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High-impact CEO teams:
Setting the conditions to best manage complexity

In leading an enterprise, CEOs and their executive teams continually wrestle with issues, pressures and opportunities that may appear to compete or conflict with each other: how to reduce cost while maintaining quality; how to diversify while safeguarding the core business; how to decarbonize without increasing prices to customers. These issues are best described as 'polarities' because, while they may look like they compete with each other, both parts are required for success. A CEO's approach to navigating these tensions is, therefore, one of the determining factors in their own personal success and the effectiveness of their leadership team and, ultimately, the health and performance of their enterprises. This article sets out to explore the qualities that CEOs can cultivate to best enable them and their teams to address polarities effectively.

The late Professor Sir Michael Rutter, the father of modern child psychiatry, spent much of his career exploring why being born into hardship and adversity impacted young people so differently: why some ended up with psychiatric problems or 'delinquent' behaviors, while others flourished. His conclusion was that some young people enjoy the benefit of certain protective factors in their lives that negate the impact of adversity, for example consistent love from a caregiver (not necessarily a biological parent), above average intelligence and a positive mindset. Others, by contrast, are subject to identifiable risk factors, such as ineffective parental supervision, family conflict or a need for immediate gratification, that make them more likely to be negatively impacted by their background.

We've asked the same question about CEOs and senior leaders in businesses and other enterprises.

Why are some so much better able to navigate the complexities of their operating environment, resist the buffeting of changing commercial conditions and ever-faster technological advance, and steer a course that brings their organization success? To put it bluntly, in our experience some leaders and leadership teams are just better adapted to navigating uncertainty and complexity than others. Why? What qualities and behaviors enable them to succeed where others struggle? We believe that one of the key determinants is their ability to manage polarities.

Managing polarities – the key to thriving in a tough world

> *You can't use an old map to explore a new world.*
>
> **Albert Einstein**

In our first article in this series, *High-impact CEO teams two-part series*, we introduced and provided examples of the concept of executive polarities in a business environment of increasing complexity – priorities, opportunities and pressures that compete for executive bandwidth, and which require, at least on the face of it, conflicting or paradoxical responses. We also looked at how leaders can fall into the trap of perceiving issues as problems to be solved rather than as polarities to be managed over time.

That article identified two polarities that are universal across the senior leadership teams we work with – team dynamics and enterprise leadership. Team dynamics is about the tension between creating a safe and supportive environment for the executive team while simultaneously requiring honesty and accountability. Enterprise leadership is about the tension between stewarding and managing the business – working *on* the business as well as working *in* it.

But these are just two common, albeit essential, polarities. In a business landscape of ever-greater complexity, polarities are pervasive – they are everywhere, and they are an expression of that very complexity. So, CEOs and other leaders need to be able to recognize polarities or, to put it another way, distinguish them from problems (see below). This requires them to step away from the instinctive and comfortable cause-and-effect, problem-solving mindset that has most likely played a key role in their career to date and instead adopt a different approach.

We have seen the most effective CEOs recognizing that the way they behave has a profound influence on the way their executive teams function and their collective ability to manage polarities. So, which personal qualities should CEOs be developing and modelling? How can they set the conditions for executive team effectiveness in addressing polarities? Exploring that question is the purpose of this article.

We have observed, and there is academic research that we reference throughout this paper to support our observations, that to thrive in complex environments and to manage polarities effectively, CEOs and their executives will benefit from cultivating five inter-connected qualities:

- reflection
- humility
- curiosity
- connectedness
- courage

> ***Satya Nadella**, CEO at Microsoft, has spearheaded a psychological transformation that has seen the tech giant return to the very top of the corporate tree.[1] Leveraging the Growth Mindset approach popularized by psychologist Carol Dweck, Nadella's Microsoft embraces a philosophy that holds that abilities and intelligence are not fixed but can be developed; challenges are opportunities for growth, failures are lessons; and feedback is a pathway to improvement. Nadella also emphasizes the importance of empathy in effective communication and relationship building, helping to create an atmosphere of psychological safety, where people are encouraged and empowered to speak honestly and to take risks without fear.*

Reflection

CEOs are confronted by varied challenges, from the routine and predictable to the complex and chaotic. Addressing them requires constant vigilance, the capacity to embrace complexity and paradox, and the ability to adapt responses in contextually appropriate ways. Reflection is perhaps the most important and transformative practice that any CEO can enlist when it comes to addressing such complexity.

