1 How Leaders Think and Operate: The Pressures, What Matters, the Obstacles, and the Solutions

Chapter Outline

How the day-to-day world of leaders applies to you, how leaders make decisions, five reasons leaders fail, and six behaviors for leadership success.

The place to begin our discussion on achieving the status of a Trusted Strategic Advisor is, of course, talking about the world of leaders and how they operate.

The nature of leadership has changed in many important ways in the last few decades. Whether a leader is the CEO of a multinational company, a tech start-up, a large local utility, a taxi company, a dairy, or even the superintendent of the school district, gaining these positions used to represent the pinnacle achievement of one's lifetime. There are many powerful realities that drive the world of today's CEO, as we will see in this chapter. Becoming a Trusted Strategic Advisor requires a clear sense of these realities and of the role that CEOs play.

Pressures Leaders Are Under

Look at the CEO's world. It is very, very different than most people imagine: All training for CEOs is on the job.

There really is no school for becoming a CEO.

Talk to those who have other high-level jobs, and many do before they become CEOs. Talk to Chief Operating Officers, watching from next door, second-guessing their bosses, certain they could run the place better. Yet, the moment the top job becomes theirs, the new incumbent instantly realizes that the job is completely different from anything that could possibly have imagined.

The new CEO also notices that they are alone. There is only one CEO in the organization.

Every single day for a CEO is a new learning experience because there is no manual and no one to train them. Surprisingly, the CEO discovers, too, just how limited the freedom to act really is. Wait a minute, you say, the CEO is the boss; they can do anything. The reality is very different. Being a 21st-century CEO is extraordinarily stressful.

Leaders Are Having a Lot Less Fun

A brief tour of the reality of today's executive leadership world will reinforce the fact that these jobs are extremely difficult, challenging, and frustrating.

The average tenure of corporate leaders is declining, as is the average tenure of their key staff. There are two reasons for this, one global, one local. As larger organizations globalize, one of the most significant features of global corporations is the youth of their leadership. According to Bloomberg in early 2023, the age of newly appointed CEOs peaked at 56 in 2021, with quite a few new CEOs over 60. But starting in 2022, the average age of new CEOs fell to 54, with nearly 30% under 50. One S&P 500 CEO was 42.[1]

The second reason is that people in general know a lot more at a significantly younger age than they used to. The amount of knowledge a 35-year-old can bring to the business in the modern era is perhaps two to three times what it was just 25 years ago. These younger managers are indeed capable of leading large business organizations.

CEO turnover dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many companies felt the need for stability and familiarity to get through the crisis. CEO turnover dropped from 11.6% in 2020 to 9.6% in 2021 among Russell 3000 companies. Job turnover hit record highs during the pandemic but not among CEOs. A 2022 article states that CEO turnover began to rise again. Within 2021, there wasn't a single instance of forced exit among Russell 3000 companies.[2]

Another important factor is the succession failure factor. According to Dan Ciampa, former CEO and now counselor and coach to many CEOs and boards of directors, who is a recognized authority on CEO succession, one-third to one-half of new chief executives fail within the first 18 months. Some of these flame-outs can be attributed to poor strategic choices by the new leader. Some result when the board makes an imperfect choice or overestimates a candidate's abilities and potential, hiring a leader whose skill set doesn't fit the context. Sometimes the new leader is obviously responsible for the problems created, other times the board is rightly blamed.[3]

A close look shows that it is rarely that simple. When the succession fails, responsibilities are almost always shared.

Fewer than half of involuntarily retired executives regain a comparable position in their lifetime. More and more management literature is being devoted to these individuals and their inability to recover following sudden, unplanned separation from their top jobs.

Non-operational issues, for example, globalization, adverse legislation, and anti-corporate activism, are intruding with greater regularity. These interruptions are soft, highly emotional, and require an entirely different attitude by management. The Sarbanes-Oxley legislation, enacted by the United States Congress in 2002, introduced a distinctly moral focus into daily operations, an approach that continues to antagonize and irritate many business leaders. This moral focus is frustrating for staff functions to discuss, decode, and decipher. The Sarbanes-Oxley law forced integrity and compliance concerns forward, basically through threat of criminal prosecution. This legislation has gotten management's attention, at every level, but especially at the top, where the greatest risk now rests.

