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Distilling the Wisdom of C.E.O.'s

By ADAM BRYANT

This article was adapted from “The Corner Office: Indispensable and Unexpected Lessons From CEOs on How to Lead and Succeed,” by Adam Bryant, author of the weekly “Corner Office” column in The New York Times. The book, published Tuesday by Times Books, analyzes the broader lessons that emerge from his interviews with more than 70 leaders.

IMAGINE 100 people working at a large company. They're all middle managers, around 35 years old. They're all smart. All collegial. All hard-working. They all have positive attitudes. They're all good communicators.

So what will determine who gets the next promotion, and the one after that? Which of them, when the time comes, will get that corner office?

In other words, what does it take to lead an organization — whether it's a sports team, a nonprofit, a start-up or a multinational corporation? What are the X factors?

Interviews I conducted with more than 70 chief executives and other leaders for [Corner Office](#) in The New York Times point to five essentials for success — qualities that most of those C.E.O.'s share and look for in people they hire.

The good news: these traits are not genetic. It's not as if you have to be tall or left-handed. These qualities are developed through attitude, habit and discipline — factors that are within your control. They will make you stand out. They will make you a better employee, manager and leader. They will lift the trajectory of your career and speed your progress.

These aren't theories. They come from decades of collective experience of top executives who have learned firsthand what it takes to succeed. From the corner office, they can watch others attempt a similar climb and notice the qualities that set people apart. These C.E.O.'s offered myriad lessons and insights on the art of managing and leading, but they all shared five qualities: Passionate curiosity. Battle-hardened confidence. Team smarts. A simple mind-set. Fearlessness.

What follows are excerpts from chapters on each of them.

Passionate Curiosity

Many successful chief executives are passionately curious people. It is a side of them rarely seen in the media and in investor meetings, and there is a reason for that. In business, C.E.O.'s are supposed to project confidence and breezy authority as they take an audience through their projections of steady growth. Certainty is the game face they wear. They've cracked the code.

But get them away from these familiar scripts, and a different side emerges. They share stories about failures and doubts and mistakes. They ask big-picture questions. They wonder why things work the way they do and whether those things can be improved upon. They want to know people's stories, and what they do.

It's this relentless questioning that leads entrepreneurs to spot new opportunities and helps managers understand the people who work for them, and how to get them to work together effectively. It is no coincidence that more than one executive uttered the same phrase when describing what, ultimately, is the C.E.O.'s job: "I am a student of human nature."

The C.E.O.'s are not necessarily the smartest people in the room, but they are the best students — the letters could just as easily stand for "chief education officer."

"You learn from everybody," said [Alan R. Mulally](#), the chief executive of the [Ford Motor Company](#). "I've always just wanted to learn everything, to understand anybody that I was around — why they thought what they did, why they did what they did, what worked for them, what didn't work."

Why "passionate curiosity"? The phrase is more than the sum of its parts, which individually fall short in capturing the quality that sets these C.E.O.'s apart. There are plenty of people who are passionate, but many of their passions are focused on just one area. There are a lot of curious people in the world, but they can also be wallflowers.

But "passionate curiosity" — a phrase used by [Nell Minow](#), the co-founder of the Corporate Library — better captures the infectious sense of fascination that some people have with everything around them.

Passionate curiosity, Ms. Minow said, "is indispensable, no matter what the job is. You want somebody who is just alert and very awake and engaged with the world and wanting to know more."

Though chief executives are paid to have answers, their greatest contributions to their organizations may be asking the right questions. They recognize that they can't have the answer to everything, but they can push their company in new directions and marshal the collective energy of their employees by asking the right questions.

“In business, the big prizes are found when you can ask a question that challenges the corporate orthodoxy,” said [Andrew Cosslett](#), the C.E.O. of the InterContinental Hotels Group. “In every business I've worked in, there's been a lot of cost and value locked up in things that are deemed to be ‘the way we do things around here.’ So you have to talk to people and ask them, ‘Why do you do that?’ ”

It's an important lesson. For all the furrowed-brow seriousness that you often encounter in the business world, some of the most important advances come from asking, much like a persistent 5-year-old, the simplest questions. Why do you do that? How come it's done this way? Is there a better way?

Battle-Hardened Confidence

Some qualities are easier to spot than others. Passionate curiosity? It's there for all to see. There's an energy from people who have it. Other qualities are tougher to discern, especially the ability to handle adversity. Some people embrace adversity, even relish it, and they have a track record of overcoming it. They have battle-hardened confidence.

If there were some test to find out whether a person had this quality, it would be a huge moneymaker. But people, and companies, reveal how they deal with adversity only when they are faced with potential or real failure, and the status quo is not an option.

