

Advice to advance your career

CAREER COACH

LEADERSHIP

The Window And the Mirror

A framework for building credibility as a leader

by Ray Harkins

The majority of professionals will never rise to the heights of leading a major corporation. But because of the public nature of executives and the organizations they oversee, business leaders and their management methods often form effective case studies for those who manage smaller projects and organizations.

Over time, professionals who make a habit of reading trade journals and analyzing business reports will spot the useful and futile patterns among these executives' leadership styles. One such pattern, coined by Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, is called the window and the mirror.¹

The window

In a recent article detailing the presentation Toys R Us chief executive David Brandon gave his senior staff about the organization's downfall, Brandon is quoted as saying:

"Vendors who at times have been less than cooperative, customers who in some cases have not been as supportive as we wish they'd been ... and certainly members of the media, who have had a great time using us as their whipping post over the last few months—I believe that all of them will live to regret ... will live to regret ... what is happening to our company."²

Few people understand the significance or magnitude of the external forces executives like Brandon navigate every day. In addition to the challenges a complex supply chain, diverse customer base and biased media present to multinational corporations, shifting consumer preferences, regulatory issues and many other factors also become stumbling blocks to these behemoths. But like a ship captain who steers his or her vessel through the waters—whether choppy or smooth—the very job of these senior executives is to steer their corporations through these varied business conditions.

Collins would describe this portion of Brandon's presentation as an executive who is looking out the window. Some leaders, as Collins explains, "look out the window for someone or something outside themselves to blame for poor results."³

Exceptional leaders also look out the window, but they don't do it to blame external factors when things go wrong. They do it to bestow credit when their plans succeed.

In an October 2018 interview with *Bloomberg News*, Microsoft's CEO, Satya Nadella, was discussing the organization's advancements in coupling artificial intelligence with universal design to bring the power of computing to people with disabilities. In response to the reporter's question about why he appointed Jenny Lay-Flurrie as Microsoft's chief accessibility officer, Nadella said:

"She was already leading the accessibility efforts at Microsoft. And in her, I found someone who not only had the patience to teach me why accessibility mattered, but quite frankly bring about the purpose and energy across the company on what a difference technology can make."⁴

Nadella's expertise in accessibility for disabled people is widely known and runs deep personally and professionally. And as the organization's senior executive, his substantial role in Microsoft's advancements is undeniable. But exceptional leaders like Nadella seize opportunities to look out the window to acknowledge the people or things that played a role in their organization's success.

The mirror

This approach to apportioning blame or credit has an antithesis, which Collins refers to as looking in the mirror. This idiom usually suggests a process





of introspection where someone attempts to honestly assess his or her motives, flaws and struggles. Even Aristotle reportedly discussed this practice when he said, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom."⁵ For outstanding leaders, this process of looking in the mirror is where they learn from mistakes and commit to moving in a new direction.

In February 2014, General Motors (GM) announced an initial recall of 800,000 vehicles suspected of containing defective ignition switches that lacked the mechanical resistance to prevent road vibration from rotating them off. After the engine was shut off, drivers were no longer protected by the vehicle's airbag. Eventually, the recall was expanded to include more than 30 million vehicles worldwide. And through the exhaustive investigations by independent agencies, the U.S. Congress and GM itself, 124 fatalities and nearly 300 injuries were tied directly to these faulty switches.⁶ It was time to look in the mirror.

Although she had been at the helm of GM for only two months, CEO Mary Barra was called before the U.S. Congress' House Energy and Commerce Committee in April 2014 to explain the decade's worth of mistakes that led to these horrific tragedies. The initial hearing resulted in more questions than answers, but Barra's intentions were clear.

"Sitting here today, I cannot tell you why it took so long for a safety defect to be announced for this program, but I can tell you we will find out ... While I cannot turn back the clock, as soon as I learned about the problem, we acted without hesitation. We told the world we had a problem that needed to be fixed. We did so because whatever mistakes were made in the past, we will not shirk from our responsibilities now or in the future. Today's GM will do the right thing. That begins with my sincere apologies to everyone who has been affected by this recall, especially the families and friends who lost their lives or were injured. I am deeply sorry."⁷

Even though Barra herself never designed or installed any of the defective switches, she took direct responsibility for the failure and the process of leading her organization through the tough work of looking inwardly.

Less-developed leaders also may look in the mirror, but for egotistical reasons, such as to receive praise for their organization's successes. They tend to overestimate the value of their own contributions and underestimate the contributions of their subordinates and external factors. This egotistical "credit grabbing" extends to leaders and followers alike. From group projects in high school to major undertakings in the workplace, most people have encountered bosses and colleagues who were more interested in having their names attached to a successful mission than in doing the hard work of making that success a reality.

What makes a great leader

As Collins tersely explains, great leaders, "look out the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well ... and look in the mirror to apportion responsibility."⁸ When less-experienced leaders follow this same window/mirror model, they build credibility with their subordinates, colleagues and those higher up the organizational ladder. **QD**

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