One of the major impacts in this moral focus on leadership is the extraordinary expansion of compliance activities and requirements in many companies combined with often very intricate codes of conduct. They are very intensive and ongoing activities as managements attempt to clarify what specific behaviors are required as well as specific behaviors that are prohibited. The Trusted Strategic Advisor is deeply engaged in these now operationalized Human Resource activities and often business mandates. The role of a Trusted Strategic Advisor includes helping new CEOs orchestrate their first 100–300 days in office.

Another facet of the non-operational issue for large local and national companies, but especially for the global company, is the rise in power and influence of non-government organizations (NGOs). This has introduced a whole new level of stresses, strains, and potentially negative visibilities for business organizations.

In large organizations, globalization increasingly requires staff functions to work together across intellectual, international, and intercultural lines, and around the clock. It is definitely becoming more complicated to be a senior staff advisor in large organizations. The demands on the leader have increased significantly. On the one hand, they are asked to do more, faster, while on the other they are forced to reduce staff support as an indicator of their ability to be successful.

With all these distractions, coaching and counseling leaders require important fundamental shifts in mindset. The trusted advisor needs to realize that the CEO, while still captain of the ship, is operating under increasingly complicated navigation rules and pressures.

The Limits of Leadership

Deciding on a course of action is one thing, but getting the organization ready, willing, and able to move in that direction is an entirely different task and challenge. Successful leaders and their advisors learn to recognize the limits of CEO effectiveness.

One of the first large companies Jim worked for retained him to develop a marketing strategy for one of its highly technical product divisions, which was beginning to plateau as more competition entered the field. Jim and another person spent significant time developing several unique approaches for the organization to consider. When they made their presentation to senior management, it was enthusiastically received. The senior managers were engaged in conversations, asked questions, actually remarked at how sensible and important all of the ideas they presented seemed to be. It was one of the best presentations Jim can recall making in all the years he has been a consultant.

They all went to lunch together, and Jim sat next to the CEO. He seemed quite pleased. So Jim asked him, "With the reception this morning, how much of what we proposed is likely to be initiated?" Without hesitating, the CEO said, "I'd guess about four or five percent."

Jim was absolutely stunned. In fact, he had that sinking feeling in his stomach; you know the one where you have made a great mistake. After a brief hesitation, he asked, "Did I make a mistake? Did I misunderstand what happened this morning?" The CEO's answer was again quick and profound. He said, "Look, I'm just the CEO here. This place is run by the 7,500 employees who show up to work every day. What they will want to do and can do will determine the direction we're going. I'm 57 years old; if I stay healthy, I'll probably be CEO here for another seven to eight years. Absent some catastrophe such as tremendous business loss, stock drop, or takeover, if I can move this organization five to seven degrees in new directions every year, I will have made a substantial contribution during my brief term as leader. We're kind of like an aircraft carrier," he said. "Once we move in a direction, it takes a lot of energy to change that direction. Of course, torpedoes, hurricanes, or collisions can make a big difference, if they come along."

Leaders recognize and work to maintain the momentum of their organization and what it takes to change, reshape, and perfect that momentum.

Leader aspirations and behaviors often create an exuberance among staff functions that overestimates situations and is overly optimistic about results and about what can be changed. The leader's immediate staff often seems eager to simply move key organizational components or ideas around according to some checklist or set of theoretical ideas, based on what they assume the boss wants. The lesson of the CEO's 5 to 7% is that the greatest successes are often, at first, underwhelming. While much is desired, far less can actually be achieved; yet meaningful progress will still be made.

The Loneliness of Leadership

Leaders are often lonely. The concept of leadership loneliness will echo throughout the pages of this book. Several predictable consequences occur as an individual is elevated within an organization.

First, the sense of isolation and loneliness tends to increase because fewer people are privy to information at higher levels. Mitigating this isolation of leadership is one of the key roles for the trusted advisor.

