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The Interview: Mark Lyons

Dr Harold Robles, Founder, Albert Schweitzer Institute for the Humanities and Lindsay McMillan, CEO of MS Australia at the Second Summit on Non Profit Leadership

The Conscious CEO: The New Face of Leadership

by Steve Bowman



What makes a not-for-profit Chief Executive Officer (CEO) stand out as a true leader, one who has charisma, who is decisive yet takes into account all points of view, who is able to ask questions or find solutions that have eluded everyone else, who forges incredibly strong and long lasting strategic visions and systems?

The one underlying factor in this type of leader is that they choose to be conscious: they are truly aware of what is happening around them, they consciously choose whatever they do or perceive, and they are able to function in the simultaneity of past, present and future without fixating on any one aspect of time. The skills they bring to an organisation are much less important than the consciousness they bring, as consciousness will affect all people who are impacted on by that organisation. Higher levels of conscious behaviour and attitude are the key to creating a balanced integration of organisational vision, strategic and operational realities.

Consciousness is only a matter of choice. If you choose to be conscious, then you can be. If you choose to be unconscious, then you can be that as well. Your choice!!! The unconscious individual has things happen around them, much to their bemusement and frustration. The conscious individual is able to create those things that are the most expansive to themselves, their family and their organisation. The contribution they make is awe-inspiring and extraordinary. Why wouldn't you want to be conscious?

CEOs can choose to be conscious, unconscious, or even anti-conscious. Consciousness exists on a continuum, and thus the CEO can choose where on that continuum they want to be. However, if the organisation is to thrive and provide real value, the CEO needs to be primarily conscious and must also have attention on consciousness in all aspects of the organisation. The CEO has the power to make an incredible difference. It can be a magnificent, affirmative contribution, particularly when approached with commitment to conscious awareness, or it can be a negative contribution when it is approached with unconscious or anti-conscious thoughts, feelings and behaviours that contain unrecognised and unresolved personal concerns.

The Conscious CEO

Those CEOs that choose consciousness have the ability to perceive all that is happening around them, including thoughts, biases and feelings, without buying into that perception as reality. The Conscious CEO knows, and acts upon that knowing, perception and intuition with trust and conviction. They exemplify continuous renewal and transformation. They make a conscious demand and commitment to being all that they are. They know what they are about – what inspires, stimulates and rejuvenates them, as well as their implanted fears. They know that fear is an implanted imagination – not truth; they are aware and able to perceive when their unresolved concerns surface. These individuals are able to release their fears so they can shift from being outer-directed to being inner-directed.

The Conscious CEO is totally present, able to function in the simultaneity of past, present and future and thus not be influenced unconsciously by past events or future concerns. They live in the question, rather than being besieged by the problems. They know how to ask questions in a more unlimited ways in which they will allow the answers that they hadn't considered as possibilities to manifest. By "living in the question", they become more aware of the options they have. They look at situations from the framework of wanting to get to the truth. They are in touch with their intuitive knowing as well as the logical aspect of themselves. When the person functions from their intuitive knowing they are able to perceive solutions that cannot be worked out by the clear light of logic. Recent research by the HeartMath Institute, a not-for-profit in the US, has shown that intuition can actually be measured by electrophysical changes, and that consciousness and intuition are linked (<http://www.heartmath.org>).

The Conscious CEO is able to receive all with true gratitude without any sense of obligation, judgement or filtering. They relate to life in spontaneous interaction with the energy of the moment and have the ability to perceive, know, be and receive everything. They are empowered to know that they know, as they are able to connect with their inner source. They are not attached to convention and are always willing to take risks and destroy and un-create old systems, structures and routines for new ones.

Conscious CEOs have a sense of adventure and curiosity and are comfortable with a flowing process rather

than a rigid form and structure. They are able to flow with change and even thrive on it. They are able to destroy and un-create any predetermined point of view about how the organisation should be in order for the infinite possibilities of that organisation to be revealed. The Conscious CEO is able to choose from infinite possibilities, those actions that will prove to be the most expansive for the organisation, to facilitate the Board to be conscious in its governance responsibilities, to empower staff to consciously add to the organisation, and to spread consciousness to all they touch at work, home and throughout society generally.

The Conscious CEO lives in the question (without expecting answers) by constantly posing the question:

- How does it get any better than this?
- How did I get so lucky this day?
- How did I create this?
- What do I know that I am pretending not to know or denying that I know?
- What's right about this that I'm not getting yet?

(Acknowledgement is given to Gary M. Douglas, ACCESS™ LLC, for identifying these questions.)

