

EXECUTIVE COACHING

Reflections from the Summit

A collective masterclass in leadership, distilled from conversations with presidents, CEOs, chairmen, and founders.

BY MARK THOMPSON



It is a genuine privilege to sit down with some of the most remarkable leaders across diverse industries. As a CEO coach, my role often involves facilitating moments of reflection, helping these individuals extract the crucial lessons from their journeys, acknowledge the paths they might have navigated differently, and identify the persistent challenges that even those at the pinnacle continue to grapple with.

Over the years — as a coach, and then interviewing these executives more publicly at conferences, seminars, and in podcasts — I have engaged in profoundly insightful conversations, and the wisdom shared is too valuable not to disseminate. Consider this article a glimpse into those dialogues, a distillation of the hard-won experiences of presidents, CEOs, chairmen, and founders: a collective masterclass in leadership.

SELF-AWARENESS COMES FIRST

One of the recurring themes, and perhaps the most fundamental, is the crucial role of self-awareness and humility. Stepping into a leadership role, particularly at the executive level, demands a profound understanding of one's own strengths and, perhaps more importantly, one's limitations.

Cristiano Amon, the CEO of Qualcomm, articulated this with striking clarity when reflecting on advice he was given early in his career: "The most important thing is to know the limit between your area of competence and your area of incompetence, and this is how you manage your career. You go all the way to that line, and you stay there until you can push the line forward." This is not about lacking ambition.

It is about recognizing where you excel and where you need to rely on the expertise of others.

This sentiment is echoed by Patrick Frias, the CEO of Rady's Children's Hospital, San Diego, who shared a powerful insight gleaned early in his career from my collaborator Marshall Gold-

smith's book "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." Transitioning to the CEO role required a shift in perspective. "I'm not the smartest guy in the room, and that's not why I'm here," he stated.

He realized that his job was not to have all the answers but to "listen and to not necessarily have the solution, but to then say, how do we get the right people here to help you solve whatever problem you're trying to solve, and make sure they have the tools and the resources." This blend of acknowledging one's limitations while empowering others is a hallmark of effective leadership.

PEOPLE AND CULTURE ABOVE ALL

Closely intertwined with self-awareness is the paramount importance of people and culture. The executives I spoke with consistently highlighted that the success of any organization hinges on the quality of its team and the environment in which they operate.

Evan Sharp, the co-founder and chief design officer of Pinterest, put it simply: "I think most of the biggest improvements we've made to Pinterest

have been people. Have been hiring people, or taking a bet on somebody, or giving them a clear goal and asking them to hit it." Building the "right culture and the right team," he emphasized, is the number one priority for creating a great product.

Margo Georgiadis, the CEO of Mattel and then Ancestry.com, delved into the challenges of fostering a culture of innovation and risk-taking. She recognized that organizations develop "a set of reactions, based on the feedback they've been getting... that pattern that we all get stuck in." To break free from this, she implemented frameworks like Google's 70/20/10 rule to encourage thinking beyond immediate results and to create space for more ambitious, albeit riskier, initiatives.

Her emphasis on building "self-reinforcing muscles" for growth — and the recognition that leaders often "underestimate the time it takes to build these new competencies through an organization" — are crucial insights for anyone seeking to drive change.

25+

Years the author has spent leading teams, building companies, and coaching the leaders at the summit.

70/20/10

The Google framework Margo Georgiadis used to make space for ambitious, riskier bets.

8

Hard-won lessons distilled from presidents, CEOs, chairmen, and founders — see the takeaways.

Jesper Nordengaard, president of Colgate, North America, echoed this, pointing out the inherent resistance to change in established organizations, akin to an “immune system pushing back.” He stressed the need to “create a very tolerant culture where people who look different, think different, talk different, actually have a seat at the table and can influence you.”

THE JOURNEY NEVER ENDS

The journey of leadership is, by its very nature, a continuous process of learning and growth. There is no endpoint, no moment of arrival where one possesses all the answers. Alan Mulally, the former CEO of Boeing and Ford, framed this beautifully within the context of business strategy, highlighting “continuous improvement” as a cornerstone of success. He advocated for personal continuous improvement plans for every team member, focusing on behaviours and competencies, aligning individual growth with the overall improvement of the organization.

Mohammad Al Shorafa, chairman of the Abu Dhabi Development Department, reflected on what he wished he had known earlier in his government career: “I think I would have gotten

coaching from day one I came to the government... [and] bring better people much earlier.” He wisely likened coaching to a “journey” rather than a one-time procedure, emphasizing the ongoing nature of development.

ADAPT – AND LET GO

In today’s rapidly evolving landscape, the necessity of adaptability and innovation cannot be overstated. Nordengaard astutely pointed out that staying stagnant is not an option. “It’s going to need some reimagining, and then also some push, or we will kind of keep doing what we’re doing right now.”

When we build new capabilities, what do we let go of?

– JESPER NORDENGAARD,
PRESIDENT, COLGATE NORTH
AMERICA

He highlighted the critical need for organizations to be willing to “sacrifice some of the old structures to build the new ones,” particularly in areas like insights, where data analytics are transforming traditional approaches. He raised a vital question for resource allocation: “When we build new capabilities, what do we let go of?” This proactive shedding of outdated practices is essential to prevent new initiatives from being stifled

by existing systems and mindsets.

TRUST IS THE BEDROCK

Building and maintaining trust is the bedrock of any successful leader-follower relationship. Mike Kaufmann, the CEO of Cardinal Health, emphasized the enduring value of authenticity and transparency. Sharing an anecdote about a lost customer who wished to return, he recounted the reason given: “Because, you know, Mike, one of the things that I’ve always liked about you, and what you’ve done at the company, is you’ve always been transparent and authentic. When you couldn’t do something, you just say, We can’t, it’s not going to work.”

