

How's The Boss?

In today's world of online transparency, likeability may be vital for top CEOs

By KRISTY STEVENSON

The old way of leadership, where the CEO and upper management rule over employees and determine the direction of an organization, is dying. This is according to Jim Whitehurst, President and CEO of Red Hat, who just topped Owlery's 2017 report on CEO Likeability for the greater Raleigh area.

The analysis, which parsed thousands of Chief Executive Officer reviews from site users, reveals what people think of CEOs across the country at a time when there's more transparency and accountability in the corner office than before. "CEOs really care, and companies really care how their CEO is rated," says Jim Fowler, Founder and CEO of Owlery, a pioneer in crowdsourced information that's building, according to the company, the world's largest database of executive information with more than a million users to date.

"For me to be included on this list is about more than just likeability," says Whitehurst, "it's a reflection of Red Hat and our culture. As a leader, you have to know yourself and your strengths, and if you work from those areas you will be successful. Being out there, being open, and working directly with people are all things we try to encourage at Red Hat, and they are all things I try to do, too."

A 2016 media and analytics poll showed that some of the most successful technology CEOs in the world are also some of the most likeable. It remains vital that a CEO possess the vision needed to inspire, however, and likability may play a role in how they rally support behind that vision.

"Part of openness is being approachable and encouraging dialogue. People at all levels of the organization are comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions with me," says Whitehurst. "When people feel heard and supported, they are happier and perform better in their roles."

Peter Zaitsev, Co-Founder and CEO of Percona, took the number two spot on Owlery's Raleigh report. "Studies show that millennials value work/life balance as a measure of how they view a company's desirability, even over their own career progression," said Zaitsev. "In my



opinion, CEOs who want to create a stable and effective organization must garner people's loyalty by caring about their welfare. It goes beyond being 'likeable': you must cultivate an atmosphere where people feel their time both in and out of the office is respected."

Fowler says a broad market of people who vote on a CEO's performance, or in this case likeability, heretofore has not existed. Owlery reports raw data in asking users to rate a CEO. Responses could be based upon many things: How much do you like the person? How effective are they at their job? How is the company doing as an indication of its leadership?

"I personally believe that the CEO is a reflection of the product or service the company is providing," says Fowler. "A CEO is a very public face representing the overall corporate image." For example, with its recent bad publicity, United Airlines' CEO was the lowest rated executive in Owlery's report. Uber was once a media darling, but as it has endured some recent bad press, its CEO rating also plummeted.

When people acknowledge C-suite representatives as authentic, they trust and follow them. Transparency enhances that confidence and the ability to connect.

"From a hiring perspective, candidates will ask/comment about the CEO's history, vision, knowledge, competence, etc.," says Judy Protz, Senior Recruiter at HireNetworks. "At some point, though, I think everyone wants to know what the CEO is like in terms

of leadership style and personality."

Protz says that those seeking other employment because their situation is 'not a good fit' are very cautious and ask more questions about leadership. They want to know the CEO is honest, transparent and trustworthy.

Whitehurst concurs, saying that the CEOs people want to work for and respect are the leaders who are empowering them instead of dictating to them. Zaitsev, too, says mutual respect is how people choose which organization is worth investing time and energy into. He focuses on creating a culture that attracts and keeps the best and brightest by respecting and listening to his team.

Based on their likeability scores, both Red Hat and Percona offer excellent examples of what CEOs are doing right. The bigger picture may extend beyond whether a CEO is likeable, to when a company valuation is low, what can it do to turn it around? As transparency is brought to the forefront, it compels CEOs to do a better job.

A recent study found that the most successful leaders treated their subordinates with respect and made a genuine attempt to be liked. This approach garnered support and led to greater success. So not only do likable executives excel, their companies do too.

"What we're aiming for is the social good," says Fowler. "This is going to make companies more efficient, and consumers are going to benefit as a result. We like the social impact of it." ■