Second, a filtration and sanitizing process occurs as information is passed up to the top. Most corporate advisory boards and boards of directors include a significant percentage of CEOs as peers to senior leaders. This facilitates the sharing of experiences between those who have similar relevant life and work histories. The presence of these senior peers often compensates for the lack of information that CEOs generally have as they make decisions about the futures of their organizations. The late Jack Welch, being interviewed on public television shortly after he had retired from his chairmanship at General Electric, was asked by an interviewer, "What was the worst part about being chairman of this huge U.S. corporation?" Welch answered without a second's hesitation, "Being the last to know."[4] This circumstance does tend to be a great frustration to those who lead.

Third, the higher the altitude, the thinner the leader's skin. Increasing seniority often comes with decreasing tolerance for questions, questioners, those who push back, and people with negative approaches. This can be a fatal flaw in management leadership. It is a major cause for isolation at the top and a powerful barrier to knowing what really is happening at various levels in the organizations.

Fourth, as managers advance and become senior managers and leaders, the "yes, sir/ma'am" mentality that pervades these high-level environments leads to an exaggerated sense of their own abilities: They believe that they are good communicators, financially savvy, and aware of their surroundings and the risks they face. They have enough mathematical competence to get along. Absent sensible and meaningful evaluation, what else are they to believe?

In this environment, at this altitude, it is a principal role of the Trusted Strategic Advisor to recognize these four circumstances and to constantly, relentlessly, and endlessly work against these patterns.

What Leaders Do

The CEO has two powerful assignments in any organization. The first job is to look to the future; that is, go over the horizon to see what is out there and then come back and tell the organization a bit about where it is headed, perhaps, what some of the pitfalls might be and, most importantly, what some of the deadlines are.

The second principal task of the CEO is to find the people-power required to achieve the organization's mission. Unlike the manager, whose job is to achieve objectives, complete programs, and work inside of the box, the leader's role is to work almost exclusively outside of the box in this energizing arena of strategy, future accomplishment, and managing the destiny of the organization.

The big decision work of executives, that is, those who execute at the top of the organization, is pretty much done by the time the operating budgets are in place, the program established, and a course for progress is being set. This is because, of course, others do the implementation. The leader's job shifts to observation, education, course correction, evaluation, inspiration, and motivation.

In Fred's executive coaching practice he has noted a pattern: The higher a leader goes in an organization, the less success and failure is driven by technical competence and the more it is driven by communication: by the ability to inspire; to align people around a common purpose; to keep people energized. By the time one is at the very top, Fred has found, communication can take up to 80% of the leader's time. And a big part of that is repeating the same theme over time. Many leaders hate repeating themselves. But Fred admonishes then: One of the burdens of leadership is to have a very high tolerance for repetition.

Indeed, Jack Welch's successor at General Electric, Jeff Immelt, said frequently that every leader needs to constantly remind their people of the few most important things to the organization.[5]

Leadership success depends on leader-driven communication. In fact, personal communication, in good times and bad, is the most powerful tool leaders have.

When Jim examines how to move organizations, successful leader communicators follow a fairly interesting pattern of mostly verbal communication and participation with their employees, executives, and others (see Table 1.1).

The math is correct, even though unusual, because the job of a leader is a 24/7 proposition. Anyone who does anything on a 24/7 basis, by definition, can accomplish substantially more than any peer or non-leader working more regular hours.

As you can tell by this distribution of time, the CEO and senior leadership will be spending significant amounts of time explaining, coaching, interpreting, reiterating, and monitoring the progress of their strategies, plans, and outcomes. This is far different from the notion that these senior people are busy making big decisions every single day about things that can change the company's direction or the company's history. Even during enormously stressful times like mergers, acquisitions, takeovers, or divestitures, the actual number of major decisions executives make that matter is extremely small. It is the failure to communicate even these small decisions that is often the root cause of much bigger operational failures.

Table 1.1 Jim's Empirical Analysis of Top Leaders' Communication Activity

Decision-Making:	5%
Articulating:	40%
Coaching/Teaching/Motivating:	40%
Forecasting (Guessing):	5%
Admiration Building:	6%
Reputation Repair:	1%
Repeating, Re-emphasizing, Re-interpreting:	20%
Total:	117%

Recently Jim was interviewed by a top management team for a very large company that was heading into labor negotiations. The prospects were fairly gloomy. The board was concerned about conflicting approaches that had been suggested, and they wanted to hear Jim's. When Jim finished explaining his concept to them, their first reaction was, "Well Jim, from what you propose, we're going to spend a lot of time talking to employees." Jim's response was, "What else have you got to do that matters?" They laughed as they realized this was something of crucial importance and they really had to make the time to get it done.