The best predictor of behavior is past performance, and that's why so many chief executives interview job candidates about how they dealt with failure in the past. They want to know if somebody is the kind of person who takes ownership of challenges or starts looking for excuses.

“I think hiring great people remains extremely, extremely hard,” said [Jen-Hsun Huang](#) of [Nvidia](#). “You can never really tell how somebody deals with adversity. When you have a difficult situation, some people just take it and run with it. Some people see adversity and they cower, as talented as they are. You could ask them about the adversity they had in the past, but you never really know the intensity of that adversity.”

Many C.E.O.'s seem driven by a strong work ethic forged in adversity. As they moved up in

organizations, the attitude remained the same — this is my job, and I'm going to own it. Because of that attitude, they are rewarded with more challenges and promotions.

“I like hiring people who have overcome adversity, because I believe I've seen in my own career that perseverance is really important,” said [Nancy McKinstry](#), the chief executive of Wolters Kluwer, the Dutch publishing and information company. “I will ask them directly: ‘Give me an example of some adverse situation you faced, and what did you do about it, and what did you learn from it?’ The people I've hired who have had that ability to describe the situation have always worked out, because they're able to sort of fall down, dust themselves off, and keep fighting the next day.”

The chief executives' stories help bring to life a concept known as “locus of control.” In general, it refers to people's outlooks and beliefs about what leads to success and failure in their lives. Do they tend to blame failures on factors they cannot control, or do they believe they have the ability to shape events and circumstances by making the most of what they can control? It's a positive attitude mixed with a sense of purpose and determination. People who have it will take on, and own, any assignment thrown their way. They say those words that are music to a manager's ears: “Got it. I'm on it.”

Team Smarts

At some point, the notion of being a team player became devalued in corporate life. It has been reduced to a truism — I work on a team, therefore I am a team player. It's a point captured in [a cartoon](#), by Mike Baldwin, in which an interviewer says to a job candidate: “We need a dedicated team player. How are you at toiling in obscurity?”

The most effective executives are more than team players. They understand how teams work and how to get the most out of the group. Just as some people have street smarts, others have team smarts.

[Mark Pincus](#), the C.E.O. of the Zynga Game Network, the online gaming company, said he learned lessons about teamwork playing soccer in school. Even today, when he plays in Sunday-morning games, he said, he can spot people who would be good hires because of how they play.

“One is reliability,” he said. “There are certain people you just know are not going to make a mistake, even if the other guy's faster than they are, or whatever. And are you a playmaker? There are people who have this kind of intelligence, and they can make these great plays. It's not that they're star players, but they will get you the ball and then be where you'd expect to put it back to

them. It's like their heads are really in the game.”

Team smarts is also about having good “peripheral vision” for sensing how people react to one another, not just how they act.

[George S. Barrett](#), the chief executive of [Cardinal Health](#), described an example of how he assessed managers when he moved into a new role.

“We were sitting with a group of about 40 to 50 managers, and people were standing up to raise certain issues,” he recalled. “And I watched this one executive. People were riveted to him, really listening and engaged. And then this other executive addressed the group, and I watched everyone's eyes. And their eyes went back down to their tables. It was a clear signal that said, ‘You've lost us.’ So sometimes you don't know what the messages are that you're going to get, but you have to look for them. They come from your peripheral vision.”

Companies increasingly operate through ad hoc teams. Team smarts refers to the ability to recognize the players the team needs and how to bring them together around a common goal.

“Early on, I was wowed by talent, and I was willing to set aside the idea that this person might not be a team player,” said [Susan Lyne](#), chairman of the Gilt Groupe. “Now, somebody needs to be able to work with people — that's No. 1 on the list. I need people who are going to be able to build a team, manage a team, recruit well and work well with their peers. The people who truly succeed in business are the ones who actually have figured out how to mobilize people who are not their direct reports.”

A Simple Mind-Set

There is a stubborn disconnect in many companies. Most senior executives want the same thing from people who present to them: be concise, get to the point, make it simple. Yet few people can deliver the simplicity that many bosses want. Instead, they mistakenly assume that the bosses will be impressed by a long PowerPoint presentation that shows how diligently they researched a topic, or that they will win over their superiors by talking more, not less.

Few things seem to get C.E.O.'s riled up more than lengthy PowerPoint presentations. It's not the software they dislike; that's just a tool. What irks them is the unfocused thinking that leads to an overlong slide presentation. There is wide agreement it's a problem: “death by PowerPoint” has become a cliché.

If so many executives in positions of authority are clear about what they want, why can't they get the people who report to them to lose the "Power" part of their presentations and simply get to the "Point"?

