



Think Like a CEO

HOW TO THINK LIKE A BETTER
CEO AND BECOME THE
GREATEST CEO YOU CAN BE

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*"The function of leadership is to
produce more leaders,
not more followers."*

— Ralph Nader

About This Guide

I learned a lot as head coach for Satya Nadella's innovation team as well as being a CEO Whisperer for CEOs beyond Microsoft.

A few CEOs came back to me years later and acknowledged I helped them transition to a billion-dollar company. (That's a big deal)

I started my journey of learning and sharing what the best CEOs do that others don't around 2010.

In 2017, I started experimenting more as a CEO Whisperer to flex my skills and grow.

At that point, I had been helping disrupt industries around the world, and I was feeding trends & insights, stories, and scenarios to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella.

With this guide, I hope to help you become the greatest CEO you can be.

Edward de Bono on How Anyone Can Think Better (and Think Like a CEO)

Edward de Bono authored over 80 books on thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, including notable titles like *Six Thinking Hats* and *Lateral Thinking*.

He provided training and workshops to various organizations, including the CIA, focusing on creative thinking and decision-making.

De Bono was involved with Disney as a consultant, contributing to creative processes and innovations in theme park design.

I remember how de Bono said anyone can think better, if they just explore perspectives.

And how anyone can think better if they think like a CEO.

But I also remember thinking what does it mean to think like a CEO?

This guide helps answer that.

How to Think Like a CEO (General Mindset Shifts)

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Here are some ways better CEOs think better:

1. Visionary Thinking
2. Risk Management
3. Customer-Centricity
4. Adaptability
5. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

By internalizing these habits and approaches from these CEOs, you can begin to cultivate a strategic, visionary mindset that allows you to think and act like a CEO in any role or situation.

#1. Visionary Thinking

Always keep an eye on the long-term horizon.

Define where you want to go and work backward to create steps.

#2. Risk Management

Learn to take calculated risks, balancing bold action with thoughtful analysis.

#3. Customer-Centricity

Constantly put yourself in the shoes of the user or customer.

Think: “What will delight them? What problem can I solve for them?”

#4. Adaptability

Stay flexible.

CEOs understand that industries change, technologies evolve, and strategies need constant revision.

#5. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Strong CEOs connect with people on a human level.

Develop a keen sense of empathy and build relationships based on trust.

5 CEOs and How They Think

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Learn from everyone you can.

Here are 5 CEOs to learn how they think:

1. Steve Jobs (Apple)
2. Jeff Bezos (Amazon)
3. Warren Buffet
4. Satya Nadella (Microsoft)
5. Elon Musk (Tesla / SpaceX)

Sometimes you learn and model from their great moves, and the kind of person you aspire to be.

Sometimes you learn from their mistakes and what you want to avoid or the person you don't want to become.

#1. Steve Jobs (Apple)

Key Insight: Obsess Over Simplicity and Design

- **Actionable Tip:** Jobs' genius lay in distilling complex ideas into simple, elegant products. He focused relentlessly on user experience and design.
- **How to Apply:** Prioritize simplicity in your work and communication. Strip down ideas, products, or services to their essential components. Ask yourself: "How can I make this simpler for the user or customer?" This applies not just to product design, but to how you structure meetings, presentations, or even day-to-day decisions.

Key Insight: Vision First, Details Later

- **Actionable Tip:** Jobs was famous for having a "reality distortion field," seeing the future in ways others couldn't and pushing teams beyond their limits.
- **How to Apply:** Develop a clear vision of where you want to go in your personal or professional life. Then, relentlessly work on aligning the details. Ask yourself: "Am I solving the right problem?" or "What is the bigger picture?" Embrace thinking that may feel ambitious or impossible at first.

#2. Jeff Bezos (Amazon)

Key Insight: Long-Term Thinking (Customer Obsession)

- **Actionable Tip:** Bezos built Amazon with a focus on long-term gains over short-term profitability. He believed in customer obsession—always focusing on what would provide value to customers.
- **How to Apply:** When making decisions, adopt a long-term view. Ask yourself: “Will this choice lead to sustainable success?” Also, put the customer at the center of every decision. Consider their needs, wants, and pain points, whether you’re leading a project, pitching a product, or planning your career.

Key Insight: Iterate and Experiment

- **Actionable Tip:** Bezos created a culture of rapid experimentation, learning from failures, and iterating constantly.
- **How to Apply:** Embrace failure as a stepping stone to innovation. Try small, controlled experiments in your work or life. Be willing to adapt based on what you learn. Ask yourself: “How can I test this idea with minimal risk?” or “What can I learn from this failure?”

