



# Advice for Aspiring CEOs

Rookie chief executives have little or no margin for error. **Dawn Murden** finds out what steps need to be taken in order to maximise the chances of being a success



Good leaders have the ability to empower and influence others. In the world of business, performance levels drop when leaders confuse their roles and responsibilities with those of task-oriented managers. Although both are equally necessary, what they provide an organisation should be seen through two different lenses.

Keeping sight of this can prove extremely difficult. Criticaleye spoke to a mix of senior business leaders to find out how their respective styles have evolved over the years, what's important to keep in focus and what advice they would impart to others, particularly aspiring CEOs. Here's what they had to say:



**Steven Cooper**  
CEO, Personal Banking  
Barclays

### *“As the leader, you have to absorb the burden”*

There was a whole host of problems in one of Barclays' African businesses I was running; my back was against the wall. So, I changed part of the team, brought new people in and galvanised the business.

What I learnt from that period is that if you purposefully trigger a sense of urgency to make changes – even when you're in a business that's doing well – you can achieve phenomenal results.

Although, if you are doing that, you must shield your staff from pressure. They need to be aware of it but also have the space to get on with the job at hand. As the leader, you have to absorb the burden.

I've also learnt that if you're not approachable and visible, or react badly to information, it creates a culture in which you don't get told bad news.

Instead, people tell you what they think you want to hear. That's very unhealthy; there's nothing worse than not knowing what's going on.

#### **Advice for Aspiring CEOs:**

Communicate. Spend time in the business connecting with people at all levels. If you have a shop front, go in there unannounced and see what's really happening. Also, talk to customers; particularly those that are complaining. And don't forget to look at what your competitors are doing.



**Charlie Wagstaff**  
Co-Founder & Managing Director  
Criticaleye

### *“Think about how to make a difference”*

I'm fortunate in my role of being able to glean what it is other business leaders feel is important and to make observations about how to resolve issues. This also helps me to constantly reframe my own approach to leadership and supports the mentoring I undertake.

Being open and listening to criticism is important, but you also need to have confidence in your own ability. When we launched Criticaleye, I'd had a relatively successful corporate career, emerging from a demanding role where, for the prior 18 months, I had been involved in divesting and selling growth businesses internationally.

All the skills I'd built up, such as being entrepreneurial in thought and learning how to challenge the status quo, enabled me to take that leap and set up a business from scratch.

It does take a long time to hone your style. It's about constantly learning, being curious and finding different reference points so that new experiences and seeking fresh perspectives continue to inform leadership style.

#### **Advice for Aspiring CEOs:**

Think about how to make a difference and the legacy you are going to leave as a leader.



**Howard Kerr**

CEO  
BSI Group

## *“Don’t pretend to have all the answers”*

I would say my natural leadership style is collaborative. My strengths are in strategy development, communication and building relationships. For other areas, it’s important to consciously surround myself with people who have strengths in my areas of relative weakness.

For me, self-awareness is vital, as is possessing the ability to solicit and respond to daily feedback, for example after meetings, rather than just formally. Don’t pretend to have all the answers. No matter how experienced you are it would be

incredibly arrogant to think that you can’t improve – I describe myself as the ‘incomplete leader’. No matter how strongly the business is performing there are always things that you can and should do better.

### **Advice for Aspiring CEOs:**

Recognise what the organisation needs, rather than what you need. You must understand the context and adapt your own style to the business you inherit. What you did in a previous company will not necessarily work.



**Rita Clifton**

Non-executive Director  
Nationwide

## *“Hire brilliant people around you”*

There are a few events that I think have particularly shaped my leadership style. Becoming CEO at Interbrand was one.

Whatever people tell you about being CEO and however close you think you have already been to the role, little prepares you for the relentlessness of it in practice. You have to combine being a therapist with being an executioner when needed, and you have to be ‘on it’ around the clock.

My time at advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi also had a lasting effect as it combined extraordinary vision and drive

with a positive attitude and sense of humour. They also had a female CEO and Strategy Director – it never occurred to me that you couldn’t do whatever you wanted as a woman in business.

### **Advice for Aspiring CEOs:**

Make sure you are confident enough in yourself that you hire brilliant people around you without feeling threatened. Hiring inferior people means the company is only going one way – down. Also, ensure you are great at numbers and the language of finance.



**Ian Gibson**

Board Mentor  
Criticleye

## *“The focus was much more on the team”*

The biggest change in my style when I became CEO at Nissan for the UK and Europe was demonstrating that I was listening to the team rather than directing them.

It reflected the philosophy of the business as a whole; we were trying to involve the workforce in very different ways – to be more consultative and get more employee motivation. The focus was much more on the team rather than what I, as the boss, wanted to do. It was about listening to views, giving a

verdict, and then delegating and evaluating. In some ways it was difficult to make that shift at first. By the time I was CEO, I’d already been an executive in a multinational, operating with a fairly directive style.

### **Advice for Aspiring CEOs:**

The most important thing about leadership is learning how to evaluate people’s ideas and getting a group to work on them together.