There are a few likely explanations. A lot of people have trouble being concise. Next time you're in a meeting, ask somebody to give you the 10-word summary of his or her idea. Some people can do a quick bit of mental jujitsu, and they'll summarize an idea with a "Here's what's important ..." or "The bottom line is" Others will have trouble identifying the core point.

Another possible explanation is that a lag exists in the business world. There was a time when simply having certain information was a competitive advantage. Now, in the Internet era, most people have easy access to the same information. That puts a greater premium on the ability to synthesize, to connect dots in new ways and to ask simple, smart questions that lead to untapped opportunities.

"I'd love to teach a course called 'The Idea,' " said [Dany Levy](#), the founder of [DailyCandy.com](#). "Which is, basically, so you want to start a company, how's it going to work? Let's figure it out: just a very practical plan, but not a business plan, because I feel like business plans now feel weighty and outdated. It seems, back in the day, that the longer your business plan was, the more promising it was going to be. And now, the shorter your business plan is, the more succinct and to the point it is, the better. You want people to get why your business is going to work pretty quickly."

[Steven A. Ballmer](#), the C.E.O. of [Microsoft](#), said he understood the impulse in presentations to share all the underlying research that led to a conclusion. But he changed the way he runs meetings to get to the conclusion first.

"The mode of Microsoft meetings used to be: You come with something we haven't seen in a slide deck or presentation," he said. "You deliver the presentation. You probably take what I will call 'the long and winding road.' You take the listener through your path of discovery and exploration, and you arrive at a conclusion.

"I decided that's not what I want to do anymore. I don't think it's efficient. So most meetings nowadays, you send me the materials and I read them in advance. And I can come in and say: 'I've got the following four questions. Please don't present the deck.' That lets us go, whether they've organized it that way or not, to their recommendation. And if I have questions about the long and winding road and the data and the supporting evidence, I can ask them. But it gives us greater

focus.”

Fearlessness

Are you comfortable being uncomfortable? Do you like situations where there's no road map or compass? Do you start twitching when things are operating smoothly, and want to shake things up? Are you willing to make surprising career moves to learn new skills? Is discomfort your comfort zone?

In other words, are you fearless?

Risk-taking is often a quality associated with entrepreneurs, the kind of people who make bet-the-farm wagers on a new idea. But risk-taking doesn't quite capture the quality that many C.E.O.'s embody and look for and encourage in others.

With the business world in seemingly endless turmoil, maintaining the status quo — even when things appear to be working well — is only going to put you behind the competition. So when chief executives talk about executives on their staffs who are fearless, there is a reverence in their voices. They wish they could bottle it and pass it out to all their employees. They're looking for calculated and informed risk-taking, but mostly they want people to do things — and not just what they're told to do.

“One of the things that I characterize as fearlessness is seeing an opportunity, even though things are not broken,” said [Ursula M. Burns](#), the C.E.O. of Xerox. “Someone will say: ‘Things are good, but I'm going to destabilize them because they can be much better and should be much better. We should change this.’ The easiest thing to do is to just keep it going the way it's going, especially if it's not perfect but it's not broken. But you have to be a little bit ahead of it, and you have to try to fix it well before you have to. Companies get into trouble when they get really complacent, when they settle in and say, ‘O.K., we're doing O.K. now.’”

Many executives said fearlessness was one of the top qualities they're looking for when they were interviewing job candidates.

“Specifically, in this culture I have to have people who not only can manage change but have an appetite for it,” said [Mindy F. Grossman](#), the C.E.O. of HSN, the parent company of Home Shopping Network. “They tend to be more intellectually curious, so they don't just have vertical climbs. I ask for those stories. I love hearing them and it gives me a real sense of the person.”

Like the other four keys to success, fearlessness is an attitude, and because attitude is one of the few things over which everyone has complete control, it is a character trait that can be developed. It can be fostered with a simple approach to taking more risks.

Chief executives advise that you will be rewarded for fearlessness, because so few people live that way and bring this attitude to work. It is risky. You may unsettle people by shaking up the status quo. But if you have the best interests of the organization in mind, you can unlock new opportunities for the company and for yourself.

These five qualities help determine who will be chosen for bigger roles and more responsibility. Those promotions will inevitably bring challenges that require learning through trial and error.

C.E.O.'s can act as mentors to speed people along that learning curve. They may not develop silver-bullet theories, but they are experts in leadership because they practice it daily. And many of them have spent years honing their leadership styles, studying what works and what doesn't, and then teaching others.

Chief executives face criticism from many corners, and it is often deserved. But there is no arguing that they have achieved a great deal.

Through their stories, lessons and insights, they have much to offer beyond the hard numbers.