#3. Warren Buffett (Berkshire Hathaway)

Key Insight: Stick to Your Circle of Competence

- **Actionable Tip:** Buffett emphasizes knowing what you know and, equally important, what you don't know. He invests only in businesses he deeply understands.
- **How to Apply:** Focus on mastering a few core skills or industries rather than spreading yourself thin. Identify your circle of competence—your unique strengths and areas of expertise. Whenever making a decision, ask: “Is this within my circle of competence?” If not, seek guidance or defer.

Key Insight: Patience and Discipline

- **Actionable Tip:** Buffett is known for his extreme patience, waiting years for the right investment opportunity.
- **How to Apply:** In your personal or professional decisions, cultivate patience. Sometimes the best opportunities take time. Avoid impulsive decisions, and trust in long-term discipline. Ask yourself: “Will this matter in 5 years?” or “Am I being patient enough for the right opportunity?”

#4. Satya Nadella (Microsoft)

Key Insight: Growth Mindset

- **Actionable Tip:** Nadella revived Microsoft by fostering a growth mindset—believing that abilities and intelligence can be developed with time and effort.
- **How to Apply:** Adopt a mindset of continuous learning. Every setback or challenge is an opportunity to learn. Ask yourself: “What can I improve?” or “How can I adapt to this new situation?” Commit to ongoing personal and professional development, even when things are going well.

Key Insight: Empathy-Driven Leadership

- **Actionable Tip:** Nadella believes empathy is central to leadership and innovation. Understanding others’ needs helps build better products and relationships.
- **How to Apply:** Practice empathetic listening in every interaction. Instead of thinking about your response, focus on understanding the other person’s perspective. Ask: “How can I better understand this person’s experience?” This applies not just in teams but also in understanding customers and clients.

#5. Elon Musk (Tesla/SpaceX)

Key Insight: Bold, Audacious Goals

- **Actionable Tip:** Musk is known for his willingness to tackle massive challenges—whether it's electric vehicles, space travel, or renewable energy.
- **How to Apply:** Don't be afraid to think big. Define audacious goals that excite and challenge you. Even if they seem unattainable now, ask yourself: "What's the biggest problem I can solve?" and "What would it take to achieve this?" Set goals that push you beyond your comfort zone.

Key Insight: Relentless Work Ethic and Focus

- **Actionable Tip:** Musk is intensely focused and willing to work tirelessly to achieve his goals.
- **How to Apply:** Cultivate a deep focus on your most important work. Eliminate distractions and commit fully to your goals. Ask yourself: "Am I dedicating enough time and energy to my most important tasks?" or "How can I structure my day to focus better?"

The Ultimate Guide to Think Like a Better CEO

#1. Strategic Thinking and Vision

Key Insight: CEOs are responsible for setting the long-term direction of a company. This requires seeing beyond day-to-day operations and understanding broader industry trends, market shifts, and the global economic environment.

Actionable Practices:

- **Develop a clear vision:** Write down a long-term vision for your project or company. Make it ambitious but grounded in reality.
- **Think in systems:** Study how different parts of your organization (or life) interconnect. Always consider how a decision in one area affects another.
- **Schedule time for “big picture” thinking:** Regularly step back from operational tasks to reflect on where you’re heading and whether you’re still aligned with your long-term goals.

#2. Data-Informed Decision Making

Key Insight: CEOs must be comfortable analyzing data to inform their decisions. While intuition is valuable, decisions grounded in data lead to more predictable and reliable outcomes.

Actionable Practices:

- **Measure what matters:** Identify the key metrics that drive your business or goals. Focus on data that reflects the health of your business (e.g., customer retention, revenue growth, productivity metrics).
- **Make data accessible:** Use dashboards and reports to keep key data visible. Review these regularly to stay informed.
- **Experiment and iterate:** Use A/B testing and controlled experiments to guide innovation and decision-making.

3. Decisiveness in Uncertainty

Key Insight: A good CEO makes decisions, even when the information is incomplete. The ability to act in ambiguity and take calculated risks is essential.

Actionable Practices:

- **Use the 70% rule:** Jeff Bezos advocates for making decisions with about 70% of the necessary information, rather than waiting for perfect data.
- **Trust your gut, validate with data:** In areas where data isn't sufficient, lean on your intuition but then back it up with as much evidence as possible.
- **Practice decision sprints:** Give yourself deadlines to make tough calls. This keeps you moving forward and reduces the paralysis of overanalysis.

