



The Motive

Why So Many Leaders Abdicate Their Most Important Responsibilities

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Bestselling business author Patrick Lencioni garnered fame for offering storytelling analogies to inspire leaders and to drive home his insights about leadership. Picking up where Aesop left off, Lencioni uses the familiar form of a fable to explain why top leaders, especially CEOs, should always let their mission be their greatest motivation. His inspirational storybook will help executives identify their purposeful motives and embrace their duties as servant leaders.

Take-Aways

- Shay Davis became a CEO for the wrong reason – but he did something about it.
- Every CEO should focus on action.
- Bad CEOs attend to fun tasks they enjoy and avoid tough tasks they don't enjoy.
- Executives want to become CEOs because they see the job as a reward – a bad motive – or they want to help others – a good motive.
- “Reward-centered” executives often abdicate five kinds of responsibility: Developing leaders, managing subordinates, having tough conversations, running great meetings and communicating well.
- Leadership means service to others.

Summary

Shay Davis became a CEO for the wrong reason – but he did something about it.

Shay Davis had been the CEO at Golden Gate Security, a San Francisco firm, for only six months, and things weren't going well. He worried that his hold on his new job was shaky.

As CEO, Davis was responsible for the firm's progress, and it wasn't growing as fast as other local security companies. Davis's company could not compete with All-American Alarm, the dominant player in the home and small business security market. Davis believed he had less than a year to make Golden Gate Security a winner before the board bounced him out.

"Please don't be a leader, unless you're doing it for the right reason, and you probably aren't!"

In need of expert business advice, Davis called Lighthouse Partners, a well-respected California consultancy. Unfortunately for Davis, Del Mar Alarm, a San Diego firm that routinely got under his skin, was one of Lighthouse Partners' most prominent clients. Davis could not stand Del Mar Alarm's CEO, Liam Alcott, a British citizen, whose profitability made him the subject of constant press adulation.

Davis was jealous that Alcott seemed so great at running a home-security firm since the job was challenging him so much. Amy Stirling, the Lighthouse Partners' consultant who took Davis's call, told him she'd need Alcott's approval before she could speak with him.

Stirling didn't call back. Instead, Alcott himself called Davis, who felt annoyed pretty quickly. He didn't like Alcott's accent or affable tone. He thought the British executive was a pretentious phony.

Alcott told Davis he had no problems with his consultancy, or Stirling, working with another California home-security firm. Before they began, however, Alcott said he and Davis should get together and go over some CEO leadership lessons Stirling had taught him. Davis hated this idea. The last thing he wanted was to get together with Alcott.

Nevertheless, the British CEO convinced Davis to meet. He pointed out that if they got together, they might be able to figure out how to slow the influence of All-American Alarm, their mutual competitor. And, Alcott said, they could share advice.

They met the next week at Davis's office. Alcott asked what Davis wanted to learn from Lighthouse Partners. Davis said he worried that his company, Golden Gate, was not as productive as it could be, and maybe the consultants at Lighthouse could help him spark sales. Alcott asked Davis to share his financials and to be candid, so he could be of genuine help. To overcome Davis's natural reluctance, he revealed his own firm's financial fundamentals.

Davis was amazed at how much better Del Mar Alarm's numbers were than his, and felt ashamed of the numbers he outlined to Alcott. The Del Mar Alarm CEO asked Davis why Golden Gate was doing so poorly. Davis said his San Francisco home security system market was tougher than Alcott's San Diego market.

Alcott didn't buy it. He told Davis that many of Golden Gate's salespeople were bringing in less revenue than Del Mar's staff, and that Davis's customer and employee turnover rates and marketing costs were much too high. In response, Davis asked if Alcott could see anything in his methods that were undermining his company. He asked Alcott to be candid. Alcott said he'd try to help with a diagnosis, but first wanted to share what he had learned from Stirling.

Every CEO should focus on action.

Alcott told Davis that Stirling had taught him to focus on his own performance. As far as Amy Stirling was concerned, he said, CEO doesn't stand for chief "executive officer." It stands for chief "executing officer."

Alcott asked Davis: "What is the most important part of what you do?" Davis replied that he paid close attention to the firm's numbers and its sales, marketing and M&A activities. He worked on maintaining positive relationships with his board members and the "private equity guys."

"It's hard to hate someone you don't know, but Shay figured he was getting pretty good at it in regard to Liam Alcott."

He found other tasks less important, including, "management, dealing with employee issues and politics," as well as meeting with customers from small companies and multi-unit housing enterprises. Alcott asked Davis to rank his activities by importance and by the joy he took in them. Davis ranked "management and leading" close to the bottom in both value and joy. Alcott said his own rankings were once similar, but his point of view had changed completely.

Alcott told Davis that managing and leading are now the only CEO activities on his list. He leaves everything else to his management team, unless an executive is struggling and needs a hand. Davis didn't agree with that strategy. He suggested that he and Alcott embraced different, but equally valid, approaches.