The Unconscious CEO

The Unconscious CEO will make many decisions and generally is quite busy being busy, but is unaware of what has influenced those decisions, actions or feelings. They feel that luck, outside events, other people or fate have had an influence on their current situation, and that what they now have is possibly as good as it gets. They often are engulfed by problems and often struggle to figure the answer out, all the while being very busy. They have a point of view that, "this is just the way life is, there is no other choice, it's just trauma and drama, and that's all there is!" They will grumble about it hopelessly, but do little if anything to change it. They have no awareness that they can choose differently. They become affected by life (a victim), rather than being the cause of life.

The Unconscious CEO is primarily survival and rule oriented. They function from a finite and fixed point of view of, "I've got to figure it out and I'm here all alone." They are somewhat inflexible in their thinking, attached to traditional and possibly outmoded methods, protective of their turf, and inclined to blame most problems on external forces. They often find it uneasy to relate to people in an open and genuine way. They are unable to release the reins of power because they have trouble in trusting others. The more unconscious they are, the more risk-averse they become. Their common phrases include "but", "just", "why did I", "need", "try", "want" and "never". Everything that we are, we create through our thoughts, feelings, emotions and our spoken words. The use of these types of words creates strong limitations on our ability to be conscious.

These Unconscious CEOs are seeking more in life, home and work, but are unsure what or how to effect change. The Unconscious CEO is one who is buffeted around by circumstances they feel are not quite under their control. Things happen around them, often leaving them bemused and worried. They are often in charge of organisations which have an insipid culture, are somewhat defensive internally and externally (a sure sign of the unconscious protecting its unconsciousness), and which seem to be at the whim of outside forces.

The Anti-conscious CEO

There are those CEOs who actively work against the consciousness of themselves and those around them. The Anti-conscious CEO is primarily "attainment and sensation" oriented; they are too busy watching out for themselves, fearing the unfamiliar. They create conflict and discord and uphold their own unrecognised dysfunctional agenda. They often play politics with anyone to get what they want. The CEO who is highly anti-conscious can become status and power hungry, and tends to want to build empires and will actively play office politics. This can lead them to work long hours and neglect their life and families.

These CEOs do not allow the free flow of information (performance, financials, strategy etc), actively cultivate a climate of fear and punishment (to themselves by their thoughts and feelings, and to others by systematised organisational disincentives), and have such fixed points of view that no other possibilities are allowed. They are focused on systems and processes that create order and are not very open to change. This attachment to a fixed point of view can be unfavourable because it blinds them to the need for change. They do not function well with the course of change, trying to hang onto their security, and resisting what they do not understand. Their concrete mindset can also cause them to discriminate others as adversaries and to justify reprisal against them. They often struggle to alleviate their insecurity through excessive control and territorial behaviour. Control is sustained through hierarchical authoritative structures that often cater to their need for status, advantage and privilege. They demand discipline and obedience from their people. The organisation that is directed by the Anti-conscious CEO can easily degenerate into bureaucracy. The environment within their organisation (and at home) is toxic, and is characterised by polarised views within the organisation about what is right, wrong, good or bad. The Anti-conscious CEO creates unhealthy climates in their organisation. The Anti-conscious CEO works very hard at creating their reality so it is not ease or joy, for themselves or those around them.

So how do I choose to be a more Conscious CEO?

One of the simplest methods for choosing consciousness is simply to be aware of the three states of Conscious, Unconscious, and Anti-conscious behaviour and thought that are all possible in the one individual. Choosing Consciousness is about choosing where on the continuum of consciousness you want to be. The Conscious level of the continuum enables you to relate to life with great ease and joy in spontaneous interaction with the energy of the moment, without projections, judgments, expectations, separation or rejection.

We have identified five key operational areas in which the Conscious CEO can facilitate an increase in consciousness in themselves and those around them, and generally create a Culture of Consciousness for their organisation.

Continued next page



Key Area 1: Create a Conscious Board/CEO relationship

The Conscious CEO knows that an unconscious or anti-conscious Board will have a limiting effect on the staff, constituency and the organisation generally. The Conscious CEO will work towards raising the consciousness of their Board. Each of the following Board Consciousness Strategies are briefly described, and for more details on each strategy, go to www.lifemastery.com.au.

The key Board Consciousness Strategies include:

- assisting the Board to understand and implement their key roles (legal, accountability, strategic/policy, public relations and risk);
- reporting to the Board against outcomes, not how busy the organisation has been. This means reporting against agreed criteria (most often the success measures directly attributable to the strategic plan) rather than reports from committees or divisions or projects about how busy they have been;
- developing and implementing an induction program for Board (and staff) that relates to roles, history, use of vision/mission, strategy, ethics, compliance and behaviour;
- developing a working relationship with the Chair that is focused on strategy and the ethos of “no surprises”;
- integrating Board professional development that enables Board members to gain insight into and skills with relevant aspects of the organisation (e.g. risk, governance, accountability, financial stewardship, strategic thinking etc);
- managing the agenda so it is focused on strategic issues, not operational reports, and working with the Chair so that Board items are focused on strategic, ethical and compliance issues;
- ensuring information provided to the Board is not biased to provide a “rosy” picture, and that the Board consciously ask strategic, ethical or compliance related questions;
- assisting the Board to develop key performance measures for the CEO and the Board, and to facilitate both a CEO and Board evaluation process;
- utilising the vision of the organisation as a filter for development and evaluation of programs.