#4. Resilience and Adaptability

Key Insight: CEOs face a constantly changing business landscape. They need to adapt quickly to market changes, new technologies, competition, and crises. Resilience allows them to bounce back from setbacks and keep their teams motivated.

Actionable Practices:

- **Embrace failure as a learning tool:** Adopt a mindset where failure is seen as an opportunity to gather data and improve. Ask yourself after each setback: “What did I learn from this?”
- **Stay flexible:** Have a strategy, but be prepared to pivot. Constantly review and revise your plans as new information becomes available.
- **Invest in personal well-being:** Resilience is not just mental; it’s physical. Ensure you’re taking care of your health (sleep, exercise, mindfulness) to perform under pressure.

#5. Talent Development and Team Building

Key Insight: A great CEO knows they can't do everything themselves. Building a high-performing team is crucial. You need the right people in the right roles, all aligned toward the same vision.

Actionable Practices:

- **Hire for attitude and train for skill:** Skills can be taught, but attitude, culture fit, and work ethic are harder to change. Prioritize hiring people who share your vision and values.
- **Delegate effectively:** Learn to trust your team and empower them to take ownership of projects. Micromanaging will only slow you down.
- **Inspire a growth culture:** Create opportunities for learning and development within your organization. Offer mentorship, encourage continuous learning, and promote from within.

#6. Customer Obsession and User-Centric Thinking

Key Insight: CEOs like Jeff Bezos emphasize customer obsession. They constantly think about how to deliver value to their customers and prioritize the user experience above all else.

Actionable Practices:

- **Build feedback loops:** Regularly gather feedback from customers and clients. Use surveys, interviews, and data to understand their needs, pain points, and desires.
- **Walk in their shoes:** Regularly put yourself in the customer's position. Experience your product or service the way they do to uncover friction points or areas for improvement.
- **Innovate for the user, not the competition:** Focus on how you can improve the customer's experience, rather than just reacting to what your competitors are doing.

#7. Financial Acumen

Key Insight: CEOs need a deep understanding of finance to make smart investment decisions, allocate resources, and ensure profitability.

Actionable Practices:

- **Understand cash flow and margins:** Cash flow is the lifeblood of any business. Understand how money moves through your organization and how your margins contribute to profitability.
- **Use financial forecasting:** Learn to create financial models that predict future revenue, costs, and cash flow. Regularly review these to ensure you're on track.
- **Control costs without stifling innovation:** Balance cost-cutting measures with investments in growth and innovation. Don't let short-term financial pressures prevent long-term success.

#8. Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Leadership

Key Insight: Emotional intelligence is critical for leading teams, building strong relationships, and fostering a positive workplace culture. CEOs with high EQ are better at motivating teams, resolving conflicts, and making sound decisions under stress.

Actionable Practices:

- **Develop self-awareness:** Reflect on your emotions and triggers. Understanding how you react in different situations helps you manage stress and communicate better.
- **Empathize with your team:** Truly listen to your team members. Understand their perspectives, challenges, and motivations. Ask open-ended questions like: “How are you feeling about this?”
- **Lead by example:** Your behavior sets the tone for the organization. Model the attitudes and work ethic you want to see in others.

#9. Risk-Taking and Innovation

Key Insight: CEOs must be comfortable taking risks and innovating. This means fostering a culture where experimentation is encouraged, and failure is seen as part of the process.

Actionable Practices:

- **Encourage bold thinking:** Challenge your team to think creatively and come up with innovative solutions. Reward risk-taking, even if it doesn't always result in success.
- **Implement a “fail fast” approach:** Encourage small-scale experiments where failures can happen quickly and with minimal risk. Use these failures to iterate and improve.
- **Stay ahead of trends:** Always be on the lookout for emerging technologies, business models, and industry shifts. Stay curious and informed to keep innovating.

10. Communication and Storytelling

Key Insight: A great CEO is also a great communicator. Whether rallying the company around a vision, pitching investors, or speaking to the media, CEOs must be able to articulate their ideas clearly and persuasively.

Actionable Practices:

- **Master storytelling:** Learn how to craft a compelling narrative about your company, product, or mission. A clear story helps align your team and inspire stakeholders.
- **Be transparent:** Open communication builds trust within teams. Share both the good and bad news openly. When communicating tough messages, explain the reasoning behind decisions.
- **Adapt your message to your audience:** Whether speaking to employees, investors, or customers, tailor your communication style to their needs and expectations.

