

Insights

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ART OF LEADING



David Wilkie, CEO of World50, on the Power of Curiosity | Art of Leading

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David Wilkie, CEO of [World 50](#), shares his insights on workplace changes and innovation, the impact of geopolitical challenges, and why he believes in the power of curiosity as a key leadership quality in this [Art of Leading](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#).

Q. What do you see as the top-of-mind challenges for leaders these days?

A. It's impossible to be a CEO of a multinational firm and not be drawn into the geopolitical arena. Many CEOs are being asked by their organizations to weigh in on geopolitical events, and they are reluctant to do so because they know that there are two sides to every story.

Given all the internal and external stakeholders you have as a large multinational company, it's difficult to handle such an emotional and politically charged topic like that. Then you compound that with the geopolitical impact on their businesses from the two wars going on right now, plus all the uncertainty surrounding US-China relations. Those are big challenges.

Q. Leaders face a huge challenge of trying to build a sense of alignment in their organization, as well, given that it can be hard to get people just to agree on facts these days.

A. It's harder to create alignment and build a great culture when companies have shifted how they work. People are not getting as much face-to-face time, and we're still doing a lot of meetings over video. There are no on- and off-ramps in many of those meetings, so you're losing a lot of the hallway conversations that can lead to serendipitous innovation and idea generation.

There's no easy solution. When you bring a bunch of CEOs together, they will start asking each other about how many days people are back in the office at their companies. That's how much it's on their mind because it's so instrumental to the issues that they're dealing with inside their organizations.

We're seeing the best companies taking a fresher look at what work really means. What are the outcomes you're trying to generate? If it's to create a bunch of new ideas to deliver to your customers, how do you do that? How do I change meeting formats to generate those breakthrough ideas? The point is not to use the same hammer for different nails. You have to use the right tool to achieve the right outcome.

Q. Leadership has become so much harder these past few years that it can be overwhelming to a lot of folks.

A. There's definitely more stress, and you're hearing a lot of folks talking about mental health. All these Zoom meetings are exacerbating the problem. I have this theory that our brains are hardwired for 3D recognition more than 2D recognition.

So we have to run our internal processors in our brain harder to understand the 2D screens, and that's why we're all tired at the end of a day of video calls. Someone asked me once, "What's your advice on improving mental health?" And I said, "Go to work. Use your 3D and not your 2D vision for a day, and rest your eyes and brain."

Q. What is it about your background that set you up to lead in this kind of environment of endless disruption?

A. I've had very good mentors who taught me a lot. One lesson was the importance of raising the red flag when you need help. You only get in trouble if you don't raise it when you need to. Your colleagues will happily lend a hand if you ask for it.

I'm also a big believer in the power of curiosity. Because if you don't know the answer but you're curious, you'll go figure it out. So we really try to hire for curiosity and try to foster curiosity. That has helped me a lot as a leader, because there are many times that I don't know the answer to something, and the best solution is usually to talk to other people about what they've learned about a particular issue or challenge.

Q. How do you test for curiosity in job interviews?

A. I like to ask people, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how curious are you?" People usually say a high number, but the specific number doesn't matter to me, because then I turn the question to, "Okay. Now that you've told me your score, give me a story that describes your curiosity."

It can be anything. Most people start with an answer like, "Well, I had this project and I had to figure it out, so I started to research..." And then I say, "Time out. You had to do that. That was work. Research was a means to an end. When I say curiosity, I want you to give me a story of curiosity purely for curiosity's sake, with no benefit."

What I'm looking for is an answer like, "I was researching something on Wikipedia, and an hour later I had gone from the Egyptian pyramids to Sub-Saharan Africa to the spice trade with Asia." I'm looking for people who go down rabbit holes just to feed their own curiosity.

My own story, if I were asked the question, is that one day my dad came home and saw me putting the lawnmower back together, and he asked me, "What did you do today?" I told him that I took the lawnmower apart because I was curious about how it worked.

Then he said, "What's that one bolt over there?" I said, "I couldn't figure out where that went." So sometimes the power of curiosity can be dangerous, but that's what we're looking for—people who are curious for curiosity's sake.

Q. When you've mentored more senior people you work with, what themes come up most often?

A. This is probably a universal truth for people in management, but it can be hard for people to shift from seeing their work narrowly to seeing the big picture of what the organization is trying to accomplish. So I'll always talk about the benefits of achieving our bigger goals if we all pull together.

If I take the leader themselves out of the equation and say, "Let's talk about the team, the organization and other people," people quickly become super-generous. They can be more in service of the people that they care about and less about themselves.

The other thing is that people often struggle with the sheer volume of work they face. I like to ask the CEOs I meet, what is your management hack? One gave me a great piece of advice. "Micromanage," he said. "I know. Everyone tells you don't micromanage, but you should micromanage 20 percent. In every business, 80 percent of your business needs to

be good, but 20 percent of it needs to be very, very good, and that's the differentiator for you in the marketplace. Your job as CEO is to know what 20 percent that is and over-index on that." So I tell leaders, "Figure out what your 20 percent is and focus on that."

This interview with David Wilkie, CEO of World 50, on leadership challenges and the power of curiosity is part of our Art of Leading interview series featuring powerful insights from top leaders. [Join the conversation on LinkedIn.](#)