Kaufmann believes that “employees appreciate it. They can tell when you’re not being transparent or authentic. And in this world we are in now, if you had not been that way before COVID, it would have been harder to manage through that.” He also underscored the importance of remaining “calm and focused,” recognizing the powerful impact a leader’s demeanour can have on the entire organization.

SEE THE WHOLE BUSINESS

Navigating the complexities of the C-suite requires a holistic business perspective. Patricia Corsi, the CMO of Bayer Consumer Health, offered invaluable advice for those aspiring to senior leadership. “The first thing is the mindset of having a full business view,” she stated. “So, when you sit in the exco, you cannot just sit there and only discuss, if you’re CMO, brand advertising and brand equity; you’re part of the leadership of the company that is responsible for the growth, for the profit, for the teams, for the culture.”

She highlighted the importance of understanding finance, technology, and ESG as non-negotiable elements for future-facing leaders. Corsi also championed the “benefit from having diversity” in experiences, industries, and perspectives, as it leads to “so much better” conversations and outcomes. She encouraged individuals, particularly women, to be clear about their ambitions: “If people don’t know what you want, they cannot help you.” Her emphasis on vulnerability as a powerful trait in authentic leadership resonated deeply.

THE DAILY BATTLE

Finally, the conversations invariably touched upon the resi-

lience and mental fortitude required to navigate the relentless pressures of senior leadership. Dave Chang, the restaurateur, offered a starkly honest portrayal of the daily internal battle many leaders face.

I have to want it a little bit more than I want to quit.

– DAVE CHANG, RESTAURATEUR

“I’ll be honest, there’s not a day that goes by... and I felt this way even before the Coronavirus happened. Yes, there was about five minutes, ten minutes, where I’m like, I can’t do this. It’s too goddamn hard. And then it’s like, that’s how I start my day, almost like, my day doesn’t start until I quit in my head.”

His description of this daily rumination, this “Sisyphean-like task to literally embrace the absurd,” while perhaps unconventional, speaks to the immense mental toughness required to persevere in the face of constant challenges. His mantra of having to “want it a little bit more than I want to quit” is a raw and relatable reflection of the inner strength that sustains many leaders.

EIGHT LESSONS FROM THE SUMMIT

In reflecting on these rich and varied conversations, several key takeaways emerge:

- Embrace lifelong learning and seek continuous improve-

ment in both yourself and your organization.

- Cultivate genuine self-awareness and understand your limitations, surrounding yourself with those who complement your skills.

- Prioritize building a strong and diverse team and foster a culture of trust, innovation, and psychological safety.

- Be adaptable and willing to disrupt the status quo, letting go of outdated practices to make way for new capabilities.

- Lead with authenticity and transparency, building trust through honest and direct communication.

- Develop a holistic understanding of the business, looking beyond your specific functional area.

- Recognize the immense mental resilience required for leadership and acknowledge the internal struggles that are often unseen.

- Seek coaching and mentorship early and often, recognizing it as an ongoing journey of development.

The insights shared by these exceptional leaders serve as a powerful reminder that the path to effective leadership is paved with continuous learning, a willingness to confront one's limitations, and an unwavering commitment to the growth and well-being of the people they lead.

Even at the highest levels, the journey is one of constant evolution, marked by moments of profound insight and the persistent effort to translate those learnings into meaningful action. It is a privilege to witness these reflections, and I hope that they offer valuable guidance to leaders at all stages of their careers.

WHY COACHING MATTERS

What unites the executives featured in these conversations is not just their professional acumen but their commitment to becoming more reflective, grounded, and balanced leaders. Coaching has played a quiet but critical role in this transformation. For many, it is not a luxury

or a one-time intervention; it is a lifeline that enables sustained success in both boardroom decisions and personal resilience.

Whether it's Cristiano Amon defining the edge of his competence or Margo Georgiadis building a framework for risk-taking, these leaders have used coaching to challenge long-held assumptions, navigate uncertainty, and accelerate their learning curves. The most effective coaching relationships don't just reinforce confidence — they stretch it. They foster a mindset of humility and curiosity, creating space for leaders to grow beyond their comfort zones without compromising their values or vision.

No matter how high you rise, you never stop needing a mirror, a partner, and a challenge.

Crucially, coaching helps leaders move beyond the illusion of perfection. As Dave Chang so vulnerably shared, even the most

visible leaders face internal battles daily. Coaching offers a safe space to unpack that struggle — not to eliminate it, but to integrate it into a healthier, more resilient approach to leadership. Executives who embrace this process often report not only better commercial results but a renewed sense of purpose, presence, and connection in their personal lives.

The path to high performance isn't linear, and it certainly isn't solitary. The executives whose stories are shared here understand that sustainable success requires ongoing reflection, honest feedback, and a deep investment in both personal and organizational growth. Coaching enables all of that and more.

If there is one lesson these leaders offer the next generation, it is this: no matter how high you rise, you never stop needing a mirror, a partner, and a challenge. Coaching, at its best, provides all three. ■

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Mark Thompson is an expert on executive leadership, business strategy, and innovation who has spent over 25 years leading teams and building companies. Formerly chief of staff to Charles Schwab, he is a New York Times bestselling author.



Mark Thompson is co-author of *CEO Ready: What You Need to Know to Earn the Job – and Keep the Job* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025). Scan to find the book.