Leadership Is About Tomorrow

Why is it that when the boss walks in the room, people's voices drop, everybody looks in that direction, and a sense of anticipation tends to build? It is because the only one in the room who knows where we are going, in other words, about tomorrow, is the leader or CEO who just walked in.

We all want to know where we will be tomorrow. In fact, whenever a boss or leader enters the room, the first obligation is to share some of the latest news that only the boss gets to know or would happen to have. This is, in fact, one of the most powerful reasons why being a Trusted Strategic Advisor is such an interesting position to hold.

You can only get that future view of where we are headed when standing next to and being around the person at the head of the line, the person who is making the decisions and choosing the future.

Leaders work in a future tense. The CEO is the chief strategist, and strategy is always about tomorrow's goals. This is because leadership is truly about tomorrow and what lies ahead. Contrast this with much of staff activity in your own experience. Some are busy defending yesterday and making excuses for things that have not yet happened, while still trying to leverage their way forward without the kind of forward-thinking and extraordinary insight leaders tend to expect.

Leaders avoid yesterday's thinking because it can be very confusing and unproductive. Besides, yesterday is already owned by everybody else from their own perspective. The past is owned by others intellectually, sometimes physically, perhaps financially, and certainly emotionally. And everyone's perception of yesterday is unique and almost always at odds with the perception of others, especially the victims. The fascination of leadership and leaders is that most of their work is in territory yet to be owned or occupied by anyone. This is the definition of tomorrow. It is an intellectual area where people can come together and where engineering solutions and ideas are still possible because tomorrow is where most people want to be in some positive, constructive way.

The Trusted Strategic Advisor constantly needs to decide whether to be a force for yesterday or a force for tomorrow. The closer you are in tune with tomorrow, the more likely your compatibility will be with the leader you are advising.

Making It Up as We Go

One of the greatest surprises about leaders is that much of what they do is more or less made up on the spot. Jim discovered this early in his career, when he had the chance to coach the CEO of a large insurance company in the Midwest. To coach at this level, you have to meet the person you will be coaching ahead of the scheduled session and there has to be almost an instant chemistry. It is about chemistry—can you work together; do you have this feeling that you are both on the same page?

Jim's "beauty contest" interview with this CEO took place in his wonderful, exotic office at the top of a very tall building. The view was amazing. The office had three full window walls; it was awesome. It was also really intimidating. As they began talking, it was pretty evident that the CEO had a "visitor management approach" because visitors asked the same questions about the view every time.

The moment a visitor starts to speak or ask questions, the CEO takes the visitor's arm, leads him or her first to window number one, then around the perimeter answering all the questions about each wall—pointing out landmarks, history, useful details—at about 45–60 seconds per window. As he began explaining the third window view, Jim's brain was screaming at him to, "Say something really important, real soon. Only one wall left, and that one has the door." Jim's mental voice commanded, "If you want to get this job you better ask an important question now."

So, Jim managed to interrupt the CEO with a question. "Tell me something, do you always know what to do?" he asked. "You run a company of

14,000 employees; I have a company of 14 employees. My people expect me to solve today's problems and move ahead for tomorrow, following a plan. Do you know what to do every minute?"

He looked at Jim, smiled, and said, "Don't you ever tell anybody this, but I think the board actually hired me because I had a good sense of where we would need to go, and at least half of my important decisions would be carried out by people who really knew what they were doing. They felt that I could estimate and make the right decisions in the grey areas at least 25 percent of the time. The remaining 25 percent they sort of left to me to find out for myself."

"But I'll tell you something," he continued, pointing at the door, "Every employee in this company thinks I have the answers. They think that I have a plan. I've got news for you, there is no plan. But if I were going to tell this to the people that work for me, they wouldn't believe it for a minute."

