Grace Is a Leadership Strategy — Here's How CEOs Can Use It Effectively

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If you haven't watched the latest season of "The Bear" yet, I highly recommend it to any small business owner. Without giving anything away, the plot is an eye-opening exposé of what it takes to keep a business afloat and the lengths CEOs must sometimes go to ensure survival.

I believe that restaurateurs are some of the ultimate entrepreneurs. They take chances every day in one of the most challenging business models with a high failure rate. As such, there's a lot to learn from leaders like Chef Carmy. Starting with, you have to be conscious of doling out grace and empathy — and before you do so with your team, it needs to start with doing the same for yourself.

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True victory is knowing everything can't be a win

Mistakes happen in life and business. Choices and big decisions are necessary, and you're not always going to get it right. But it's not about avoiding the difficult moments; it's about how you handle them in the moment, head-on, that will be the biggest differentiator in your success.

This is paramount in a startup entering its growth phase, where things are moving very fast and there isn't always time to pump the brakes. When everyone's pushing really hard and you're all accelerating at the same time, you're going to hit road bumps inevitably. But if you have a mindset of "these things happen" and give grace to yourself and your team, it will better prepare you for your next strategic move. On the other hand, being reactive and punitive will only break the ecosystem further as teams face impossible standards to solve the situation.

If you've ever had a startup with very narrow margins, you know the immense pressure I'm talking about. Maybe you were on your last three weeks of cash, or lost your most significant partnership and the company went on life support. The most successful founders don't give up; they get back on the horse and do what they do best — staying inventive and finding a way to pivot in a new direction. The companies that fail are the ones that refuse to recognize or acknowledge a Plan B.

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It starts with positive self-talk & positive behaviors

There is a top-down approach to this organizing principle. If you want everyone on the same page with the same mentality of rallying around a mission, it must start with the one at the top. Given the stressful nature of the job, it's easy for CEOs to develop unhealthy habits: not sleeping well, not eating well and getting caught up in a constant panic mode. When you feel unwell, though, it's difficult to give yourself grace, let alone anyone else.

Positive self-talk is a great first step, and it can be

nurtured by having a good sounding board that you go to for counsel and support. I fully believe in utilizing your advisors as much as possible because they may be able to provide different perspectives and encourage you when challenges arise.

Yet, holding yourself accountable is also important, as is being honest about your own role in the circumstances. It's impossible to give yourself grace when you're lying or masking information, all the while knowing the truth in the back of your mind.

Best practices for coaching your team

Once you've established how to be kind to yourself as a CEO, it's essential to establish this mindset within the company. I like to lead with the idea that it's okay to fail, but it's never okay not to try. Effort is always rewarded, even if the results didn't go as we intended.

At my company, we tend to overcommunicate, which I believe is a benefit in the long run to align as coworkers and human beings. We do regular check-ins to see how people are feeling and where they need support, whether it's our weekly all-hands meeting or smaller one-on-ones with managers and their teams. One-on-ones are also encouraged to be taken outside the office, whether by walking around the neighborhood, grabbing coffee or lunch together, or an after-hours dinner or event. This way, people may feel more comfortable leaving the work environment.

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The value of learning from mistakes

An interesting thing happens when you allow mistakes to happen naturally — you actually learn more from the stuff that doesn't work than what does. It's why having postmortems is critically important. Rather than just moving on from the situation, take inventory of what happened, see why it didn't work and understand what could've been done differently to bring a different result.

This, too, should be done with grace. Encourage teams to work collaboratively to gain insights rather than hold a session to reprimand anyone's actions. Whether you're in a line kitchen like "The Bear" or have a less dramatic working environment, it always takes everyone's cooperation to come up with the right recipe for success.

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