Leaders should make room for a questioning or philosophical mindset that allows them to step back from the immediate challenges and take a longer-term perspective: to think both strategically and systemically about their enterprise. They should seek out opportunities to let their minds wander, speak to people outside their disciplines and sectors, and read widely. This kind of unstructured thinking – literally wandering and wondering – can be both a source of inspiration and a route to enlightenment about balancing polarities.

Thinking with purpose

Reflection should be a purposeful act: pulling back from the pressures and demands of a day-to-day role, really taking time to consider and understand how events and behaviors are shaped by the context in which they occur, and critically examining their own actions and thought processes. Reflecting means actively seeking out unconscious biases, knowledge gaps and areas for improvement: it is a benign but brutal form of honesty, and it needs individuals to lean into at least two of the other qualities that we are going to explore: humility and courage.

[1] www.inc.com

Psychological safety

A prerequisite for reflection and self-awareness in an executive team is an environment that is characterized by psychological safety, as described by Amy Edmondson and explored in article one in this series.[2,3] This is an environment in which team members are encouraged and empowered to provide one another with open, honest and constructive feedback without fear of repercussion (see the practical application of this approach in the Microsoft case study above and the Netflix one below). In such an environment, created by the tone the leader sets, team members are better able to scrutinize the extent to which their own behavior and that of their colleagues may be factors contributing to a polarity.

The story of Netflix provides a valuable example of the power of a leader creating an environment of psychological safety – and modelling it themselves:
Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix, built a winning and high-performing culture through a deliberate set of practices that emphasized and nurtured freedom and responsibility. This has meant, among other things, a true commitment to constructive candor – saying what you think – that starts at the top and permeates through every layer of the organization. By cultivating this culture of honest, supportive and straight feedback, he's been able to generate much more constructive and performance-oriented conversations across the organization that simultaneously foster a culture that focuses on performance and excellence while still being supportive.

Netflix's principle of "don't seek to please your boss, seek to do what's right for the company" underlines dispersed decision making as a key lever to enable the organization to move at speed and innovate by building and growing decision-making muscle throughout the organization. In practice this has helped to create autonomy and agency for employees, along with ownership and accountability for the decision made. While the organization has clearly benefitted, so has the CEO, with the ability to create time and space to reflect, cast his eyes to the longer-term horizon, and be available for the team to support them effectively.

[2] Amy C Edmondson. The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth. 2018
[3] High-impact CEO teams: Managing executive polarities to create high-performing senior teams

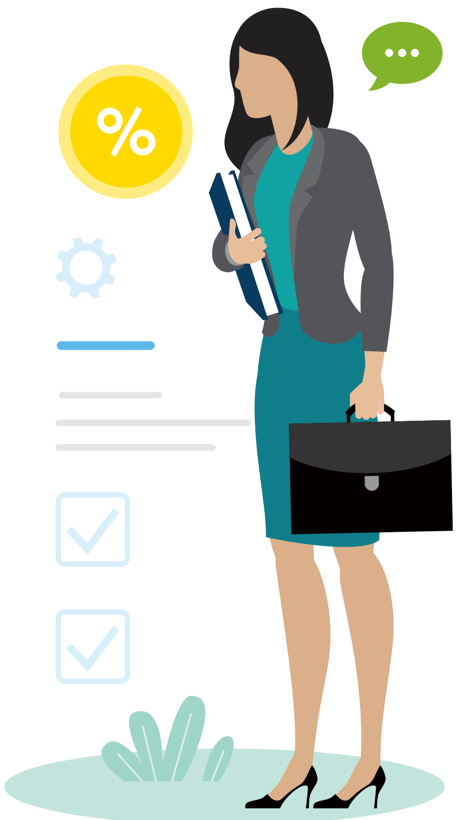
The limits of control

Let us be honest: being a CEO is hard and, from our experience of working with CEOs, it is getting harder. Geopolitical shifts, the disruptive spread of generative AI and the intensifying focus on ESG are just a few of the new pressures that CEOs and their executive teams must contend with – there are plenty of others, depending on sector and geography.

