



The Successful CEO:

How can science help leaders achieve results through developing relational skills?

Article 7

Successful CEOs are often said to have certain traits and to behave in a certain way. However, such assertions do not hold up to real-world scrutiny.

In the real world, each CEO succeeds, or not, in a unique context. So, there can be no set of general traits or ways of working that will lead to his or her success.

In this article of our 'The Successful CEO' series **Nadja Hereitani, Head of HR ITV Studios Germany** and writer on leadership effectiveness is interviewed by **MU's Head of Marketing, Sofia Hjort Lönegård**, alongside **MU's CEO, Richard Moore**, about how you, the CEO, can use relational skills to succeed at work.

To read other articles in the series please visit [The Successful CEO](#).

'The Successful CEO' series

Nearly half of CEO appointments fail.

For practical advice to succeed as a CEO – Sofia Hjort Lönegård, MU's Head of Communications, interviews **Nadja Hereitani, Head of HR ITV Studios Germany, leadership expert and author with MU's CEO, Richard Moore**.

As a senior HR Leader herself, Nadja has a wealth of practical experience in supporting C-level leadership effectiveness. Nadja has studied and worked with relational leadership for decades and is a well-known expert in her field. Richard, as well as being CEO himself, has spent decades working with leader selection and development. He has found that by applying what science tells us about performance at work, more CEOs succeed.

Sofia

Nadja, you have recently published a new book. What is behind your book and why should a CEO read it?

Nadja

In a world that has become digital, crucial leadership competencies will be relational. The world is ever more VUCA and the consequences for people at work are large. The number of employees with poor mental health is exacerbating. Difficult emotions at work such as anxiety, sadness, and exhaustion in the face of ongoing change and crises are reaching a record high.

As leaders, we may have ignored these consequences for too long because we tend to think our job is mainly to inspire people and be rational and result-focussed. And of course, this is a necessity, as long as we do not forget that results come from motivation. It is obvious that if people are under too much pressure – e.g. close to burnout – they don't have anything to give. Hence, our first responsibility as leaders is to take care of our people and put them in a position where they are seen, heard and felt. If we care for them in this way, only then they will be able and motivated to move on and learn, flourish and grow – themselves and their businesses.

Sofia

How new is this problem?

Nadja

VUCA is thirty years old, the US military invented the concept to describe the nature of the accelerating change in the context we live and work in (as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). However, only in recent years have we started to understand the consequences for the people. The impact of these rapid and sometimes disruptive context changes is large. Additional challenges of our time such as environmental, political or pandemic crises do the rest and have taken people to their edge.

Because of this reality, we need a new understanding of leadership and include the emotional aspect to find a more wholesome way of leading. Leaders are not consultants or coaches, so many have not learned how to deal with employees' difficult emotions. Nevertheless, we are all living human beings, we all have emotions. However, in our rational world (of work), many people have lost access to their own emotions, it happens unconsciously. If we can't feel and manage our own emotional well-being, it is hard to understand and guide others in this regard. Thus, to enable effective action in the face of suffering, the work that has to be done has two sides:

Firstly, as leaders, we have to deal with our own difficult emotions.

Another is to deal with our employees' difficult emotions.

Sofia

What are these difficult emotions?

Nadja

Well if we look at – for example – the annual Gallup polls – difficult emotions like sadness, anger, and anxiety are increasing significantly. With the current challenges people face and the way our brain works, we can easily be placed into a defensive survival mode – like hunger games. Typical and automatic reactions our brain triggers in our bodies are "fight", "flight", and "freeze". Hence, people are either acting out in these environments (fight), or they leave physically or mentally (flight), or they are paralyzed, ruminating on what was and will be difficult, unable to take necessary action in due time (freeze). Only a few are able to consciously deal with the current challenges and associated difficult emotions by transforming them into something that is good for the individual and the organisation.

As many leaders are not trained in this area they do not even see what is missing. Dealing with peoples' emotions has been a blind spot in management practice, since emotions are not rational. However, there is scientific evidence that emotions do matter, also in business contexts. Studies show, that a leader's EQ has more impact on results than IQ. One of the reasons why leadership has not focussed enough on emotional culture may well be that people who qualify for leadership positions, may have more narcissistic aspects in their personality profiles than the average person – studies have also shown that. For example, they may like to market themselves, they like to centre stage, they like to dominate. However, we also know from studies that they are not necessarily better leaders as they also may have less empathy and less compassion. They often care about their own success more than others' success. However, the good news is that empathy and compassion can be learned. You can learn how to be conscious of and manage your own and others' difficult emotions. We just need to train leaders on how to do it.

Richard

What Nadja points to is a vital element of effective leader selection and development. Each CEO works in a unique context, and so no two CEO challenges are the same. However, in the framework of capabilities that a CEO must have – in order to succeed – are three elements: that in their context they can achieve results, that they can contribute to broader organisational success and that they can develop themselves. Soft skills and the ability to cope with manifold and varied demands of others are vital to success. That is why the most common subjects in business schools preparing tomorrow's leaders are relational skills and the ability to cope with multiple competing demands and priorities. These business schools can't predict the future, but they can prepare leaders for it. And that is why it is essential for a CEO to manage emotional culture.

Sofia

So clearly soft skills are vital to leaders' success today and in the future – but how should a CEO lead with and through emotions?

