



Book

## How to Think Like a CEO

The 22 Vital Traits You Need to Be the Person at the Top

Debra A. Benton

Warner Books, 1996

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CEO behavior can be learned, so the job can be earned. Here's how to walk, talk, think, and act like you're already the boss.

## Recommendation

Author Debra A. Benton discusses how chief executive officers succeed. She bases her information on interviews with hundreds of major corporations' CEOs and with well-known leaders and public figures. The experiences of so many CEOs make the book fascinating. Readers will be intrigued by the many success stories. Benton also extrapolates and explains the key principles behind the success of these executives. The book is an excellent, well-written guide that includes some well-known success principles and some that may be less well-known. The short, snappy, easy-to-read style is accessible. A helpful summary at the end of each chapter captures the major principles covered. *getabstract.com* recommends this book to those on the way up in management, those interested in getting into management, and those who wish to apply these principles of success in their own careers.

## In this summary, you will learn

- Why perseverance ranks among the most important qualities for a CEO
- What eight qualities near-perfect CEOs have
- Why being kind to others is not a sign of weakness

## Take-Aways

- To become a CEO, first you need to think like one.
- You have to be confident in your abilities if you are going to make it to the top.
- Even if you encounter difficulties, keep going.
- Good CEOs are good actors; they know how to play the part they need to play in different circumstances.
- Don't try to maintain the status quo. Use your originality to promote improvement and change.
- Becoming a CEO is like climbing a mountain; you need to learn the ropes and overcome obstacles as you climb to the top.
- Become a master of style and choose the appropriate style for each occasion.
- Being in control of your attitude is critical, since success in business and life depends more on mental attitude than mental ability.

- Even if you see the big picture, pay attention to details.
- You can make your message more powerful if you use humor, drama, and style to get it across.

## Summary

*“You need to think like a CEO long before you become one. People who make it to the top act and think like they are ‘number one’ before they actually become number one.”*

### **The Basic Equipment Needed to Become a CEO**

You might compare climbing the corporate ladder to climbing a mountain. You need certain qualities, which are like equipment, to make it to the top. You also have to be ready to pass through "tricky and scary situations," just as you would if you were going higher and higher up a mountain. To begin, you first need to establish a "firm footing." You also have to "learn the ropes," so you can move upwards, overcoming difficulties as you go, and take the lead.

To increase your chances of rising to the top, try to understand the CEO who employs you. You will learn more if you work for a top CEO. A better CEO is more likely to run a successful organization. Your CEO won't be perfect, since no one is. But you want to work for a "near-perfect chief." A near-perfect CEO has 22 vital traits. Make these traits your own. Observe them in others. Continually work to improve these qualities in yourself, so that you get better and better.

### **Eight Fundamental Qualities**

The eight fundamental qualities that near-perfect CEOs have are:

1. They are secure in themselves - Near-perfect chiefs have to be secure, to have the confidence to believe they can make it. Uncertain people don't get to the top. Good CEOs want to surround themselves with confident people. Therefore, they are the ones who will get promoted. A CEO who lacks confidence will make those around him nervous and uncertain. Thus, act with confidence to inspire others, whether you feel confident or not. Acting confidently will make you feel confident, too.
2. They are in control of their attitudes - Take charge of your attitude. Your ability to succeed in business and in life depends more on your mental attitude than your mental abilities. Adopt an attitude that fits each situation, such as being firm or friendly as needed. Being optimistic and having positive attitude helps. Remember, you have to be in control of your own attitude, or others will control you.
3. They are tenacious - Top CEOs persevere and overcome obstacles. They keep going. Even if others discourage you, you should stay on your path and work toward your goals. Even if you experience disappointments, frustrations, and setbacks, keep going. However, you should be ready to give up and cut your losses if you see that something is a bad project or a mistake. Like a poker player, you should know when to hold them and know when to fold them.
4. They are continually improving - Keep learning, so you know more and more about your job. Learn by talking to people, learn from your mistakes, and learn from the experiences of others. Think about how you can "emulate effective leaders" and how you can "learn something new every day."
5. They are honest and ethical - This is vitally important. You should tell the truth, have integrity, be genuine, be fair, and be forthright. Do not engage in fraud, deception, or artifice to get ahead for yourself or your company. Don't intentionally mislead or misrepresent anything or break your promises. Bring up uncomfortable issues, so they can be resolved, but don't exaggerate. You cannot get ahead unless you have a reputation for honesty and good character. A lack of integrity will generally catch up with you.

*“If you lose control, you lose. Period.”*

*“Until, and unless, you're in command of your outlook, everyone and anyone can control you. Only people who manage their attitude avoid being managed by others.”*

*“Keep going until something stops you, then keep going.”*

6. They think before they talk - If you think before you speak, you can control what you say and carefully choose your words. You can express yourself for the desired result. With forethought, you can avoid repeating yourself and minimize stuttering or stammering. Remember, at times it may be best to be silent and not say anything.
7. They are original in their ideas and actions - Originality is especially important in today's climate of change. CEOs have an advantage in that they can express their imagination, and be inventive and original. This vital trait is the basis of human improvement and is a necessary part of responding to change. Use your originality to find better ways to do things.
8. They are publicly modest about their abilities and achievements - As you improve and achieve, be modest. Avoid being pretentious or ostentatious. Bragging about what you achieve can turn people off and breed resentment. You want to be recognized for your contributions, without becoming arrogant about them.