What Jim learned from that encounter, and it has been with him ever since, is the recognition that CEOs in particular are making it up 25 percent of the time. They have to create what is next. They are making it up based on their experience or lack of it, on their concerns or their fears, and oftentimes on the perceived opportunities as well. This is an extremely interesting insight to have. When Jim is in meetings, and the meetings are wandering off track, once in a while he will turn to the CEO and ask if this is the part we know how to do, or the part we are making up as we go. It is amazing how stunningly accurate this comment can be.

It happens every day in the executive suite, and it is something we should think about because it is one of the reasons that they let us in. They expect us to help them move the business ahead every single day, to help figure out what to do next.

Daily Intrusions

There are tasks CEOs face every day that only they can handle. These tasks are intrusions in the CEO's day. There are four kinds of daily task intrusions: soft intrusions, hard intrusions, nagging problems, and what we call, "career-defining moments."

Soft intrusions include:

- Negotiations with employees
- Anti-corporate government action
- Nagging negative news
- Personal, professional, or corporate embarrassment—real or potential
- Managing the moral decision-making elements of leadership
- Rumors
- Unfounded or even founded allegations

Hard intrusions are more operational:

- A major stock price drop
- Job actions and walkouts
- Major product market loss or product failures
- Other serious market problems
- Departure of a giant client or customer
- Failure to gain crucial government approvals
- Mergers or takeovers
- Preparing for litigation

Nagging problems are:

- Aggressive activist attacks, maybe on an individual executive or one board members
- Disgruntled employee or whistleblower problems
- Negative trends in stock and business performance
- Persistent bad news
- Bullying on social media. These kinds of problems just sort of hang on and gnaw at the CEO every day.

Career-defining moments:

- Sudden stock price manipulation
- Criminal indictments
- Serious people failures
- Serious high-profile product failures, recalls, or deaths
- Embarrassing, needless, obviously stupid events for which the CEO is held accountable.

It is amazing what takes up the CEO's day but they generally fall into these four categories. It is helpful to use this category approach, because among your key functions is to identify, prevent, preempt, correct, suggest, or develop solution options for these daily problems and issues.

Why Leaders Fail

While we are talking about the CEO's main responsibilities, we also ought to talk about why CEOs lose their positions. At the present time, CEO turnover is starting to rise again after a down period during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Forbes* and other business media occasionally publish studies of the principal reasons CEOs get fired or are asked to resign. Five reasons tend to stand out.

1. Failure to Deliver on What Was Promised or Expected When They Got the Job

Boards of directors of businesses and organizations, as well as shareholders, are becoming increasingly impatient with nonperformance. The risks are high, the stakes are high, mistakes are costly, and there is a lot of talent available these days to take on the visions of organizations. As a trusted advisor, one of your key roles is to look for signs of nonperformance and bring them to the attention of those you are counseling.

2. Over-Optimism

CEOs and those around them tend to be overly optimistic in the way they describe their progress, minimize obstacles, underrate opposition forces, and deny the weaknesses in their organization, structure, strategies, and operations. Eventually, the metrics of performance or the truth from the line managers of a business will reduce and clarify whatever over-optimism CEOs and their advisors might provide. Here again, the role of the Trusted Strategic Advisor is to take a pragmatic view of performance and accomplishment. This guidance helps the CEO gravitate more toward reality.

3. People Problems

The CEO's key job is to find and put the right people in the right jobs to accomplish the objectives. Failure to accomplish this will cause the organizational effort to fragment or simply not to form. Teamwork suffers; people stop trying to pull together. Important talent becomes demotivated and unproductive—or leaves the organization. New talent becomes nearly impossible to recruit.

4. Distractions

This usually means too many roles outside the company on boards and commissions, giving speeches, or other outside interests that get in the way of the CEO focusing on what needs to be done when big decisions have to be made. Jim often characterizes these behaviors as being AWOL, Absent Without Leave.

5. Stuck in the Mud

Usually a mysterious category, but it has an obvious result—nothing is happening, progress is not being made, and people may be leaving. For some reason, extremely talented individuals in one business environment failed by creating paralysis in another.

This list of reasons CEOs get fired shows clearly what is expected of them. They need to deliver on the bold promises they made or that the board expects in order to move the organization ahead, face and clearly define reality, build effective teams, stay focused, and get good at figuring out what to do next.