CEOs are held directly accountable for all aspects of their enterprise's performance: the buck stops with them. But the environment in which they operate is subject to forces and influences over which they have little or no control and is often characterized by a lack of observable cause and effect relationship between decisions, actions and outcomes.

For CEOs, these influences include:

- **Chair, board and group CEO dynamics,** especially the leadership style, priorities and dominance of the board chair and wider board. For example, if the chair is risk averse and the CEO wants to transform the enterprise, which almost inevitably means taking risks, there can be real problems. Independent chairs can be more helpful in this regard. If the CEO's view of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the enterprise is not shared by the chair and other board members, inertia and paralysis may result. If there are historical issues of trust between the board and management or if the board's arrangements for overseeing management are overly burdensome or even intrusive, the result can be slow decision-making and disproportionate amounts of management time spent servicing the board.[4] In cases where the CEO leads a business that is part of a wider enterprise or group of businesses, the leadership style of the overall CEO can determine a lot, especially if their priorities are subject to frequent change.
- **Changes in senior leadership.** Where a CEO has established trust, credibility and understanding of the nuances of their decision-making with the chair and/or ultimate CEO, a sudden change at the top can be disruptive, disorientating and exhausting. CEO's have no peers within their organization and their 'circle of trust' is often very small so it is important that they have a network of people they trust, possibly including mentors, an executive coach, critical friends and a peer group of current and former CEOs.
- **Enterprise governance policies, procedures and practices** can heavily influence whether a CEO is successful or not. For example, the extent to which the CEO is empowered and has delegated authority from the board or the group CEO to make decisions over matters such as investments or executive remuneration; or, how long it takes for the board to approve budgets and business plans.
- **Other factors within the enterprise** that may only become apparent when a CEO starts their role – the problems they inherit such as the underlying financial position of the enterprise, organizational culture, lack of capacity, capability and/or capacity and capabilities being in the wrong place.
- **External factors** such as the media, powerful regulators, legislation, economic uncertainty, changing customer habits and preferences, geopolitics and 'black-swan' events such as COVID. (see blog by Anna Marks, Deloitte's Global Board Chair, for further discussion of these external factors).



[4] Board Impact: Understanding and measuring the value of a board.

Humility

So, effective leaders are reflective: they see their enterprise in its wider context; they understand what has delivered any success; they see the role they and their teams can play in shaping the future; and they acknowledge the limitations of their reach. But true and meaningful reflection does not happen without humility.

Leaders and their executive teams need to consciously guard against developing a false sense of confidence about their expertise and leadership effectiveness. Analysis conducted in 2022 on our own leadership-assessment database indicates that the more power leaders hold, the greater the likelihood that they will overestimate their skills and abilities: 28% of senior leaders were at moderate to high risk of becoming over-confident in their own effectiveness compared to just over 10% of front-line leaders.

CEOs prone to this tendency typically default to previously tried-and-tested approaches when confronted with new challenges, regardless of the circumstances. Needless to say, this operating style among top teams can lead to flawed decision-making, inappropriate actions and negative outcomes (see Curiosity).

One of the defining attributes of humility and self-awareness is the recognition of fallibility, the existence of superior knowledge or expertise in other people, and also, critically, of the limits to one's own power and 'rightness'. Effective leaders have the courage to acknowledge their limitations, accept that they do not have all the answers, and remain open to learning from and being advised by others (see Connectedness). This ability can perhaps best be described as 'curiosity', and it is a vital tool for CEOs seeking to set the conditions to manage polarities.

Senior teams are prone to encountering difficulty when the challenges they experience involve opposing values or beliefs that are deeply held. In other words, egos and over-used strengths can become the source or the substance of polarities that then need to be managed.

