

LESSONS FROM LEADERS: Can “Quiet Leaders” Be “Bold Leaders?”

Executives don't reach the upper echelons of corporations alone – they are influenced and supported through peer networks and interactions with other senior leaders. In this glimpse into the ExecuNet General Management Roundtable, we offer some of the most pertinent advice from executives about the boldness of quiet leaders.



“In the absence of leadership, people will gravitate toward the most compelling person they can find. Sometimes the best leaders are the ‘quiet leaders.’ Who is/was your favorite ‘quiet leader’ and why? Also, do you think a ‘quiet leader’ can be a ‘bold leader?’ Why or why not?”

— STEVEN CRAMER, VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS, ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURING

“Most would consider the quiet leader to be an oxymoron. The leaders who get attention are those who dominate the discussion of the day with decisive, dramatic moves.

Yet, there have been great examples of successful leaders who were not the ‘loudest voice in the room.’ Rather than seek home runs, they usually are associated with sustained ‘base hits’ that consistently produce positive results.

Examples include Chuck Knight, who led Emerson Electric from 1973 to 2000, who notched 43 consecutive years in increases in earnings per share and 44 in dividends per share. Yet, he did that quietly and consistently without great flair or fashion.

On a similar note, William Smithburg led Quaker Oats through dynamic growth by changing the business mix of Quaker’s diverse holdings. His focus on turning Quaker to a return to a focus as a food company rather than a diversified corporation led to the acquisition of Gatorade and a new generation of growth for the company. Although Smithburg was a quiet leader, he was decisive and firm. Within Quaker, his manner earned him the nickname ‘Velvet Hammer.’

Both are excellent, quiet, humble, yet visionary, leaders who enabled their organizations to reach higher. Unfortunately, the headlines go to leaders who prefer to polarize (Trump, Jobs) rather than consolidate and build.”

— REAGAN G. STEPHENS, VICE PRESIDENT/OPERATIONS AND SBU LEADER, CHEMICALS AND PLASTICS

“I suppose much depends on how one defines ‘quiet.’ While, obviously, I never heard him speak, my perception from a distance is that Lincoln was a ‘quiet’ leader. I would put Gandhi on the list, along with maybe Mother Teresa. Colin Powell also comes to mind.

At the end of the day, when I think of quiet leadership, I think of men and women who lead by example rather than words, be they spoken loudly or softly.”

— DAVE OPTON, FOUNDER OF EXECUNET

“One phrase that has stuck with me the most over the years is the way the Army special operations soldiers refer to themselves: ‘quiet professionals.’ The loudest guy in the room is not always the most dangerous or most effective one. I’ve learned that I

don’t have to be in the spotlight so much, and when I share it with others, they are more inclined to follow me. Of course, not jumping into the spotlight gets you labeled as a quiet person. To some, that connotes a negative image, i.e. passive. I don’t mind if people want to label me, though. My actions and my ability to get things done will speak much louder than any labels that others may try to pin on me.

You most definitely need a variety of leadership styles for different situations. A common approach is to take all of the styles into our kit bag and to apply them, as needed, for the situation — the right tool for the right job. But we will probably end up with a predominant style based on our beliefs and our personality. The best approach is to be humble enough to not only know yourself, but also to recognize that the other guy might be just as effective as you, even though he approaches the task in a completely different way. In the end, it is all about getting the task done and making the task meet the mission or overall philosophy of the organization. And hopefully, you will get there without having ruffled too many feathers — preferring to catch more flies with honey.”

— DEL CHAMBERS, DEPUTY CHIEF OF THE MANEUVER AND FIRES DIVISION AT THE ARMY HUMAN RESOURCES COMMAND, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE



Quiet or loud, bold or reserved, it doesn’t matter in the end as long as you are gaining alignment and engagement of your stakeholders, executing at a high level throughout your organization and achieving the vision you have established. That is what leadership is about.

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“One needs to first define what a leader is: bold or otherwise. Also, what defines ‘bold?’ Ask 100 executives, consultants, etc. to define a bold leader and you will probably get 100 different definitions. Likewise, [there is] the requirement to define ‘quiet.’ We have all heard the phrase ‘speak softly and carry a big stick.’ I’m not sure this type of quiet leader would be good for any organization outside the military (and probably not there either).”

There is no one definition of what makes a leader bold any more than one can define a great (or even good) leader. It reminds me of what MBA students I have encountered in the past ask me: ‘What management book would you recommend?’ I answer this question with the response: ‘All of them.’ After the initial shock of the response, I then explain to them that what they are really asking is: ‘What book should I read that will give me the recipe for being successful?’ There is no recipe for being successful any more than there is a recipe for good/great leadership. Every person is different, every situation has its own nuances, every organization has its own issues. Every book I have ever read had at least one jewel that made me think about something we could do better. The best we can hope for when we read books, blogs, newsletters, forums, etc. is to gain insights which will form guidelines for us to utilize in dealing with given situations we face.