How Leaders Achieve Success

Today's leaders have to be successful. They will pay attention to you if you can demonstrate that you have a good sense of what matters to them in achieving success.

Every CEO and leader assembles their own set of ingredients to help drive them toward the success they seek. Some of these ingredients are intellectual, some of these ingredients are financial, some of these ingredients are emotional, and many of these ingredients are behavioral.

In observing leaders, and simply tying common behaviors to those who succeed, and the lack of certain behaviors to those who fail or who fail to succeed significantly, it appears to us that there are six crucial ingredients to CEO success. The absence of any one of these will severely threaten the sense of success to be achieved, and perhaps even trigger additional negative behaviors by boards of directors and stakeholders like employees, customers, or shareholders. These six ingredients are really powerful in terms of CEO success. And so they matter a great deal to leaders.

1. Focus

It is what Price Pritchett calls the 95/5 rule. Ninety-five percent of what we do every day probably does not really matter much. Focus means relentlessly dealing with the 5% that is really crucial, really essential, and really important. We believe this is one of the most powerful disciplines of leadership—and when you consider the daily intrusions outlined above, often very difficult to achieve.

2. Limit the Number of Objectives to Be Achieved

A leader can accomplish only a limited number of incremental steps every day. And, it makes little sense to commit to a whole series of major objectives recognizing that they will be unable to manage the many details necessary to get them all done. Fewer important objectives to achieve means a manageable number of incremental steps can be accomplished. Success is more likely.

3. Build Support and Create Followers

One of the great downfalls of CEOs is the inability to manage the people dimension. There have to be supportive people in place around these CEOs to make their work successful. People can stay together in support of the CEO if they can communicate constantly. Maintaining followers is a daily process because most employees do not know, cannot know, do not care, or cannot care about what the CEO cares about or does. It is up to the CEO to verbally communicate what matters with great intensity, continuity, and repetition. It is up to the Trusted Strategic Advisor to help design the key decisions, strategies, and messaging to keep the pack moving in the right direction.

4. Fix What Is Broken Fast

Do it now. When things go in the ditch, pull them out now. If it is even likely that something might be cracked, broken, or slipping into the ditch, CEOs act preemptively to fix it now. A related concept is to change fast. In other words, if things are moving in the marketplace in ways that have not been anticipated, leaders move appropriately, move quickly, and in some degree try to move ahead of the game once they understand the direction it is going, or figure out a better direction. Fix it now; challenge it now; start it now; stop it now. Leaders learn that most strategies fail because of timidity, hesitation, and indecision.

5. Finish What You Start

The number one reason that CEOs lose their jobs is because they do not or cannot get done what they promised when they got the job. So the skill here is to do less but get more of those fewer goals done. And for the key advisor in particular, this is a very tough challenge because most are idea people. We are the folks who are always thinking up new things to do. For the boss, this is a problem. You walk in bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for your Monday briefing session, and you spend half that time laying out new ideas for the boss to think about. The moment you leave the room, the boss almost explodes.

6. Start to Stop What's Not Working or Not Going to Succeed

Failure to make the tough decisions early can leave a leader with a list of wonderful achievements and a list of abject failures. Organizational attention almost always becomes captured by the failures, regardless of the levels of success achieved. Mistakes and unexpected outcomes tend to suck up resources from other more successful projects.

Be very careful here; many of the most important inventions and discoveries ever have come from mistakes and unexpected results. If you're interested in what some of them are just Google, Successful Mistakes in History or a similar title. Then you'll see what an amazing list of things we have that have saved our lives and done other things for us. All are the result of mistakes and errors, as opposed to planned scientific protocols.

Not only has the CEO failed to finish the work they were expected to complete last week, but now there are four or five new ideas on the desk, which, it would appear, others fully expect the CEO to work with and potentially accomplish. Before a CEO can get to next week, this week and last week have to be finished first.

Ask yourself what you do when you are at the table with the CEO or senior leaders. Do you push your staff function, or do you help them focus, keep objectives limited, build support, fix what is broken, and finish the work at hand? If you are not doing one of these six things, they probably think you are wasting their time.

