

Build Culture, Lead With Passion

How you can recognize and cultivate intangible skills to be a better AE.

In a previous column and at my presentation at the March AE Institute in Denver, I revealed the results of my study that showed that highly successful REALTOR® CEOs possess at least one of 10 intangible skills. Some skills are “mirror images” of one another—that is, the same core skill can be exhibited differently by two CEOs, depending on their personality or style. So the 10 intangible skills are actually five pairs. In this issue, and in future columns, I will cover the skills. The first pair is passion and culture. We’ll explore what they are, why they are valuable skills, and how you can cultivate them.

What is passion?

Passion, for the purposes of this article, is defined as the ability to display intense positive enthusiasm. It is often accompanied by high energy and strong beliefs. Passion is made up of individual beliefs.

Highly successful CEOs with passion visibly display intense emotion but are not overcome by it. They have a compelling enthusiasm focused on the philosophy or direction of the association. They are not interested in fads or frivolous activities. Passionate CEOs are in harmony with the key values of the association, such as enabling members to succeed in business and protecting and promoting homeownership, and this generates their enthusiasm.

Passion is infectious. It raises the energy level of everyone in the organization.

Many highly successful CEOs say that finding something meaningful within the context of the career responsibilities and pursuing it regardless of the setbacks and accomplishments is empowering. This sense



of purpose creates joy and enhances the perception of passion.

In passionate CEOs there is a higher degree of focus on the goal. As with other highly successful CEOs, passionate ones are focused, organized, and driven to succeed. Of course, they have daily business goals, weekly goals, and long-term strategic tactics. But they also have personal life goals and accomplishments desired outside the scope of being a CEO. Bucket lists are common among passionate CEOs.

Having a series of life goals clearly listed keeps passionate CEOs focused on future possibilities. They always have something they look forward to and are excited about. Many of them visit their goals every day, even first thing in the morning and last thing at night, as a routine.

Passionate CEOs are not constrained by time or schedule. They work tirelessly to accomplish their goals because, after all,

achieving them is a personal mission. They tend to be workaholics and available most anytime if it is within the scope of their passion. They have unbounded energy for the subjects that they appreciate.

Tessa Hultz, CEO of the Raleigh Regional Association of REALTORS® in North Carolina, is a passionate CEO. I facilitated the executive search for that association, which resulted in her hiring. After Tessa’s first interview, one member said, “I am exhausted just talking to her. But I like it!”

Not everyone is cut out to work for a passionate CEO because they engage their staff in the same mission and energy. To do this they create an atmosphere of trust and camaraderie and a common desire to excel. The result is a staff team that works together to accomplish the objectives with a high degree of enthusiasm.

Of the intangible skills, passion is the one that fades with the departure of the CEO.

What is culture?

Culture in an organizational setting refers to the ability to establish a set of values and beliefs for a group. It defines parameters and expected behaviors and becomes a common ground for decisions and actions. Culture is group beliefs, making it a companion of passion, which is individual beliefs.

Culture is a transformative environment. An association that establishes a clearly understood culture based upon values and beliefs has set forth an expectation for everyone in the group including staff, leadership, volunteers, and members. In such an atmosphere, everyone tends to rise to meet the expectations of the group.

Highly successful CEOs create, influence, and advance the culture. It is an extension of the CEO's organizational philosophy.

Culture is structured passion. I have worked with hundreds of associations as a consultant. Within minutes of walking into an association meeting or facility, I know whether it is a successful group or a failing one because there is a "spirit" of the organization that can be felt. It is evident in the small things—the nuances—how the volunteer members treat one another, their attitude and personal bearing, and the tenor of the conversation. That "spirit" is an underlying perception that permeates associations. When clearly articulated, it is the culture of the organization.

Tricia Thomas, CEO of the Bay East Association of REALTORS® in Pleasanton, Calif., says this about the culture of her association: "We love to delight our members. At every event we ask how we can delight our members and make them feel special. We want each member to feel they are the most important person in the room."

Most successful CEOs incorporate shared values in virtually everything the association does. Their mission statement,

vision, and value proposition all set a high standard for leadership, professionalism, and service.

There is an action component to being a culture-driven CEO. These CEOs listen to the members and take specific action based upon their members' perceptions. They are transparent and place high value on results. And they critically analyze every program, product, and service to see if it is delivering the desired results among the membership and, if not, they dispassionately abandon it.

Culture demands constant maintenance. Since culture is inclusive, everyone owns its successful implementation—especially the staff.

Steve Francks, CEO of the Washington REALTORS® Association, details this in a staff culture statement that was developed by the staff, not the CEO: "Our staff supports the following values:

- To contribute to a positive workplace
- To work in a collaborative environment
- Freedom to innovate, create, and develop new ideas
- To give and receive constructive criticism
- A mutual commitment to success
- To celebrate our uniqueness
- To give and receive recognition of achievement
- To give and receive encouragement
- Trust in each other's competencies."

Of the intangible skills, culture is the one that endures beyond the tenure of the CEO.

Developing these intangible skills

Although many of the intangible skills are difficult to develop, passion and culture are two that can be learned.

Take passion, for example. If you consider yourself to be passionate about your job and your organization, perhaps you've been hesitant to express it. Experiment with showing your personal enthusiasm more often. If you're unsure whether you are a passionate

How to Acquire Intangible Skills

Set out to cultivate these intangible skills in the same way you'd learn a language or another hard skill, such as event planning or financials.

- Contact a successful CEO who has that skill and seek advice.
- Request a successful CEO to mentor or formally coach you.
- Search the business literature, carefully noting the corporate view bias.
- Search business videos; TED talks are particularly valuable.
- Attend AEI, ASAE, and other executive education events.
- Consider local university Advanced Management Programs.
- At education events, focus on personal contacts with successful CEOs, not just course content.
- Join or create peer networks of like-minded executives.

CEO, think about what you are passionate about (service, achievements, organization) and see how those can manifest themselves in your work.

Developing an organizational culture is an old concept that is getting more attention these days. Countless consulting companies and websites can guide your organization to find and codify its core beliefs and give you the tools to establish and maintain a culture.

In our next column we will explore the skills of relationships and connections.



Jerry Matthews' executive career spans more than 20 years as a REALTOR® state association CEO and more than 12 years as an industry consultant. His consulting practice focuses on facilitating change for executives and organizations. JerryMatthews.com.