Alcott started by discussing meetings, which Davis hated. Alcott loved meetings and found them important, but he warned that bad meetings are lethal. Davis confessed he tried to avoid meetings. In fact, he saw being able to skip meetings as one of the top perks of being a CEO.

Davis suggested taking Alcott on a tour of Golden Gate Security's offices. As he walked around, Alcott evaluated the internal atmosphere as "stale," with little interaction or connection among employees. Davis introduced Alcott to CFO Jackie Loureiro. Davis asked her for a quick commentary about his management style. She said: "Hands off," until there's trouble. Loureiro said she didn't like Davis's meetings, and Davis joked that he didn't like them either.

Over lunch, Alcott asked how Loureiro compared to Davis's other executives in her ability to get along with her peers. "She drives half of my team crazy," Davis said. He admitted that she's "blunt," and that he wished she were more diplomatic. He said they had discussed it, but his other

executives also had negative issues. Alcott replied that no one on his staff is perfect either, but “a CEO’s job is to help them get better.”

Davis didn’t want to hear that. He responded that his senior executives had high-level experience and didn’t need babysitting. Alcott told him that helping executives improve was any CEO’s core task. “And it’s your job.”

As their conversation continued in subsequent days, they both recognized they had vastly different ideas about how to be a CEO, and about what a CEO’s duties should be. Davis focused on marketing, sales and M&A, his areas of comfort and expertise. For him, this was the “fun stuff.”

In contrast, by expertly coaching and managing his senior executives, Alcott dealt with his firm’s challenges, even though that part of his work was not particularly enjoyable. He believed that one of a CEO’s main jobs is to manage his team, “making sure they work together and aren’t getting bogged down by politics and confusion.”

Davis responded by describing how much he disliked those tasks.

Alcott lowered the boom on Davis. He reminded him that he wasn’t enthusiastic about his position; that his meetings were unproductive and dull; that he didn’t spend sufficient energy caring for his executives or his teams; that he avoided difficult conversations; and that, at best, he was apathetic.

Davis realized that he was ill-suited to be CEO and had set out to attain that position for the wrong reasons, seeing it as a prize, not a duty. Being CEO is a heavy responsibility.

Davis came to an unexpected conclusion: he would get out of the CEO role. He realized he didn’t really like being CEO all that much. Now impressed with Alcott, he ended up – at his own suggestion – coming to work for Alcott in marketing and M&A. This turned out to be the perfect role for him.

Bad CEOs attend to fun tasks they enjoy and avoid tough tasks they don’t enjoy.

As the above business fable illustrates, many CEOs and other leaders are happy to engage in the activities they enjoy, but unwilling to handle tough jobs they dislike. Almost always, this is because they lack proper motivation for becoming leaders in the first place.

“Too many extremely talented CEOs squander their opportunities to lead their organizations because they see their job as a playground for their curiosities and predilections.”

Alan Mulally, who used to be in charge of Boeing’s commercial division, and later ran the Ford Motor Company, which he helped to turn around, is a model business executive. He regards

leadership as a gift. His attitude is 180 degrees different from that of many CEOs who see their leadership positions as a “right and a reward.”

Executives want to become CEOs because they see the job as a reward – a bad motive – or they want to help others – a good motive.

People generally become senior leaders either to make things better for the people they lead or to gain prized executive status, a rank they believe they’ve earned through impressive skills and years of hard work. They’re irresponsible and negligent, so their organizations and employees suffer. These CEOs love the spotlight and admiration, but if they don’t attend to the tough tasks, they leave a big vacuum. Not all bad CEOs share the same motivation. Some want attention or power or fun. Unworthy CEOs don’t look or act the same, but they’re all ineffective.

“Reward-centered” executives often abdicate five kinds of responsibility: Developing leaders, managing subordinates, having tough conversations, running great meetings and communicating well.

“Responsibility-centered” leaders accept the difficult challenges of leadership. In contrast, reward-oriented leaders shy away from their duties. They fall short in five areas:

1. **“Developing the leadership team”** – Many reward-oriented leaders delegate this responsibility or fail to set up strong leadership teams, although team building is essential to organizational success.
2. **“Managing subordinates (and making them manage theirs)”** – Too many leaders regard this as micromanagement. It’s not. Managing the people you lead keeps them on track and working efficiently.
3. **“Having difficult and uncomfortable conversations”** – No one likes to confront others. But since managing a team involves developing and maintaining relationships with a broad spectrum of personalities, such conversations are essential.
4. **“Running great team meetings”** – Many people hate meetings, but quality meetings are necessary. They enable leaders to make crucial decisions and handle pressing issues.
5. **“Communicating constantly and repetitively to employees”** – Leaders must let their employees know what they require and what the organization needs them to do.

Leadership means service to others.

In recent years, people have come to speak more often about the concept of “servant leadership.” To approach leadership correctly, executives must understand that it automatically implies serving others. Servant leadership is fundamental; if you’re a leader, it’s what you do. Leadership must focus on the people whom leaders lead; not just CEOs, but all leaders.

About the Author

Patrick Lencioni, the author of 11 business books with nearly seven million copies sold worldwide, is founder and president of The Table Group consultancy.



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