The CEO's daily educational track is what they learned from their peers, and from the one, two, or three people who are guiding touchstones in their lives. Do you know who your CEO's touchstone people are? Do you know who the people are that the CEO turns to when there is a crucial question to ask or when they want to avoid internal resources? Can you help reverse the inevitable isolation from useful daily information the CEO often feels?

Jim is occasionally asked, "Does the trusted advisor need to be smarter than the leader him/herself?" The answer is that the vast majority of Trusted Strategic Advisors have little, if any, desire to be a leader in the first place. Their sole goal is to be the best number two, the best associate/assistant, the best helper, encourager, and success driver possible. Well, you might ask, "Why would one want to become a trusted advisor instead of the leader, in their own right?" The answer seems to be that leadership is simply beyond that which trusted advisors seek to achieve. In reality, for those advisors who wish to be leaders, there is ample opportunity to move in that direction, and those CEOs and leaders they have helped will undoubtedly be instrumental in moving these people along.

In our experience, it is far less likely that a consultant will become a leader over time, simply due to the fascinating power, access, and insight being close to leaders tends to generate. In reality there are far greater opportunities for trusted advisors than there are leadership positions available. Adjusting one's expectations and temperament to these very influential positions provides a very interesting, dynamic, meaningful, and important professional life.

Implications and Applications for the Advisor

At the outset of this chapter, we suggested that you focus on the realities that surround the leaders at the top of the organizational pyramid. Of course, they enjoy great power and prestige. But that aura of power is tempered by the advisor's perspective and temperament. Top leaders are under increasing pressure, and their job security is often tenuous. They may have some vision of where they want to go, but they know they need help to see the future. They will be making up a significant portion of the goals as they go along. They can feel tremendously isolated, and the levers at their command can only nudge the organization to change direction.

If you are serious about advising people at senior levels, one of your great preoccupations must become the study of leaders, leadership, and leadership activity. It is surprising how few staff people truly study their leaders and leadership, what operating people do every day, and how leaders become and stay leaders. Studying leadership involves a very practical and ongoing curiosity about:

- Who leaders are
- Where they come from
- What their relationships are
- How they came to be where they are

It also requires understanding what leaders are trying to accomplish, what motivates them, how they think about various issues, topics, and circumstances, and the behaviors you can expect to forecast as you get to know them.

Question for You to Consider

How do you study leadership? Our suggestion is to begin by looking at the kind of literature and sources leaders have and use to be informed. Here is a list of publications CEOs tell us they routinely review:

- *Baron's Magazine*
- *Berkshire Hathaway's Annual Report* (any year)

- *BoardRoom Magazine*
- *Directors and Boards Magazine*
- *Executive Book Summaries* (monthly summaries of new business books)
- *Fast Company Magazine*
- *Forbes Magazine*
- *Fortune Magazine*
- *Harvard Business Review*
- *Sloan Management Review*
- *The Wall Street Journal* (every day)
- Writings and books by former CEOs and other leaders

When queried about the most important business writers and thinkers, those they pay attention to, these are the names that crop up continuously:

- Peter F. Drucker
- Indra Nooyi (influential voice on corporate governance)
- Mary Barra (first female CEO of a major auto company—General Motors)
- Kara Swisher (leading interrogator of Silicon Valley power)
- John Kotter (Harvard)
- Warren Bennis (consultant)
- James Collins (consultant)
- Sheryl Sandberg (architect of Meta's business model)
- Stephen Covey
- Tom Peters (business philosopher)
- Joseph Rotman (Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto)
- Noel Tichy (author, lecturer, human resource executive)

Some of Fred's favorites include:

- Retired U.S. Army Four-Star General Stanley McChrystal
- Retired U.S. Navy Four-Star Admiral James Stavridis

Among the few historical individuals whose biographies leaders are often interested in are:

- Winston Churchill
- Benjamin Franklin
- Alexander Hamilton
- General Douglas MacArthur
- Theodore Roosevelt

Pick your list. All of these kinds of writings are extremely helpful in understanding the mentality, attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations of leaders.

Studying leadership should lead you to discover more interesting ways to be of service, create more powerful and purposeful ideas and suggestions, and a deeper understanding of how those you advise, and you can do bigger and better things on a regular basis. Only then can you become a trusted advisor. In the next chapter, we will look at what leaders will expect from you in this role.