

# We Need Real Leaders at Major Companies - Not Just Lofty Titles

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**D**espite the many factors that have contributed to the economic crisis, one towers above all else: the lack of true leaders in many large companies. In the wake of the damage already done, this deficiency is now causing our government to take unprecedented actions that will further harm businesses—not to mention taxpayers—for decades.

It is common to call executives with lofty titles “leaders.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, perhaps the most critical recovery-focused priority should be to avoid leaving in place or installing executives whose greatest faults stem not from their greed and short-sightedness, but rather from their lack of the distinguishing qualities that define true leaders. Too often we select top executives based almost solely on “hard” business skills such as the ability to deliver quantitative results. At best, we have offered a patronizing nod to “soft” yet crucial attributes such as uncompromised integrity, accountability, trustworthiness and courage to do the right thing vs. what is expedient or personally beneficial.

Perhaps the one leadership attribute most needed today is an unyielding pledge to put service to others ahead of self-interest. This drives executives to make decisions and take actions that work in the best interests of all those they serve—including customers, employees, shareholders and communities. Such executives live by a fundamental tenet: Service to others is one of the highest honors and greatest obligations of a true leader.

Think about executives in the news recently. Their deficiencies in terms of these attributes are stunning. Moving forward there are powerful ways to address this sobering reality.

In addition to hard business skills, those who recruit executives must adopt disciplined approaches to

investigate candidates’ character as defined by their lived—not just spoken—values. The attributes listed above must become non-negotiable.

Candidates must understand that generating great business results alone is insufficient. Instead, by measuring success through the success of all those they serve, they will achieve superlative, sustainable results for their constituents and for themselves.

Those of us in business and in the news media must identify and showcase individuals who embody the distinguishing qualities of true leaders. This will help ensure the best possible futures for our companies, our economy and our nation.

Reflecting on the banking crisis at the World Economic Forum earlier this year, J. P. Morgan Chase & Co. CEO Jamie Dimon said, “To policymakers, I say: Where were they?” That mind-boggling statement invites government to play roles it cannot handle, while it also directs attention away from the real issue. What we are suffering from

is not a failure of institutions, both public and private, but a massive, breathtaking failure of leadership. •



**Henry S. Givray** is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.