



Andi Owen, CEO of Herman Miller



Art of Leading

Conversations with CEOs about their most powerful insights and lessons learned.

Monthly Series

The Life of a CEO: Set the Direction, Communicate Often and Be Inspiring

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In this new series, I'll be interviewing top CEOs about how they lead day-to-day. [Andi Owen](#), who took over as CEO of furniture maker [Herman Miller](#) in August 2018, shared some candid insights about what she has learned in her new role, and why her comfort zone is a steep learning curve.

Q. What were some lessons from earlier in your career that helped set you up to be a CEO?

A. I tried a lot of different things and I moved laterally a lot. Instead of staying in one function, I jumped into new areas. I was really comfortable feeling really stupid for six months to a year and learning a new skill. Pretty soon I could put the pieces together for how the entire business was working because I'd been in almost every function.

That gave me a perspective that helped me move forward more quickly because I understood why a problem was happening in, say, marketing or in the supply chain, because I'd been there. In business, we don't do enough to set people up to have those different experiences because you have to get support and you have to be comfortable not having all the answers. Instead, people typically rise through one specialty or another.

Q. What was motivating you to move around to different areas?

A. I would learn something and then I would want to make a difference and want to learn more. I'm a very curious person. Sometimes that's the death of me because I ask "why" a hundred times. People who work with me now think I'm a toddler because that's often the only question I ask. By asking all those questions, you just find out so many things to solve.

Q. When you would go into a new job that was completely out of your comfort zone, what was your first-day speech to the new team?

A. I've always figured that I might as well state the obvious because people know I'm not the

expert. So I might as well own up to my deficits. Why try to hide it? And I usually tell people, "Here's what I think I bring and hopefully this skill will be helpful to you. Here's all the things I don't know, and I hope all of you and I can work together to figure it out together." It's very rare that I would go into an assignment where I didn't have something to offer, and it's very rare that people who were already there didn't have something to offer, so it's usually pretty symbiotic.

Q. When you tell people about your leadership style and how you like to work, what do you say?

A. I'm not always going to be on time. When I'm with someone, I try to be present, and sometimes that makes me five to ten minutes late for the next interaction. I ask a lot of questions, and as you move higher up in an organization, some people think that you're trying to do a "gotcha" with them. But I tell them I'm just curious.

"When you don't communicate and you start running fast, you can leave people behind."

If I make a commitment to you, I'm going to keep it, and I expect the same from you. If you make a mistake, we will solve it together. I want to hear bad news fast. But if you try to hide it or make yourself look better at the expense of other people, that's a hot button for me.

Q. This is your first CEO job. Any surprises, even subtle ones, about the role?

A. The number of times that I need to repeat the message is a lot. At first I wondered how many times I'd have to say the same thing. Then I realized that there's 8,000 employees, and in almost every venue I'm in, people are meeting me for the first time. I have to repeat the core message over and over because my job is to set the direction, communicate and be inspiring. I thought I would spend a lot more time doing some other things, but most of my day is spent communicating.

Q. I've heard that lesson about the importance of repetition and constant communication from a lot of CEOs.

A. I learned it the hard way because I've made some mistakes over my career. One of the things I failed to do in my last job was that I didn't spend enough time communicating, and part of the reason I didn't was because I was an insider. I knew the company, the company knew me, we all knew what we were talking about. I thought I didn't have to say it over and over again, but I did. And when you don't communicate and you start running fast, you can leave people behind.

I'm an outsider here, so I've been keenly aware that I need to communicate a lot more than I might have thought I needed to, and that I have to really find ways for people to get to know me personally. I believe that people don't work for you because you're a CEO; they work for you because they know you as a person.

I've found all sorts of ways to communicate and get my message out. For example, I write a letter to the whole organization every couple of weeks to tell them what I've been doing and where I've been traveling. I tell them what I notice, I thank people, and I tell them about my family. I just share random thoughts, and I have intentionally not layered it with a lot of financial strategy. We have other vehicles for that.

I want them to feel that I'm approachable. I want people to feel like they can email me or text me, and that if they see me in the hallway, they can speak to me. I want to know what the jobs are like. I work in the plant, and I build cabinets and chairs. I want to know how our people are being treated and if they feel valued and important. I also don't have an office.

Q. Really?

A. I have a space where I can put my stuff, and I wasn't quite sure how it was going to work when I started. But having done it for six months, it's amazing, because I'm all over the organization in different places at different times, and so I'm always having opportunities to inadvertently run into people. And when you inadvertently run into people as a CEO, it's not as scary for them, and people talk to you. It's also easier for me to get to know people that way.

Q. What do you want to be better at as a leader two years from now than you are today?

A. I want to be better at painting the picture that's compelling enough to get people to move and change faster. Cultures are really hard to change, and cultures are really the behaviors we tolerate and the behaviors we don't tolerate. But the world is moving so quickly. As a leader, with the clock speed of change and transformation being so much faster, you really have to be able to light the fire of saying that we need to change the way we do business, but in a way that creates some urgency but not panic.

"Cultures are really the behaviors we tolerate and the behaviors we don't tolerate."

It's about being clear about what we need to do to evolve while also giving people the confidence that who we are — our core values and what we represent and the meaning we have in our work — doesn't change, but the process around what we do may have to evolve.

Q. I'd like to go back to the point you made earlier about being comfortable with not having the answers when you move into a new situation. Some leaders use a different approach and want to make an impact right away.

A. Once I started to take the painful step of saying, "I don't know anything about this at all," then people help you. When I came to Herman Miller, I didn't know anything about furniture. People have been amazing about teaching me and answering my endless questions. If I had come in and said, "I've got this, this is what we're going to do, and you people need to get in line," then the whole organism would have spit me out so fast.

I've been that person early in my career who would go into a situation and try the whole "fake it until you make it" routine. I learned really quickly that you can't fake it. People can sniff that out in a nanosecond. It's not worth the effort.

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