It is tempting, therefore, to skirt around such challenges, knowing that they have the potential to trigger interpersonal conflicts, despite a collective awareness among team members that dealing with them directly and effectively will be to the benefit of the team. But doing so may mean that the underlying causes then manifest in dysfunctional behaviors among team members. A more constructive approach is for executive teams to acknowledge the conflict and attempt to address the charged interpersonal dynamics.

Curiosity

The capacity to accept and, importantly, display shortcomings in knowledge, is vital for leaders who truly want to understand. Curiosity is closely aligned to humility and reflection, since it requires an admission of limitation: to think or say, 'I wonder why…' is to think or say, 'I don't know why, but I want to find out.'

The CEO's opinion is not right by default:

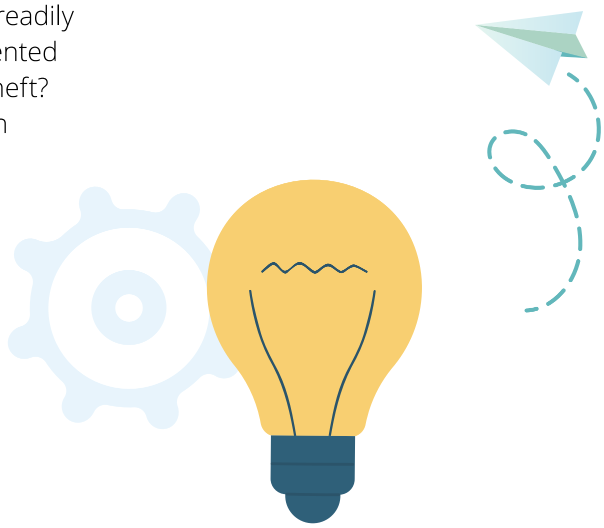
If we have data, let's look at the data. If all we have are opinions, let's go with mine.

Jim Barksdale, the former CEO of Netscape

CEOs who demonstrate a learning mindset and practice curiosity and empathy by asking genuine and sincere questions to enhance their own insight and understanding, promote a climate in which fellow executive team members will actively volunteer their ideas and contributions. This simple-sounding practice can be enormously powerful, creating what Wharton psychologist Adam Grant characterized as a "challenge network", in which a group of people can be trusted to point out individual and collective blind spots and challenge one another's perspectives. This has the positive compounding effect of encouraging humility and a willingness to question and change existing assumptions in the face of new, contradictory evidence, which goes a long way towards addressing polarities within the wider executive group.

The high-profile UK Post Office scandal is a perfect example of how a lack of curiosity at the executive level allowed a manageable situation to snowball into a corporate disaster of epic proportions and tragic consequences. Why did no-one in authority question why so many employees with previously unblemished records would suddenly commit frauds that would unquestionably be discovered? Why were assurances about the new software accepted so readily in the face of an unprecedented uptick in the incidence of theft? Curiosity, empowered by an atmosphere of psychological safety, would surely have led to much closer consideration of alternative explanations and more detailed investigation of the circumstances that lay behind so many honest people being wrongly prosecuted. Of course, the case also highlights how, without curiosity, reflection and courage, wrong analyses and decisions can become locked in and take on a life of their own.

For more detail on this, see the discussion of the team dynamics polarity in High-impact CEO teams.



A polarity to manage or a problem to solve?

Identifying whether an issue is a polarity or a problem is not easy. In our experience, CEOs often prioritize taking action – they 'jump to the fix' – so it can be helpful to pause, take a breath and reflect on the question, 'Could there be a polarity at play here?' If the answer to some or all of the following questions is 'yes', then the issue is likely to be a polarity rather than a problem:[5]

- Are you noticing a strong desire to move from the downsides of one situation to the perceived upsides of another that, on the face of it, is the logical opposite?
- In responding to a certain circumstance, are you majoring on something that you are really good at or that you really value?
- Is a proposed solution the mirrored opposite of the complaints being received?
- Do you believe that a proposed solution will work in the short-term but have concerns that it will not work if taken too far in the medium-to-long term?
- Are you concerned that doing something new will threaten something that you value or the benefits you already have?
- Are people or groups that operate differently or want an alternative to the status quo demonized or seen as misguided?
- In situations that you have been trying to resolve for a while, does the energy feel stuck and is there a stalemate with nothing getting done?

