



The 'Triple A Loop' for Innovation: Awareness, Acceptance, Action | Wendell Weeks, CEO of Corning

March 19th, 2024

Wendell Weeks, CEO of Corning, shared his key leadership insights in my latest “Art of Leading” interview. [Subscribe here](#) to receive future interviews.

Q. You’ve been in the CEO role for 19 years—an unusually long time for a chief executive. How have you kept reinventing yourself?

A. We’re five times larger as a company than we were when I took over. We’ve had to change a lot, and I’ve had to change a lot. I don’t get it all perfect by any stretch, but one tool we use when adapting to change is called the “Triple A Loop.” The acronym AAA stands for awareness, acceptance and action.

It starts with the idea that you have to be aware of the world around you at all times, because you are often wrong. If I’m super-honest with myself, I’m right about 50 percent of the time when it comes to predicting the future. So you have to be able to change and adapt, especially in today’s rapidly evolving business environment.

It’s “heads up,” not “heads down,” because operating with your head down is what kills companies and leaders. Heads-down work is great for execution when you are headed in the right direction, but it’s deadly if you’re not aware of what’s going on around you.

Then the next step, acceptance, is the hardest. It requires humility. Until people accept that they got something wrong, then they can't move to the next step, which is action. The speed with which you go from awareness to action determines how great a performer you are.

Great athletes do this. They don't get overly torqued up about that last mistake because they have to learn from it and move on. People can spend too much time trying to defend how and why they did everything right but it didn't turn out the right way. And that's where their energy goes.

To scale anything, and to be good at anything, requires a lot of humility and an ability to roll and evolve with what's happening. It doesn't mean you change everything because some things are really fundamental and you've got to be willing to be misunderstood for long periods of time.

But you have to be aware of the data in front of you. You have to make sure you're not solving the wrong problem. The key thing people need to spend more time on is making sure they are clear on the right problem to solve. Because once you find the problem, you can usually solve it. But a lot of organizations spend too much time solving the wrong problem.

Q. What were early influences that shaped you as a leader?

A. Neither of my parents went to college, and both of them were alcoholics. It was an abusive home, and so I come out of a relatively chaotic environment. The data show that when you come out of those environments, some people become professional victims while others become predators, because that's the lesson you learn.

The people who can lift themselves out of those influences have the strength to say, "I'm not going to be a victim." And they're lucky enough to run into people who are a good influence, and then they try to mold themselves after those people and become a better version of themselves.

I was lucky to join Corning, which was filled with people who were really good people. They had good values, they treated each other well, and they invested in their community. So it was natural for me to want to join an institution that would help me become a better person.

Q. Was there a critical leadership lesson for you early on?

A. The biggest lesson came during the dot-com crash and the collapse of our optical communications business in the early 2000's. Before the crash, I was largely responsible for building it, and it became an important part of the company. At one point, we were one of the 15 most valuable companies in the country, based on our stock price. I was getting all sorts of recognition, including being referred to as one of the top ten optical minds in the world. You start to think somehow that it's about you.

Then the crash happened, and our stock fell from \$100 a share to \$1.50 a share. We had too much capacity, and we were losing \$700 million a year. But our people stood up and fought and we created, in effect, a very new company. We took big risks. We doubled our investment in R&D, and we made three big bets on innovation.

What I really learned was that the strength of everyone at the company saved me. We have a way of telling stories about leaders, because everybody's the star of their own movie. So we tend to think about leaders as the person who made that difference. What I learned is that being smart is overrated. Having brothers and sisters to help you is under-rated. Willingness to fight? Under-rated. Willing-

ness to care? Under-rated. That changed me and how I lead.

Q. What's it like to work with you day to day? What annoys you? What earns people an extra gold star from you?

A. If you don't know something, say you don't know. That's fine. But if you make something up that isn't true, you are going to have a very, very bad moment, because I will start to dig to find out the truth. If you want to earn a gold star with me, teach me something I don't know.

Q. How do you hire?

A. I look for two things. First is innate intelligence, because we work on very hard technology challenges. The second thing I look for is, do you genuinely care about the people around you? You can show it different ways. Some of the most caring people you'll ever meet are very tough bosses because they want to help people raise their game.

But you've got to show me that you value the people around you. When you ask people about themselves, you can learn a lot about them by whether other people figure prominently in their story. Or are they the sole hero in their movie?

Q. What are some other core approaches to leadership for you?

A. There is a quote that is often attributed to Plato, which is, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." I keep that quote framed in my office because I can be super-intense. If I'm focusing on a problem, everything else collapses, and I'm not really thinking about managing the other person or their feelings. As a result, I can be quite non-empathetic.

And so I keep that quote nearby to remind me, because any change management fundamentally means that you're fighting some status quo, and it takes enormous energy and force to cause change. It's just physics. I put that quote there to remind myself that I don't know that other person's story, and everybody is carrying some burden.

The second quote I refer to often, which is a Marcus Aurelius quote, is, "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."

Whenever you have a big challenge, you can really bemoan that challenge, but almost always it's a gift. As long as you're aware of it, and as long as you accept it, there is always a way around it. But that is the way. You have to address that thing. You can't ignore it, you can't pretend it doesn't exist, and you can't explain it away.