Nadja

As a leader, if you tune into others, you can make them feel understood and secure. To be able to do so, it is helpful to start with tuning into yourself. The mindful self-compassion technique, developed by Dr. Christopher Germer and Dr. Kristin Neff is such an example. This technique is often compared with re-parenting. Think back to when you were young and suffered, and then a carer looked after you and you were helped to process the anxiety and try again. Like learning to walk or ride a bicycle. And where this caregiving and comforting is absent – the speed to learn and succeed is impeded. In other words: You can learn to suppress difficult feelings because of the way others reacted to them in the past. In fact, you can learn that it is not OK to be anxious or sad. Then years later in survival mode at work, these suppressed emotions suddenly and strongly emerge – panic attacks, depression, and burnout can be the sad result.

However, the good news is, that it is possible to learn about own emotions and consciously handle them, even later in life. You can learn, that it is OK to be sad and anxious, that everyone is experiencing these emotions. It is not true that everything works out all the time – things happen, things go wrong, no matter how hard we try to do everything right. And in such cases, it is not only OK to feel sad and anxious but absolutely normal. If we learn to admit to others that what we have to do as leaders is hard, and we do feel insecure, too, we are the best role model for our employees. We show them how to treat themselves and others in a kind way in the face of suffering. For some of us, this is actually a new experience because we have only learned to be hard on ourselves. This may work in the short term, however, studies show that the more we are too tough on ourselves, the more it undermines our self-confidence and increases our insecurity in the long run. We need ever more energy to pretend to be on top of things – so in the long run it won't lead to success. On the other hand, if you are kind to yourself when you feel bad, if you are compassionate with yourself, it is like dealing effectively with a child who has fallen down. You are more quickly able to feel good again and stand up and have another try.

Richard

So Nadja, can we say that the first step is to start with yourself, become more self-aware and – if needed, use your wordings "re-parent" yourself. In a professional setting you could call this process self-management or self-leadership. Only once you manage yourself and your own emotions effectively, can you effectively accompany others in the process to manage their emotions. On top of results, tasks and processes – as CEOs we need to be competent in self-management and helping others manage their emotions.

Nadja

Yes. Psychologically speaking, it means for instance to train your ambiguity tolerance and thus learn to self-regulate. If you have learned to self-regulate, you can learn how to co-regulate with others. This is a really important skill for a leader to learn and practice. With your own emotional state and impact well managed, you can help develop effective, diverse and inclusive cultures at work.

Sofia

So how can a CEO – or other leader of the future – cope with all these demands? To not only being able to run a P&L but also to secure processes, manage stakeholders and lead a successful "emotional culture"?

Nadja

We need diverse teams with diverse competencies to successfully deal with the challenges CEOs face today. There is no one person who has all the answers, the world is way too volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Hence, also as leaders, we have to work well together and lead together. For example, on the one hand, we have a leader who is good at planning, controlling, processes and results. However, if planning and controlling become too dominant, there is a tipping point where people feel mistrusted and disempowered. This form of one-sided leadership behaviour can turn into micro-management. Then we have another leader in the team who can see how people feel and see what they need to be able and motivated to do the job and how to reward them to create motivation in a sustainable way. If these two leaders respect each other and include each other in their respective competencies, then the necessary leadership can be provided. So the key is to select leaders based on the needs of the business and the team and make sure they work well together. The vital step is to ensure they value each other's differences so that different leadership skills are included.

Richard

And building on Nadja's point, is the situational adaptability of the effective CEO. To know and learn about yourself and your context continuously, to understand the relationships and capabilities you have in yourself and around you. And through this insight delegate, lead, inspire and ensure control effectively. This means to adapt your style to both different people and to the same people, in different situations.

Nadja

CEOs are responsible for building leadership teams that complement each other with the necessary competencies. Emotional competency must get enough importance in selecting and developing the team. As Richard described earlier, effective CEOs need to deliver within their context, and their context includes who other leaders they have in their team and their organisation. If, for example, there is a leadership team with a lot of ego-centric behaviour they may fear how they are seen and experience shame readily. Shame is probably the most difficult emotion, because it attacks the self-concept. Interestingly, in evolution, it originally had the function of keeping groups together. As soon as someone betrays, the person experiences shame to re-align to the group. You could not survive by yourself in former times. This still holds true today. We all need to be part of a group. And as leaders, we need to learn how to lead a group in a way, that it wants to follow. A lack of leadership diversity may result in an unbalanced team that may be unable to handle different challenges.

In today's diverse, fast-changing world no CEO has all the answers. Building an effective, balanced, and inclusive team is key to enabling high performance. Simply put, to be competitive and successful CEOs must assemble diverse and inclusive teams of leaders. Consequently, the competency to manage emotional culture must be adequately represented in the balance of power of the management team.

Richard

As CEOs we know that we need to build diverse and inclusive teams to ensure results are achieved. And that means to secure deep diversity – so, the needed leadership range is covered in our teams, and people feel included. And deep diversity does not go without sensitive handling of differences as Nadja explains.

Nadja

And to create a leadership team that will outperform, as the CEO you are well advised to lead by examples and manage your own difficult emotions like shame and anxiety. If your key competencies lie elsewhere and you don't feel able to provide emotional leadership, hire someone to your top team now, who you trust and who can provide it.

We have to develop leaders who can read and handle emotions. Science tells us that leaders with stronger soft skills are more successful, i.e. their teams produce better results in the long run. As CEO that means investing not only in horizontal leadership development (learning additional knowledge and skills) but also in vertical leadership development (learning about the self and developing as a person). In the future, we need to promote those leaders, who did successfully develop vertically as a person and thus have developed emotional competence.