

[Appointing CHRO is just first step, following its approach second: Becoming a human-centred CEO](#)

We have been listening to a lot about HR leaders who have made their way to the designated job: CEO/MD. However, does that mean the company which doesn't have a CEO with an HR background lacks a "human-centred" approach? And if it does, how can the present CEO/CXOs develop that approach while dealing with people and related issues?

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Yes, we have seen HR veterans taking charge of the CEO role and vice versa, read bundles of articles on how the emphasis on people issues coupled with the pandemic has led to the interchange of duties.

But have we discussed if and why the present CEOs or CXOs are notable to understand the employee and related issues? CHRO too needs enhanced support and mutual understanding to roll out full-fledged initiatives to solve People issues. So, what's the main reason behind this "trendsetter" transition stories doing the rounds, unless it's a marketing gimmick.

What CEOs are missing!

Typically, CEOs who climb up the rank, have moved up from the bottom to the top and have a better understanding of the organisation. Tapan Singhel was lucky to have had that experience with Bajaj Allianz General Insurance of working across functions and geographies from its inception till the present day for the last two decades.

"What I have witnessed as a CEO is having planned visits where everyone knows that the CEO is visiting has no meaning. When CEOs have surprise visits to the market or office, it gives them a real litmus test of what's happening on the ground," he said.

Singhel finds it most important to talk to the lowest subordinates who are integrally involved with the daily functioning of the organisation to understand the bottlenecks and roadblocks.

When it comes to challenges CEOs face in understanding HR and related problems, Singhel feels issues can be looked at multi-folds. He said the first is if the CEO or any leader is

disconnected from the ground reality that means, for instance, if a leader is new to an organisation, getting the true pulse of an organisation becomes challenging.

Secondly, Singhel believes CEOs many times depend on surveys or employee engagement scores to truly understand how content their people are. "This is another challenge or issue I see since at the end of the day these surveys can be doctored and can have polarised views which dilutes the objectives of these methodologies," he added.

Industry experts say CEOs are very well equipped with their functional domains and can predict challenges even before they arise. Unfortunately, Amitt Sharma, Founder & CEO of job search platform Receptix, feels this may not always get extrapolated to human relations, despite the function's criticality.

"In the initial stages, the lack of people problem solving may be categorised as an operational inefficiency within a sub-department or function," he said, adding, "If it remains persistent, however, it can quickly snowball into inconsistent output, lackadaisical performance, and missed opportunities for the overall organisation, and not just a singular function."

Further, Sharma pointed out another pertinent point: Employer Branding. He said CEOs, with their deep understanding of organisational values, have the most evolved role in creating a positive reputation for the organisation and ensuring that it follows a trickledown approach.

"It is critical to note that every employee, across Strategic business units and levels, is a potential image manager for the brand. Hence, if the CEO is not engaged in instilling the core values and brand ethos by being transparent and leading by example, it may lead to challenges for them as well as the organisation," he said.

Leaders say engagement should be all around – Physical and Digital. A 2019 study by Brunswick Group, titled 'Connected Leadership', found that 65 per cent of employees say it's important for CEOs to actively communicate about their companies online, with 60 per cent checking executive social media accounts before accepting a job offer.

However, it further revealed that over half of all CEOs aren't active on even one social media account. And is not just because leaders are facing "social media burnout". The 2015 Social CEO Report from Domo and CEO.com also found that 61 per cent of Fortune 500 CEOs have no social media presence at all.

It's not the CEOs' fault in totality

CEOs have access to a tremendous amount of data providing real-time insight into the health of the business with views on financials, customers and, depending on what is being measured, employees, asserted Brian Selby, GM - Hydro Asia, GE Renewable Energy.

On the last point, Selby said, "Unless your business adopts appropriate HR technology and tools, there is a lack of clarity on what is happening with the health, engagement, productivity and development of your employees."

"Without the right mindset and strong HR partnership to support a virtual workplace, CEOs are flying blind and opening themselves to making significant missteps that could destroy the

customer-focused, value creation business that has been painstakingly built over many years," he said.

Reiterating the same, Singhel of Bajaj Allianz said when HRs rely simply on their understanding or perception of what's good or bad for their workforce then that becomes an issue since the right data does not get percolated to a leader or a CEO for him to make the right call when people are concerned.

That's why Singhel feels that a CEO needs to be privy to and take cognizance of such issues faced by employees of their company. "But at the end of the day, if your HR does not know what's happening on the floor, then CEOs are not going to get the right feedback wired to them and will not receive a holistic perspective of problems from the grassroots level," he said.