[5] 'Navigating polarities: Using both/and thinking to lead transformation' by Brian Emerson and Kelly Lewis

Connectedness

High-impact sustainable leadership occurs through relationships. Successful CEOs excel at establishing authentic, meaningful connections and building robust networks of strong, trust-based relationships. In doing so, they foster cultures of collaboration and interdependence, increasing the collective leadership capacity of their executive teams and enterprises, while simultaneously protecting against the isolation and insulation that apex leaders can unintentionally establish. Good leaders know who 'knows what's going on' and how to reach out to them. They are intentional about getting outside the 'bubble'. We see this in many countries and cultures – there's even a word for it in Arabic: *Shura*. It alludes to the practice of surveying the opinions of those who are most knowledgeable in order to reach the best decisions.

Despite their responsibility to perceive and then respond to executive polarities, one of the most significant obstacles for CEOs doing this is their seniority. The CEO is almost never the first person to hear about an issue and in some cases may be among the last. Issues typically only reach the attention of the CEO after they have been looked at by several levels of management and leadership.

An associated risk of executives feeling unable to approach the CEO is that they begin to manage around her/him. When The Beach Boys were recording, their former manager (and father to several band members), Murry Wilson, kept aggressively interfering, yelling instructions and demanding adjustments to the way the sound was mixed. The band's long-time sound engineer Chuck Britz had an innovative solution. Since he couldn't stop the meddling, Chuck built a second control panel through which Murry could fiddle and make his adjustments. The yelling stopped when Murry felt he had control, but the sound went unchanged – the second mixing desk was not connected to anything.[6]

It is also true that executives and managers may be reluctant to bring issues to the CEO, particularly if they themselves have failed to address them adequately. CEOs may not realize it, but their very presence and power can serve to shut down discussion and the exchange of opinion. Executives self-censor and withhold valuable insight for fear of the consequences of revealing unfavorable news or presenting a negative or counter-consensus perspective, hence the English expression: don't shoot the messenger.

[6] https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/rhodri-marsden-s-interesting-objects-the-fake-beach-boys-mixer-10085425.html

Silence is not golden

The inevitable consequence of self-censoring and withholding is the emergence of an echo chamber or groupthink. This effect may be compounded if the executive team is relatively homogenous i.e. lacking in gender, background and skill diversity. One simple tactic for identifying this withholding behavior within an executive team is to reflect on a simple question: Why is there silence? Why are high-caliber, senior people not saying anything?

For CEOs, especially 'successful' ones, there is also the risk of listening less than before. This can be an expression of hubris – a belief that their status and track record mean that they probably know what is best – or, paradoxically, a concern that soliciting opinion, insight or advice might be viewed as weakness or ignorance (see Humility above). CEOs have either fallen for their own PR or are concerned with exposing it as misplaced. In this way, a CEO's seniority can serve as a barrier to perception, obstructing their vision out and down, and also blocking the communication of ideas and concerns up and in.

As the CEO, simply inviting and expecting C-suite colleagues to display more courage (see below) and speak up is not an effective way to address the issue. Instead, CEOs should use a combination of the reflection and curiosity we looked at earlier to first notice and then draw out reluctant contributors. CEOs need to understand what is holding executive team members back, acknowledge how their own actions and behaviors have contributed to this situation, before committing to making meaningful changes by encouraging, supporting, and personally role-modeling desired behaviors. One practical example of this that we have seen is when CEOs solicit junior team members' perspectives first, ensuring that they feel valued and that their views are aired and included before other, often louder voices chime in.

Public Living Rooms and the work of Camerados

A more left-field approach to drawing out opinion and perspective from unexpected places could borrow from the work of Camerados, a social movement based in the UK that believes that the answer to problems is each other. Its Public Living Room initiative has reached 246 communities in five countries, including the US, providing an environment with no-agenda, where people can sit down, enjoy a tea or coffee and feel free and welcome.

