

THE BEST CEO: FIVE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF A GREAT CEO

By Jan B. King

What are the five defining characteristics of the great CEO?

1. Personal Insight

Great CEOs are great leaders. They know themselves and what they stand for. They have been called on all their lives as problem solvers because others know them to be fair and impartial. People respect their opinions and look to them for guidance. Great CEOs are mature as people. They can suffer disappointment more gracefully than others and give others credit for their achievements. They don't come in the office door yelling for something they need. They aren't as concerned about titles or power structures as they are about the welfare of those who work at the company. They are trustworthy because they've always been honest with people and have earned that trust. They care about families, and they know that people are more important than dollars and express it in their actions every day. Finally, great CEOs seek out feedback. They want to know how others see them so that they can understand themselves better and continue to grow as people. They also want feedback about the company from an employee perspective, and they use surveys as a starting point for creating a dialogue to make things better.

2. Resourcefulness

Great CEOs seem to have boundless energy. They come to work with the greatest enthusiasm. Even when they don't feel like it, they find ways to reenergize themselves and come in ready to go. They take good care of themselves physically and emotionally so that they can be there for the employees and the needs of the company. They give much more than they take every day. They don't give up. If the wall is too high, they back down and find another way around. They don't blame, but they do look for solutions to problems so that those problems are less likely to happen again.

3. Courage

The CEO has one of the world's toughest jobs. No matter how tough it was to start the company, it's even harder to keep it going and growing. A CEO must decide what he or she stands for and do what is right, all the time. It takes courage to fire the salesperson responsible for the company's biggest, most lucrative account when that same salesperson drives a company car drunk and causes an accident. There will be many times when CEOs will want to smooth over something that requires decisive action because of the potential consequences or because they just can't take on one more challenge at the moment. However, CEOs who exercise poor moral judgment will lose their personal integrity with all of their employees watching.

4. Willingness to Look at Risk

A great CEO isn't afraid to look at the downside and answer the hard questions he or she hopes will never become a reality. The CEO needs a backup plan—one that is designed by looking at the company's worst-case scenarios. This plan addresses questions such as: What if your industry experiences a slump? What if new governmental regulations affect your business? What if you lose the client that accounts for 50 percent of your sales? Preparing yourself and your company for these eventualities may be the difference between a tough year or two and bankruptcy.

If you are in business for 20 years, some of your worst-case scenarios will probably happen. The key is to be ready and able to take immediate action to reduce the loss.

5. Foresight

It seems some CEOs have an uncanny ability to predict the future. They may have unusual insights into their particular markets, and luck may play a part as well. In addition, they are prepared to create their own luck by cultivating an ability to see opportunities for their company and to make the deals that convert those opportunities into realities. Some things that may seem like amazing foresight are actually the result of the hard work and discipline it takes to constantly look forward to build a successful company. Great CEOs must also constantly develop new products to build and retain a customer base. Foresight is also the ability to hire and retain the right people, looking ahead toward the growth of the company. Finally, over time, each company must develop a steady source of business during both good economic times and bad, because there are sure to be bad economic times during the life of a business.