

Preparing Your CEO for the Role of Senior Statesman



Marjorie Benzkofer

Global Managing Director,
Reputation Management Practice,
FleishmanHillard Inc.

Edited by Christina Dreher

There is a need for a stronger voice of leadership in the C-Suite, but many executives struggle to articulate how and why their business matters to society.

As communicators, we must be better prepared to help guide these executives to tell the story beyond managing the company and articulate its relevance to society and the larger issues of the day. Today's most influential CEOs will not only be captains of their enterprise but also senior statesmen in society.

Numerous studies show that society believes business is more likely than government to solve tough societal problems. Business has perhaps the most influential role in how we tackle job creation, healthcare, affordable and sustainable access to food, and balancing environmental preservation and commerce.

Research done each year by FleishmanHillard on how companies can behave more authentically shows there is a growing gap between our rising expectations for management to do the right thing and our declining experiences of seeing those leaders make decisions or take actions motivated by a greater good. That widening chasm undermines credibility, threatens growth and slows progress.

Despite our growing expectations, today's titans of business often struggle to find their voice and play a role as leaders of our time. Today, we need a new kind of leader — one I'll call the Human CEO — an individual who demonstrates principle, passion and purpose. And one who does so not from atop the corporate ladder, but alongside us. A new study from the WP Carey School of Business found that humble CEOs are perceived as stronger because they motivate the people around them. A purpose-driven CEO becomes even more important in leading internally as the workforce approaches being 75 percent millennials, a generation that is attracted to and motivated by purpose.

There are two types of CEO leadership — those who are deeply focused on most efficiently and effectively running their business and driving growth, and those who understand that rolling up their sleeves and diving into some larger, messier issues beyond their business can have far greater impact. CEOs don't always stay cast as one or

the other. When crafting any CEO strategy, it's important to know where your executive lives at the moment.

Humble CEOs are perceived as stronger because they motivate the people around them.

There are some important principles to keep in mind in counseling a CEO into the role of statesman:

1. *Vision*

Too often vision statements are simply an aspiration for the company. It should be about how the present can be changed into a desirable future, both at the company level and, even more meaningfully, at a larger societal level. Articulating how is the key to talking about more than just the company and finding a broader platform that speaks to a larger societal need.

2. *It's a conversation*

Often CEOs shy away from speaking about larger problems because they don't have all the answers, and their companies aren't without blemishes. Being a statesman and a leader can mean simply being willing to convene a conversation about these tough issues. Whether it is access to affordable healthcare or fair working conditions, a corporate statesman — the Human CEO — is willing to stand up and say we need to talk about solutions.

3. *Authenticity is about quality, not quantity*

Every CEO has a different communication style. Some are better on their feet in live Q&A than scripted; some are natural orators but terrible

writers; some are good on camera and others not. Know your CEO and put them in environments where they can most authentically tell their story. Two heartfelt speeches (that can be repurposed in many ways) can be more valuable than 100 tweets.

4. *It's a team sport*

Leadership is the job of more than one individual. If the higher cause is women in leadership, then the actions and narrative must be carried by leaders through all facets of the company like HR, operations, sales, R&D and legal.

5. *Silence is not an option*

The executive may believe that the risk of being more visible outweighs the benefits, but silence can be as damaging as it is deafening. By opting out of the conversation, you're admitting you have nothing to add, you let others narrate your story and you miss an opportunity to make even greater gains.

Today, those CEOs who will have the most lasting impact on the world are those who can authentically create more value and purpose by demonstrating a wider concern for those who work for, with and around them. As senior communicators, we can help them understand why reaching for that greater purpose is worth the risk — for them, their business and society.

Sources:

"How authentic companies behave in a more demanding world." The Authenticity Gap Report 2015-16.

Marjorie Benzkofer works at the intersection of brand and reputation, helping organizations close the gap to better achieve business goals. As global leader of FleishmanHillard's reputation management practice, Marjorie leads the firm's work around authenticity — customized business solutions that improve organizations' ability to more authentically engage with their stakeholders. Marjorie regularly works with CMOs, CCOs and C-Suite executives to manage both brand and reputation. Marjorie has put together award-winning programs for clients that help align employee performance behind an organization's goals. She graduated from Northwestern University.