*“Persevere through disappointments, setbacks, frustrations, and inequities. Those who persevere will succeed.”*

### **Practicing Vital Traits That Will Help You Climb**

Five vital traits that will help you enjoy your climb to the top are:

1. Be aware of style and use it appropriately - Employ the proper behavior and the appropriate style. Don't try to be the same way with everyone. Effective styles include being decisive, candid, or collaborative. Listening to others is effective, but being antagonistic and lacking empathy is not. Become aware of your own style. Don't try to guess another person's predominant style, especially if he or she is in a high level position. Such people are better at concealing and adapting their style than others might be.
2. Be a little wild and gutsy - At times, climbing to the top means taking risks. You need true courage that stems from both reasoning and instinct. You don't want to be reckless, which comes from being bold without having focus and purpose. But you also don't want to be a coward. Strike a balance; be willing to push at the boundaries of your comfort zone.
3. Be humorous - Humor is important to keep work fun. You want to act in a cheerful way and be willing to laugh at yourself when appropriate, such as when you make a mistake. The goal is to be upbeat, while being serious about "consequences, behavior, and values." Don't take humor to extremes, but learn to use it well. It can be a helpful tool in keeping employees productive.
4. Be a little theatrical in the way you express yourself - A little drama can help you make your message more powerful. Effective CEOs have good acting skills. They can be comfortable and act their part in many different situations and with many different types of people, even if they don't feel like it. Remember, other people are always reading you, just like you are reading others. By acting, you can present the picture of yourself you want to present, especially in difficult times when you want to persuade people that you feel confident.
5. Be detail oriented - Pay attention to details. Even when others are working to implement your ideas, stay alert to what is going on around you. Keep the big picture in mind. Paying close attention to details keeps you accurate, which helps you stay honest. On the other hand, inaccuracy can promote fudging and cover-ups to conceal mistakes.

*“Chew on your thoughts before you verbalize them. Digest your words as you digest your food.”*

### **The Final Steps for Getting to the Top**

The last steps you need to get to the top include these:

- Good at your job and willing to lead others.
- A fighter for your people.
- Willing to admit your mistakes, yet unapologetic about them.

*“The good CEO takes full advantage of his position to be inventive, different, imaginative, and original.”*

- Straightforward in how you communicate.
- Nice.
- Inquisitive and curious, so you ask questions.
- Competitive.
- Flexible, so you are willing to adapt and change.
- A good storyteller.

*“The simple way to get ahead in business is to give top performance today and significantly improve that performance tomorrow.”*

Being good at your job has two facets: hard knowledge, that is technical excellence, and "the soft side," your ability to relate well to others. If you are good with people, you can learn the technical details. The key to success is getting the information you need from people, not from computers. To do this, you need the ability to understand and influence others effectively. It helps to be a specialist in one or two key areas important to your company, such as marketing, engineering, or technology. Then, you can learn other key areas. Being willing to lead means being ready to "step out front," take risks, and lead the company.

You should also be ready to fight for your people and back them up. Be loyal downward; spread credit to others in the organization. You need to support people and give them credit, if you want them to support you.

Be willing to admit your mistakes, yet be unapologetic about them. If you make a mistake, be willing to admit it. Then you can correct your mistake and move on. It's fine to make a mistake once, but you don't want to make it again. A repeated mistake demonstrates a lack of attention to detail or a poor attitude. However, while you should admit mistakes, don't be apologetic about them. It can be fine to apologize, when an apology is called for, but be unapologetic in your attitude.

*“Never be satisfied with simply maintaining the status quo. You lose originality if you are satisfied with the present condition. Originality is the principle source of human improvement.”*

Communicate clearly and straightforwardly to others. Write or talk in a "plain, simple manner." Giving clear instructions helps employees do what you want. Straight talk also inspires trust in what you say. And, when you say what you mean, you avoid misunderstandings.

Being nice will help you get along with others as you move to the top. You can still make hard decisions and be strong in getting the job done, but if you are amiable and pleasant, people will be more responsive to what you want.

Being curious and inquisitive is also critical, since you want to ask questions and learn all you can. Seek the answers about anything you don't understand. In asking questions, try to learn new information or get old information clarified. Phrase your questions in a conversational, comfortable way. When questions seem like attacks, people can feel defensive or belittled.

You also want to be competitive, since it is good to have a "healthy fighting spirit." This will help you in your personal and professional growth, and will enable you to overcome obstacles and achieve victories. However, choose your battles, so you engage in only those worth fighting. Compete fairly. Don't engage in "overly zealous, destructive combat," since you may have to work with your opponents in the future.

*“Remember the four-minute rule. Be aware of and consciously control your actions for at least the first four minutes of any encounter.”*

Be willing to adapt and change. With flexibility, you can adjust your responses as circumstances change. This doesn't mean being "wishy-washy or undisciplined." Rather, it means being willing to bend and not stubbornly sticking to a position when the situation requires adjustment.

Being a good story teller means that you are able to use stories and anecdotes to help you communicate. You can dramatize an example or paint pictures with words to make what you say clearer, more memorable, and more useful to others.