CEOs have the upper hand

In the present context, Suraj Moraje, MD & Group CEO of business services provider Qness, feels it is all the more important for leaders to explicitly schedule communication time and understand each person's context, aspirations and issues.

"The importance of humans has not changed over the last years, but perhaps the context of the pandemic has meant that leaders have to work that much harder to stay connected," he said.

Gallup data show that only 13 per cent of employees strongly agree the leadership of their organisation communicates effectively with the rest of the organisation. Similarly, software supplier Unit 4 in a survey found that only 31 per cent of workers "occasionally" received a company-wide email from the CEO.

"Aside from the failure of a majority of CEOs to meet a bare minimum standard of contact, a further question showed that of employees without management duties, only 36 per cent had a meeting with the Director," it said.

Nevertheless, Selby of GE Renewable Energy believes following the sage advice of "never let a good crisis go to waste", the impact of Covid-19 opens up the opportunity for CEOs to accelerate organisation change management.

"Starting with sensible virtual work policies, CEOs and the supporting functions have the opportunity to pivot towards a more creative and engaging business work environment providing all employees far more freedom to manage themselves and unleash their passion," he said.

But Selby suggested all these changes need to be well considered with strong, regular employee pulse implemented with people-centric policies, with robust technology and tools the absence of which has a risk of creating chaos and significant frustration for employees and customers alike.

Startup CEOs and their approach

As a SaaS-based hotel tech startup, leaders at BookingJini know that they are in a “People-People-People business”. And its assets are people, unlike a brick-and-mortar business.

“They are our tools of the trade, too,” said Sibasish Mishra, Founder and CEO of BookingJini.

Mishra always tells leaders within the organisation that if “you look at a self-employed professional, for example, a carpenter or a farmer, they always worship the tool and ensure they are in the best of condition”.

Currently, Mishra spends 60 per cent of his time communicating with the employees about the vision and what they can do to help the organisation achieve its goals, as well as how they can achieve their own goals by assisting the organisation in achieving its.

Mishra feels a startup is the largest group of people “you can convince to support a plan to create a different future”. “As a CEO, you are always at the top of this,” he said.

Having said that, as a CEO, Mishra is aware that he cannot do it alone. “As a result, it is critical to be more connected with people within the organisation during this difficult period,” he said.

As a startup CEO, Ravish Naresh of Khatabook said, “In your journey to build the company ground up, you have a very strong understanding of employee experiences.”

“You would have worn different hats managing different job functions first-hand while scaling your startup. Also, as you scale, you would have managed various teams,” he said.

So, there's a solid learning curve for startup CEOs to understand People issues and identify the gaps that are needed to be plugged, he feels.

However, Naresh said, “Your success as a CEO will be defined by your understanding, empathy, and sincerity in addressing employee issues.”

Receptix has commenced a ‘Coffee with CEO’ tradition in which the top management interacts with the employees to learn about their perspectives and address their challenges. “We believe that it is critical to adopt a core team attitude, rather than working in silos. It gives directions to the management’s efforts,” Sharma said.

Get your hands dirty!

Due to the significant access to real-time business data, Selby of GE Renewable Energy highlighted that a CEO has all the tools to answer employees' questions, calm their fears and make hard decisions that directly impact employees' lives and the business.

Again, he said it comes down to the quality of the data feeding the key metrics tied to employee activity being provided to the CEO and the technology tools to implement and support the significant shift in specific policies – work-from-home, virtual skills training/upgrading, customer engagement – that enable the profitable business continuation and future growth.

“Ultimately, a CEO’s success in understanding and managing people issues combines control over operations and finance linked with a human-centric or people-focused approach to employment policies,” Selby said.

As a leader, Singhel of Bajaj Allianz suggested CEOs should do their bit by interacting with as many people as possible and understand the ground reality – “by rolling up their sleeves and getting their hands dirty”.

“Getting feedback from your employees is fundamental but there also needs to be in place an effective mechanism of capturing their point of view. This can be done by conducting feedback sessions frequently or with helplines or open forums or chat facilities where CEOs can talk to anybody regarding any issue,” he said.

Further, he said when employees feel they have contributed to the bigger picture of the organisation’s growth, that adds tremendous value in getting collective wisdom from employees which is what drives and makes people happy.

“Lastly, I feel that every leader must have empathy, it’s easier said than done, but it’s important to listen and truly accept what the person is saying,” Singhel concluded.