them.** They welcome the challenge that strong, well-rounded executives and managers will bring to their team, and don't need to 'do it all' themselves.
10. **Strategic CEOs break through the silos.** They will not allow functional barriers to get in the way of their company's success. Critically, they are able to help their people find common ground and work out a way where everyone can move forward together. Strategic CEOs build powerful networks inside and outside their organizations that allow them to draw on others' goodwill in difficult times.
11. **Strategic CEOs hold their people to account and always follow-through.** Excellence in execution is critical to them, and they never forget what others have promised to deliver. They ensure that their processes in place that allow them to regularly review progress, identify issues and keep their managers focused on delivering what they have promised.
12. **Strategic CEOs are relentless.** They remain focused on finishing what they started. They are willing to take prudent risks and make mistakes, but don't allow setbacks in execution to dilute their resolve in achieving the objectives they have agreed.

Being the CEO of any organization is not for the faint of heart. It requires courage, self-belief and an ability to inspire colleagues across your business to succeed. Which of these 12 characteristics and behaviours do you regularly demonstrate and which could you develop and build to create even higher levels of performance in your organisation?

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