#11. Time Management and Prioritization

Key Insight: Time is the most valuable resource a CEO has. Managing it effectively means learning to prioritize the most impactful tasks.

Actionable Practices:

- **Use time blocking:** Set aside specific times in your day for deep work, meetings, and creative thinking. This keeps your day structured and prevents distractions.
- **Apply the 80/20 rule:** Focus on the 20% of activities that will generate 80% of the results. Constantly ask yourself: “Is this the best use of my time right now?”
- **Learn to say no:** CEOs are bombarded with requests and opportunities. Learn to say no to distractions or tasks that don’t align with your long-term vision.

#12. Corporate Responsibility and Ethics

Key Insight: Modern CEOs must consider the ethical implications of their actions. Stakeholders increasingly demand responsible business practices, whether in sustainability, corporate governance, or social responsibility.

Actionable Practices:

- **Embed values into your culture:** Define core values for your organization and make sure they guide every decision. Ensure your business practices align with those values.
- **Practice transparency:** Be open about your company's social, environmental, and ethical practices. This transparency builds trust with customers and investors.
- **Invest in sustainability:** Consider how your business can reduce its environmental footprint or contribute positively to society. Sustainable practices are often good for both the planet and profitability.

The CEO Mindset Checklist

The CEO Mindset Checklist

1. **Develop a Long-Term Vision:** Think strategically, look beyond the day-to-day.
2. **Base Decisions on Data and Intuition:** Balance evidence with gut feelings.
3. **Be Decisive When It Counts:** Identify key moments where swift decisions are critical, weigh your options quickly, and commit to a clear course of action.
4. **Build Resilience and Adaptability:** Embrace failure and learn to pivot.
5. **Focus on Talent and Team Building:** Hire the right people, delegate effectively, and foster a growth-oriented culture.
6. **Obsess Over Customers:** Put customer needs and feedback at the center of every decision.
7. **Master Financial Acumen:** Understand the financial health of your business, and make smart, long-term financial decisions.
8. **Develop Emotional Intelligence (EQ):** Lead with empathy, communicate effectively, and build strong relationships within your team.
9. **Take Calculated Risks:** Inspire a culture of innovation and be willing to take bold, measured risks to move forward.
10. **Communicate with Clarity and Conviction:** Craft compelling narratives and maintain transparency in your communication.
11. **Manage Time Wisely:** Prioritize tasks that have the biggest impact and avoid distractions.
12. **Embrace Corporate Responsibility:** Ensure your business practices align with strong ethical and sustainability principles.

Advanced Concepts to Think Like a Better CEO

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Here are advanced concepts to help you think like a better CEO:

- 1. Stakeholder Management**
- 2. Global Perspective and Cultural Intelligence**
- 3. Crisis Management**
- 4. Innovation Leadership**
- 5. Sustainability and Future-Proofing**
- 6. Personal Development and Continuous Learning**
- 7. Legacy Thinking**
- 8. Adaptability to Emerging Technologies**

#1. Stakeholder Management

Key Insight: Great CEOs don't just manage internal teams; they also juggle relationships with external stakeholders—investors, customers, suppliers, regulators, and the community.

Actionable Practices:

- **Balance stakeholder interests:** CEOs must consider the needs of all stakeholders. Regularly ask: “How will this decision impact each group?”
- **Communicate regularly with investors:** Be transparent and proactive in communicating with shareholders or investors. They need to understand your vision, strategies, and progress.
- **Manage partnerships strategically:** Nurture relationships with key partners and suppliers. Good partnerships create synergies that drive growth and success.

#2. Global Perspective and Cultural Intelligence

Key Insight: Today's CEOs operate in a globalized economy, where understanding cultural nuances, geopolitical trends, and global market dynamics is critical.

Actionable Practices:

- **Stay informed on global trends:** Regularly read about geopolitical developments, economic trends, and global business news. This helps you anticipate risks and opportunities.
- **Cultivate cultural intelligence:** When leading diverse teams or entering international markets, understand and respect cultural differences. Invest in cross-cultural training for yourself and your teams.
- **Localize strategies:** If you're expanding globally, adapt your products, marketing, and operations to fit local markets. What works in one country may not work in another.

#3. Crisis Management

Key Insight: Every CEO will face crises, whether it's an economic downturn, a PR disaster, or internal conflict. The ability to lead decisively during these times is critical.

