Why the Best CEOs Think Like Anthropologists

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Let’s get straight to it: Business isn’t all about numbers, spreadsheets and quarterly reports. It’s about people. Human behavior is the foundation of every dollar earned or lost in a company. It’s something the best CEOs understand, approaching leadership with the curiosity and observational skills of an anthropologist. They see past metrics and look toward what moves people: beliefs, motivations and habits.

If you are someone running a business or a team, you probably know by now that logic alone will hardly win hearts and rarely sustain success. The real magic is in understanding why people do what they do, not just what they’re doing. That’s where anthropology comes in — looking at culture, behavior and relationships to better understand your customers, employees and even competitors. Let’s get into the real, practical ways this mindset plays out.

Related: How Understanding Behavioral Psychology Can Help Your Business Blossom

Understanding people is the ultimate competitive edge

The reality is that people do not always behave as we believe they should. Your customer does not purchase your product simply because it is the best on paper; they purchase because something about it resonates. They may not even know themselves why they chose your brand over your competition.

Smart CEOs understand that customer surveys or online reviews are not sufficient. They dig deeper. They watch patterns — how people live, work and decide. They witness without judgment. For instance, Howard Schultz, former Starbucks CEO, had famously visited Italy to study coffee culture. He didn't only see what Italians drank; he saw how they met, bonded and slowed down in cafes. That knowledge is part of what made Starbucks a "third place" experience — not simply a coffee shop but a space that seemed to beg for people to dawdle.

You discover insights that your competitors overlook when you quit opening and start witnessing.

1. Anthropology in the workplace: It's not just about paychecks

Let's talk about your team. Have you ever asked yourself why one employee is shining while another appears disengaged despite receiving the same paycheck and benefits? A CEO who has the mind of an anthropologist doesn't just throw money at the problem or yell about "lazy workers." They ask questions:

- What is the unwritten culture here?
- Are there voices that you hear in meetings, or is everyone truly heard?
- What's the sentiment of team members about their work outside of the job description?

Take Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft, for instance. When he took the helm, he not only introduced new strategies but transformed the company culture. His focus on empathy and collaboration marked a break from the competitive, siloed culture that Microsoft had developed. He listened, watched and reframed the workplace dynamic, making it one of the most innovative companies in the world.

People don’t work hard solely to collect a paycheck — they want purpose, connection and recognition. CEOs who appreciate this don’t merely manage; they lead.

2. Customers are culture, not data points

Many companies proclaim themselves as “customer first,” but how many executives actually spend time with customers? Not in focus groups, but rather where they live their lives. Anthropologists are aware that human beings frequently say one thing and do another. Real insight comes from watching what customers do, not just listening to what they tell you.

For example, when Airbnb was an early-stage startup, its founders weren’t sitting around in their office thinking of ways to scale. They went to their hosts’ homes, stayed in their rooms and experienced it as guests. That ground-up touch informed what people needed — direct communication, safety and trust. Those observations informed some of the platform’s key features.

The takeaway? Stop sitting in the boardroom and step out into the real world. Look at how people use your product, where they get discouraged and what motivates them.

Related: 4 Reasons to Walk a Mile in Your Customers’ Shoes (And How to Do It)

3. Spotting trends before they’re trends

It should come as no surprise, then, that thinking like an anthropologist also means thinking ahead. The culture evolves, and the techniques that work today may not work tomorrow. CEOs who decipher changing behavior thrive.

Think about Netflix. When Reed Hastings made a pivot from DVDs to streaming, he wasn't winging it. He saw a change in the way that people consumed entertainment – when they want, the way they want, as easily as possible. Rather than waiting for customers to clamor for streaming, he saw the direction that the culture was going and jumped early.

But this isn't about crystal balling the future. It's about being a keen observer, asking questions and noticing small things that suggest larger trends.

4. It's not about knowing everything – it's about staying curious

The smartest person in the room isn't always the best CEO. They're the most curious. They don't think they have all the answers and they're not afraid to be wrong. That humility and willingness to learn is really what it means to think like an anthropologist.

Take Elon Musk, for example. Whatever you may think of him, there's no question he has a different style of mind for addressing problems. He goes deep, probing "why" until he gets to the root cause of a problem. Why do legacy car companies have a hard time with electric vehicles? Why does it cost so much to go into space? By challenging everything and watching how systems function, he's created companies that upend entire sectors.

You, as a leader, do not need to know everything. But you must remain curious and open-minded.

5. Building human-centered

companies

Anthropologists study the human experience, and so do the best CEOs. They understand that when you create something that truly improves people's lives — a product, a service, a workplace — profit and growth follow naturally.

Take Patagonia, for example. Its founder and former CEO, Yvon Chouinard, didn't merely sell outdoor gear; he had created a company whose core ideals were in line with those of his customers — sustainability, conservation and quality. He understood what his audience really cared about and built a brand that people are deeply attached to.

The result? Loyal customers who don't just purchase products — they become ambassadors.

Related: 5 Insights Into Human Behavior That Will Boost Your Sales and Marketing

Practical steps to think like an anthropologist

All of this is great in theory, but what does it look like in practice? Here's a handful of things you can actually do:

- **Spend time observing:** Whether you shadow your team, visit customers or observe people's behavior with your product, get out there and see what really happens.
- **Ask better questions:** Instead of "What do you want?" the first thing you should ask is, "Why is this important to you?" or "Which problem are you trying to solve?"
- **Look for patterns:** What are the commonalities between your most loyal customers? What common behaviors do high-performing employees exhibit?

- **Stay curious:** Read widely, listen to all kinds of people, and never stop learning. The more world experiences you have, the better you lead in the world.
- **Challenge assumptions:** Don’t do something just because it has “always been done this way.” Be open to reinventing and trying things out.

Thinking like an anthropologist isn’t an exotic leadership hack – it’s common sense that we tend to miss. Business is not only about selling products or administrating teams, but it is about having the capacity to feel people. The best CEOs understand this and ask themselves continually: Why do people do what they do?

When you put time into observing, listening and staying curious, you’re not just running a business – you’re building something meaningful. And in today’s world, that’s what distinguishes the best leaders.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/why-the-best-ceos-think-like-anthropologists/484654