3 Lessons for First-Time CEOs From Someone Who’s Been There



The lessons a CEO two years in wishes she knew when she started out.

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I have always craved new challenges. The CEO role is not one for the type who phones it in, is afraid to take risks or who accepts stagnation or complacency. And while it’s easy to say who the CEO role is not for, I am excited that we are seeing new and diverse leaders filling this spot virtually every day. My own CEO tenure started just over two years ago, and I’m proud to say that figuring out how to succeed in the role has been one of my most rewarding professional challenges to date.

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I had held other C-suite positions, such as CFO, which prepared me for the top role. But I quickly learned that actually doing it was the only way to learn to be a CEO. Below are three lessons I've learned that can benefit new CEOs, particularly ones who have been hired into an existing role rather than founders who have always been at the helm.

Safeguard your time and utilize it wisely

As a CFO, managing the time I spent on non-finance-related tasks was extremely important. I particularly enjoyed working with the sales department — brainstorming the best way to maximize revenue, create incentive models and structure deals. Once I got the CEO position, I realized that I was going to have to become even better at time management. Although I had to change my tactics for my new role, I relied on the same intrinsic motivation and skill set for prioritizing where I spend my time.

I took the same passion for problem-solving, process improvement and efficiency that had helped me find success in the CFO role and was able to apply it to other departments more broadly. This included the groups I had not previously worked closely with, like our engineering or product development teams. I discovered that the best use of my time during those critical initial months in the new role was to become more closely connected to the people, goals, processes, needs and challenges of the business holistically. That also meant spending more time on things like understanding our software development processes and driving the prioritization of the product roadmap.

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After learning how valuable my time as a CEO was, I then had to learn how to evaluate who could best assist me most in driving my strategy and vision throughout my new organization.

Identify who will help you move the needle on your new vision as CEO

I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to surround yourself with the right leadership team. When I took over the CEO position, the company was dealing with some unique challenges, and I had to find replacements for the majority of my executive team.

In order for us to accomplish the big things ahead of us as a company, I identified a need for the senior leadership team to be very hands-on, lead by example and direct the company at all levels. I promote openness and don’t tolerate passing the buck or letting questions go unanswered or unaddressed. So when it came to identifying who I believed could help me manifest these traits throughout our company, I looked for passionate people who instill that in the people they work with and oversee.

Stay motivated so you can motivate a whole company

The best way I’ve found to stay motivated is to plan, execute and do big things with your time and effort. It’s also imperative to clearly communicate your vision across the organization, celebrate successes and be honest about the failures. Clear communication and transparency helps to create a culture of accountability.

A company of our size can’t have a CEO and senior leaders who are disconnected, not interacting or just sitting in their individual offices. To emphasize this, I started having a

company-wide biweekly standup meeting and authoring a weekly CEO update email to implement a transparent culture.

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It has been extremely rewarding to see what this company has done in the past two years, but it’s even more thrilling to think of what’s to come. I hope the lessons I have shared will be useful to an entire new group of CEOs and organizations looking to take on a similar challenge or simply looking to better themselves and their people.

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