Key Area 2: Create more conscious CEO/Staff relationships

The lynchpin behind a conscious CEO/staff relationship is the quality of the culture in the organisation. The CEO is the single most important shaper of culture in any organisation, and will shape that culture either consciously, unconsciously or anti-consciously. If the CEO chooses to be unconscious, then culture will develop around them without them being aware of what they are allowing. That culture is likely to be insipid yet very busy being busy, with many subcultures being created in the absence of conscious leadership. If the CEO chooses to be anti-conscious, then the culture will reflect the fear, restriction on information and territorial struggles so common with anti-conscious behaviour.

Consciously choosing and then creating the culture of the organisation is the single greatest influencer of the CEO/staff relationship. The CEO can consciously choose to actively create a culture that is in keeping with the values and vision of their organisation and themselves, or unconsciously, if not anti-consciously, choose to create a culture that is destructive and does not provide ease and joy in all aspects of the organisation. There are many choices that a CEO can make in actively creating the culture that is best suited to their organisation at that time.

The CEO can choose the degree to which:

- staff identify with the organisation and its vision, or just identify with their role or profession (e.g. I am just the accountant, I am just the receptionist);
- management focuses on outcomes and accountability, rather than the means or processes;
- work is organised around groups and individuals, or just individuals;
- staff have autonomy for decisions, or regulations and supervision are used to directly or indirectly control employee behaviour;
- rewards are tied to performance, or reflect non-performance factors;
- staff are encouraged to be consciously innovative, or unconsciously risk averse;
- staff are encouraged to openly air conflicts and criticisms as interesting points of view, or complain or undermine the organisation in devious or convoluted ways;
- the performance management system focuses on key performance measures that relate to the strategic plan and that shape behaviour congruent with the conscious culture the CEO is creating, or an off-the-shelf product is used where staff actively dislike the process.

Key Area 3: Facilitate more conscious Staff/Staff relationships

The Conscious CEO can facilitate more conscious behaviour between staff by developing and implementing:

- formal dispute resolution processes to resolve disputes amongst staff and between staff and the CEO;
- a sharing of Key Performance Indicators amongst the staff, so staff can see what the key performance indicators are for their colleagues (including the CEOs!!). This leads to behaviour that is supportive and can fundamentally change perceptions of how staff view their colleagues work, and how the Board views the CEO's work.

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Key Area 4: Facilitate more conscious Staff/Client relationships

The Conscious CEO undertakes to perceive and provide guidance to the staff/client relationship in a manner that produces a relationship that is in keeping with the culture they have consciously chosen for the organisation. The Conscious CEO can facilitate staff/client relationships (e.g. service recipients, members, suppliers etc) that are more conscious by developing and implementing:

- Perceptual surveys and focus groups that explore the relationship between staff and the client, seek insight into the perceptions and concerns of each group, and provide indications of unconscious or anti-conscious behaviour that may be identified and modified;
- Reports (verbal and written) from recipients that journal their perceptions of the ease and joy with which they receive the service.

Key Area 5: Facilitate more conscious Staff/Board relationships



The relationship between staff and the Board is often, at best, tenuous if not actively ignored. Board members often comment they do not know what staff do, yet Board members are ultimately responsible for all that occurs within the organisation. This often gives rise to the Operational Board, characterised by ever increasing demands for operational information and distrust regarding what is going on within the organisation. In many cases, staff regard the Board as some distant, irrelevant, misunderstood entity who meet for secret Board business, and who are not concerned with what staff do.

The Conscious CEO can facilitate a more conscious Staff/Board relationship by developing and implementing:

- A Staff/Board communications policy that provides guidelines for when and how Board and staff can directly communicate with each other;
- A Delegations of Authority document that outlines the authority of the Board, the CEO and staff;
- A Board agenda item where individual staff members are selected to provide a verbal report to the Board every second or third Board meeting, on the issues that staff member faces in their program or Division. This is typically around 20 minutes, and actively focuses on issues, rather than what the staff member actually does.

Summary

A high performance not-for-profit organisation is characterised by a high culture of consciousness within that organisation, which in turn is facilitated by a CEO who has chosen to be conscious. The Conscious CEO can have an incredibly expansive influence on an organisation, and can bring a balanced integration of organisation vision, strategic and operational realities. The only difference between a Conscious, Unconscious or Anti-conscious CEO is the choice they make. ●

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