



A Big Challenge For Leaders Can Be The Ability To Make Hard Decisions



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Published Aug 23, 2023

Michael Weening, CEO of Calix, a telecommunications cloud and managed services company, shared his key leadership insights in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. The question of remote or hybrid work, or fully back at the office, seems to be an endless puzzle that people are trying to figure out. Where do you come down on this?

A. For my entire career, I've tried to work remotely in every job I've ever had. And when I had to work in the office, I was in the office as little as possible because being in an office is incredibly unproductive. Going in for a day here or there can be great, but I don't agree with people who are trying to mandate their employees to return to the office.

I believe a big reason why leaders are doing is that because they feel uncomfortable that they can't touch people and they're not willing to adapt. And if you want to be successful in remote work, you have to be very adaptable as a leader.

To make it work, you have to set clear goals, and you must actively coach people to help them reach those goals. You have to care about the whole person when you are talking to your colleagues. You must make an effort to notice how they seem and how they are doing and then follow up to see if they need to have a conversation.

A lot of people are making the case for returning to the office by saying it's better for collaboration, but how many times do people go into the office and then hunt down a room so they can get on a Zoom call?

Q. So how do you build culture when people are not together? That can be a challenge

for remote companies.

A. Culture is basically how we treat each other and interact day to day. And culture is owned by the individual employees. I like to say to everyone that you own the culture. If the culture's great, it's because you've done a great job. So, every single day, every employee has to decide what the culture is going to be.

When we were going through this massive transformation, people would ask, "how do we retain the culture?" My answer is that there's nothing to retain. It's actually how you act every single day. It's about respecting each other, working well together, helping each other and caring about each other.

Q. What early influences shaped who you are today?

A. I grew up in a family that struggled financially. My dad was an immigrant, and he came off the boat in 1952 from Holland. He had a sixth-grade education, and my mom didn't go beyond tenth grade. But they made it clear that they expected us to go to university, and also that we had to figure out a way to pay for it ourselves.

After I graduated from university, I knew I didn't want to be poor. I wrote the number 100,000, and I taped it to my desk — that's how much I wanted to earn a year. My first job was selling corrugated cardboard. I asked the best sales rep how much he made, and he said \$32,000 a year. I had a different job three months later, working at Canon, and again I taped that 100,000 to my desk.

I needed to learn. I found out who was the best sales rep in the organization, and I left a message saying, "I'd really appreciate it if I could learn from you. Can I travel with you for a day?" He never returned my call. I called again. He still didn't return my call. Called again and again. After the fifth message, he returned my call, and said, "You can come to my house, and I'll mentor you."

When I met him, he said, "Do you know why I didn't return your call? Because a lot of people reach out to me to ask if I would mentor them. So, here's your first lesson: It takes five no's to make a yes. And you're the first person I've mentored because you're the only one who ever got past five."

Q. When you coach people, what is the most common theme that comes up?

A. The biggest downfall I see in leaders is the inability to make really hard decisions. And often that shows up with people. They will have a low performer, but they will rationalize how they are getting 60 percent out of them or try to coach them to be better. Exiting someone is hard, but it's a lot easier for me because of an experience I had very early in my career.

The lesson was that the low performer is cancerous to the entire organization.

In my first management role, there were two people on the team who didn't want me to be their manager. I was their peer. Three months in, I removed somebody else from the team, and those two people then came into my office and said, "We have something to tell you. First, we were wrong about not wanting you to be our manager. Second, we want to thank you because you removed him, and the three previous leaders didn't have the guts to do the hard thing, and we've been carrying his load every year for five years." The lesson was that the low performer is cancerous to the entire organization. Everybody else has to work harder, and you've got to make that hard call.

Q. How do you ensure your leadership team works like a true team?

A. I use a strategy planning process that involves voting, and it's designed to ensure that we are all on the same page. We start off by identifying the big rocks — the top ten strategic priorities — that we're going to focus on for the year. That's the framework that we're going to use to run the company. And the top five are the ones that are really moving the business this year and then the bottom five are either underpinning the company or they're something that will become significant in the next year.

When I first implemented this process across Calix, it took us two days and we had to hone 172 priorities down to ten. But they were healthy two days because that process just showed us that we were disjointed. The next year it took us six hours, and the following year it took us two hours.

That process — constantly talking about what's important — brought us together as a leadership team. Because, in the end, the greatest dysfunction of leadership teams comes from people not being aligned, pursuing their own interests, or undermining the stated goals.

And the process of voting is important. I do not overrule anyone. We debate and it works. If you open this up to a process where we all debate what's important, not only do I learn a ton, but I debate just like everybody else. Everybody has to pitch their priority and make the case for why it's important.

It's a multiphase voting process to get to the top ten. And what's fascinating is how often people start out arguing passionately for a certain priority, but then they change their mind on its importance relative to the other priorities. It is remarkable how the process clears out any ambiguity. And because everybody gets a vote, everyone's behind it.

Q. How do you hire? What qualities are you looking for?

A. Most important is, are you a team player and can you demonstrate that you've worked well within cultures in the past? The second is, are you strategic and a planner? I want to know that people can build their own plan and be independent, because if you can't, that means somebody is going to have to babysit you, and in a remote culture, that doesn't work. So, we need people who are empowered and accountable.

The third is, do you lead from the front? If you expect to come in and have 19 people do the job and you're going to sit around and delegate, that's not going to work because this is a roll-up-your-sleeves culture. The final thing I'll ask a candidate is, tell me what you learned last. What's the last book you read? How do you learn? Because we want people who are curious.

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