The movement is based on six simple ideas that have been tried and tested in the toughest of situations. CEOs might like to think how this concept and these guiding ideas could be adapted to the corporate environment.

01.

"It's okay to be a bit rubbish" – We connect much more quickly and stronger with people if we own up to our weaknesses.

02.

"Don't fix each other, we're just alongside" – Camerados understand the value of lending an ear, acknowledging the person and being alongside them in a difficult moment. Sometimes, just being heard is enough.

03.

"Have fun, to be silly is to be human" – Through fun we connect differently with each other and are lifted away from troubles for a while.

04.

"Mix with people who are not like you" – This challenges our thinking, broadens our perspective and makes us less scared of each other. Accepting difference, fighting judgment and division, and learning from one another is critical.

05.

"We can disagree respectfully" – It is okay to say you disagree but do it respectfully.

06.

"If someone is struggling, ask them to help you" – It is highly counter-intuitive but if someone is having a tough time, ask them to look out for you, to do you a favor, or give you advice. They come out of their own problems, they feel trusted, talented and driven with a new purpose.

For more information please visit
https://camerados.org/public-living-room

Connected, but exhausted

It is worth noting that while creating an environment where executives feel empowered to speak up leads to more impactful executive teams, it will not necessarily make things 'easier' for the CEO. In fact, being connected can be tough: many successful CEOs with impactful executive teams describe the emotional burden of being the focal point for everyone's ideas and concerns and say that it can be exhausting. Some may argue that goes with the territory, but being emotionally exhausted is not a great way to feel and not the best state from which to make good decisions, so CEOs should be aware of their own state of mind and practice self-care. As the great John Amaechi, psychologist, consultant and former professional basketball player, once remarked about leader exhaustion: 'You can't pour from an empty cup.'

Nurturing networks

Addressing the growing complexity of business and managing the resulting polarities is not a solo job, regardless of the experience and expertise of the CEO. Instead, leaders need to be able to work across disciplines and boundaries and convene the talents and insights of multiple stakeholders through effective relationships built on trust and respect. Network-savvy leaders realize that they cannot rely exclusively on narrow hierarchical sources of expert information but need to tap into internal and external networks and ecosystems, including engaging with stakeholders outside the organization – customers, suppliers, shareholders – and colleagues far-removed from the executive team who have on-the-ground knowledge of problems and opportunities. A deep understanding of an organization's formal and informal networks and strengthening ties where they matter most has emerged as a key differentiator in environments that increasingly demand coordinated and nuanced responses. Knowing their organization and their teams – and being able to demonstrate that – is an essential component of good leadership. It says that you are *in* the business as well as *of* it.

CEOs who cultivate a network perspective recognize the importance and impact of robust interpersonal connections on their work as leaders and are mindful of the disproportionate influence their actions have on shaping the leadership cultures of their organizations.

As the most senior leaders, CEOs should treat the development and nurturing of their own networks of formal and informal relationships as a priority and allocate time and focus to the task.

Courage

Perhaps the quality most stereotypically associated with good leadership is courage. It is widely recognized in almost every aspect of life and business as a virtue, though exactly what it means to be courageous is less clear. For many it is a version of 'bravery' and, in the context of business, might be loosely defined as the willingness to be bold; to stand out; make decisions and take action; and to own the consequences of decisions – good or bad. Few would argue that CEOs and other senior leaders should all have a healthy measure of this kind of courage.

For example, it is sometimes necessary to take on what will inevitably become an argument: to engage with an issue that will cause disharmony, at least in the short term. It takes courage to discipline or even remove senior or expert figures who wield a powerful but ultimately destructive or negative influence on organizational culture or productivity, especially when the anticipated positive outcomes are not measurable, but the short-term negative fallout is all-too discernable.

But courage also has many less obvious forms, one of which is the courage it takes to be vulnerable: to acknowledge and own one's limitations and seek input from others. It's about leaders putting themselves out there and showing that they don't necessarily know what to do yet or why something is the way it is. This is a form of courage that effective CEOs are happy to display and its power to transform has been explored by the social worker and writer Brené Brown.