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—JIM KAST, CxO, CONSUMER, ELECTRONICS

“Thanks for the intriguing question that made me revisit Jim Collins’ *Good to Great*, which I have not read in a while. Collins dedicates a chapter to what he calls Level 5 Leadership and identifies 11 good to great CEOs. Many of these executives led their companies quietly (avoiding the spotlight) to greatness by being bold visionaries of what their companies could be. Although the book was released more than 10 years ago, I think it is still possible to lead boldly and quietly.”

—BILL FELLOWS, PRESIDENT, MARKETING CONSULTING

“The best mentor and leader I’ve ever known was criticized by his ‘team’ for not being proactive enough in the business. We got along exceptionally well and we truly worked as a team. He had a very quiet way of getting things done, mentoring me with few words needed, selling, dealing with crises and making sure I got the support, when needed, as the number two person in the

company. I had to explain to others a few times how much he really did, how much they could learn from him if they would just bring him solutions and how much career opportunity there was with this awesome leader once they earned his trust. Eventually, the criticism stopped.

As far as his boldness, being in a business known for high risk (deep oil and gas drilling), he and I worked together and took on some very high risk, high reward business. Being over operations, I always felt supported, trusted and had someone to go to, when necessary. He led in a way that it was seldom necessary. He was one of the most admirable men I’ve ever known.

As a leader, would your organization describe you this way?

I’ve always thought it was futile to attempt to objectively define human personalities and abilities. In looking at my past going back to childhood, I don’t think I was meant to be a follower or passive person. Psychologists may attempt to explain such things. But all I know for sure is how I developed, what I like to do, what I’m good at and what I’m not good at.

Fortunately, not all of us are leaders or followers. Well led diversity among people can be a strong force in business.”

—JIM MORRIS, PRESIDENT, BUSINESS CONSULTING

“The beauty of good leaders, like artists, is that there is no way to define the perfect one. Leadership is about results, and there is certainly more than one way to achieve them.

Much of our perception depends on our personal experience with quiet, bold or creative styles and how effective they were. I’ve always felt that was one of the problems with the recruiting/ interview process. It attempts to put individuals in well-defined boxes. We have all been surprised by exceptional performance from a perceived ‘average’ player and disappointed by the supposed ‘sure thing.’

I’m also fairly certain leadership cannot be taught. It can be nurtured and developed or, unfortunately in some situations, squashed. Leadership at the top develops and encourages leadership, however small, throughout an organization. Today’s dynamic markets and unrelenting competition dictate that organizations develop and reward individuals for taking on problems and leading their peers/teams to success. Don’t try too hard to define leadership. It’s a waste of time. Learn to recognize and embrace it in all its varied forms.”

—BILL BEGLIN, VICE PRESIDENT OPERATIONS, FOOD AND FLAVORS



If the entire organization knows what the goals are, each person's responsibility in attaining those goals and have measures and metrics to discuss progress and remedial actions, then the stage is set for quiet management.

“In my view, leaders are those who are able to achieve the desired results or vision. This is why leaders are not limited to the top executives in an organization.

These leaders come in several shapes and forms. However, two major differentiators in the style the different leaders adopt is in their external dimension of making decisions; i.e. decisions involving the outside world.

The first type is talented in always doing things and making decisions today with the big picture in mind. This type of leader typically adopts a more quiet approach, since it works best for them. The second is an action-oriented short-term thinker whose only concern is the immediate result without concern about the long-term effect. This type of leader typically adopts the more bold approach.

Each one of these types of leaders can only be successful in achieving results or realizing the vision in the right environment. If you ask a short-term thinker to realize a five-year vision, he/she will drive everyone to panic, driving the organization to be far less productive. Or [the short-term thinker] will surround himself with other short-term thinkers, since he believes that is the best type of person. An executive team with predominantly short-term thinkers will not be able to realize a long-term vision. On the other hand, if you place a long-term thinker to achieve a one- to two- year vision, he/she will fall short of that vision because there will be a mismatch between the company's vision and the talents of this type of leader.”

— **SAM Z. MUTASEM, PRESIDENT,
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT**

“It may be beneficial to consider what circumstances provide a framework for successful quiet leadership. Many times, people outside the organization view a positive result on a superficial level. Like the duck that appears quiet on the surface, underneath they are paddling furiously!

The ability to manage with quiet leadership is a result of a structured process that involves people, process and communication. If the groundwork of planning, creating a culture of goal-driven focus and effective communication are in place, then you can practice quiet management. Getting to that position, however, is often not that quiet, but is necessary. If the entire organization knows what the goals are, each person's responsibility in attaining those goals and have measures and metrics to discuss progress and remedial actions, then the stage is set for quiet management.

If the organization is prepared for quiet management, then you must have managers who are also mature enough to use that approach, too. Management style is a personal decision that reflects the individual and the culture of the company in question. The point is, it is a conscious choice. Many of us who have been exposed to, or a victim of, the alternative to quiet management, the ‘high volume’ manager, know this to be true. Those who practice this approach, frequently rationalize that they are a tough and driven manager. But in reality, they are a testament to their own lack of process discipline – ignorance made visible. The realization that while possibly effective in the short-term, this approach breaks down organizations over time is overdue.”

— **DALE F. ELLIOTT, PRESIDENT AND CEO, BUSINESS CONSULTING**

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