Courageous communication

Courageous communication is a hallmark of psychologically safe environments that are defined by trust and mutual respect rather than by hierarchy and authority. Leaders who ask or even demand vulnerability from their executives, but who do not model it themselves are unlikely to get much back in the way of new insights.

Communicating courageously involves a reciprocal combination of advocacy and inquiry. In practice, this means CEOs offering relevant information and ideas, and then inviting others to evaluate their contributions and volunteer alternative perspectives, followed by the respectful consideration of the diversity of shared viewpoints.

In leading by example, and then explicitly inviting executive team members to share their own points of view while encouraging them to constructively challenge one another's ideas, teams come to recognize that it is safe to speak up and this in turn fosters the emergence or discovery of new ideas and perspectives.

As noted earlier, one consequence of failing to develop an environment of psychological safety is that teams succumb to groupthink, where team members simply agree with the dominant perspective and withhold their respective contributions. By definition, holding-back is difficult to observe, but over time the consequences become apparent, typically in the form of "interpersonal friction", with the emergence of relationship tensions that, if left unchecked, can degenerate into destructive reactions towards one another – disrespect, disregard, and a lack of tolerance for diverse perspectives. Indicators of this withholding can include passive aggressive behavior such as individuals tacitly agreeing to decisions in meetings but then not taking the corresponding action, or the prevalence of 'snippy' comments about other team members in one-to-ones with the CEO.

Courageous communication is difficult at first. CEOs will feel exposed, vulnerable and possibly less authoritative than they did – and that takes genuine courage. But if CEOs genuinely want their executive team to speak up productively and to feel valued for doing so – which will itself amplify their willingness to do so – they must model the change they want to see. Leaders who want their executives to be courageous, must first be courageous themselves, and in ways that may not initially feel all that comfortable.

Team dynamics and leadership: the key to managing polarities

Polarities are an expression of the growing complexity around us. Good leaders understand that responding to complexity is rarely about going all out in one direction. Instead, it requires nuance – pushing a little more on some levers and pulling back on others. It is the same with polarities.

A recent study addressing the perennial question 'what determines success', explored the role of driver and car in determining Formula 1 success and illustrates many of the points we have made in this paper. Using a fixed-effects approach, it observed that across eight consecutive seasons the contribution to race outcomes of driver skill and team technology was just 15% and 20% respectively. However, the interaction between these two complementary inputs accounted for 30-40% of the outcome. It can be tempting for CEOs to believe that enterprise success is the result of getting the right people and the right technology or processes in place but what this study suggests is that establishing the right interaction between these vital components can be significantly more important. When it comes to managing polarities, the most powerful impact a CEO can deliver is to set the conditions for team effectiveness; to foster that interaction between team and resources through reflection, humility, curiosity, connectedness and courage.

However, the study also found that luck plays a very significant part in deciding race outcomes; as much as 20-35%. Similarly, CEOs should remember that, even when they believe they have done everything right, their success is still likely to be significantly determined by the least controllable input of all – chance.

As Kipling noted in his classic poem If: 'Triumph' and 'Disaster' are twin imposters to be treated the same way. Success, like failure, does not have to be the result of a purposeful action or decision – sometimes it just happens.

> *We just believed that someday something new would happen, and the rest of it requires some serendipity.*
>
> **Jensen Huang, CEO of Nvidia, on his company's gamble on AI**

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following people for their valuable contributions to this article:

Andrew Hine, Anna Marks, Benjamin Finzi, Carolina Arbelaez DeLa Espriella, David Hill, David Lock KC, Douglas Harrop, Duncan Macaulay, James Stevenson, Jessica Dooley, Joe Ucuzoglu, Jon Dewey, Lord Gerry Grimstone, Maff Potts, Mark Dickinson, Mark Lillie, Nick Turner, Professor Clive Kay, Richard Hird, Sabine Benz, Scott Broughton, Sean Kelly, Sir Jim Mackey, Sir Julian Hartley, Valarie Daunt, Will Smith.

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