Actionable Practices:

- **Create a crisis management plan:** Be proactive by having contingency plans for potential crises (e.g., financial crises, public relations issues, or data breaches).
- **Act fast and communicate clearly:** In a crisis, timely and transparent communication is key. Keep stakeholders informed and be honest about challenges and solutions.
- **Keep a calm, level-headed demeanor:** Teams look to their leaders for guidance in tough times. Project calm confidence, even in the face of uncertainty, to maintain morale and focus.

#4. Innovation Leadership

Key Insight: As companies grow, it's easy to become complacent and lose the edge of innovation. CEOs must foster a culture of continuous improvement and curiosity.

Actionable Practices:

- **Dedicate time for innovation:** Schedule time specifically for creative thinking and exploring new ideas. This might include “innovation days” for teams or personal brainstorming sessions.
- **Invest in R&D:** Ensure that your company is consistently allocating resources to research and development. Encourage bold, forward-thinking initiatives.
- **Remove barriers to innovation:** Create a culture where ideas flow freely. Break down hierarchical structures that might stifle creativity and encourage feedback from all levels of the organization.

#5. Sustainability and Future-Proofing

Key Insight: The future of leadership includes a strong focus on sustainability—ensuring that your company’s growth does not come at the expense of the environment or social responsibility.

Actionable Practices:

- **Integrate sustainability into your business model:** Look for ways to make your operations more environmentally friendly, whether that’s reducing carbon emissions, minimizing waste, or adopting renewable energy.
- **Think long-term in terms of impact:** Consider how your products or services contribute to the betterment of society. Ask yourself: “Is our company future-proofed for a sustainable world?”
- **Partner with ethical suppliers:** Ensure that your supply chain is aligned with sustainable and ethical practices. This builds trust with consumers and stakeholders.

#6. Personal Development and Continuous Learning

Key Insight: Great CEOs never stop learning. They stay curious, continuously seek knowledge, and work on their personal growth.

Actionable Practices:

- **Set personal learning goals:** Commit to learning something new every year, whether it's taking courses on leadership, reading industry-related books, or developing a new skill.
- **Learn from mentors and peers:** Surround yourself with a network of experienced leaders. Engage in mentorship, seek advice from seasoned CEOs, and learn from others' experiences.
- **Embrace self-reflection:** Regularly reflect on your decisions, leadership style, and areas for improvement. Self-awareness is key to personal growth as a leader.

#7. Legacy Thinking

Key Insight: The best CEOs don't just think about their time in office—they consider the legacy they will leave behind. They want to build something that lasts beyond their tenure.

Actionable Practices:

- **Develop a succession plan:** Great leaders think about the future of the company beyond their own leadership. Start planning early for who might take over key roles, and ensure your successor is set up for success.
- **Build a lasting culture:** Create a company culture that reflects the values you want to leave behind. A strong culture is a CEO's most enduring legacy.
- **Think impact over profits:** Consider how your work can make a broader impact on society, industry, or even the world. Ask yourself: "What do I want my leadership to be remembered for?"

#8. Adaptability to Emerging Technologies

Key Insight: The ability to adopt and leverage emerging technologies is crucial for CEOs who want to stay ahead in a rapidly changing world.

Actionable Practices:

- **Stay updated on tech trends:** Understand key technologies like AI, machine learning, blockchain, and automation. Know how they might disrupt your industry and what opportunities they present.
- **Be an early adopter:** Encourage your company to experiment with new technologies and tools. The earlier you adapt, the more competitive edge you gain.
- **Leverage data analytics:** Use advanced analytics to make more informed decisions and identify opportunities for efficiency or growth.

Ultimate CEO Toolkit: Tools to Sharpen Your Leadership

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Decision-Making Frameworks: Use decision trees, SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), and other models to break down complex choices.

Daily CEO Routines: Structure your day with time blocks for strategic thinking, team meetings, and self-development. Review your vision and long-term goals regularly.

CEO Dashboard: Have a personal dashboard with the key metrics that matter most to your business, from financial KPIs to customer satisfaction scores.

Networking and Mentorship: Build a strong network of mentors, peers, and industry leaders who can provide guidance and support.

**Final Takeaway: The CEO
Mindset Is a Journey**

Final Takeaway: The CEO Mindset Is a Journey

Ultimately, thinking like a better CEO is an evolving process. It requires constant reflection, learning, and adaptation.

The greatest CEOs are those who not only guide their companies to success but also grow personally along the way, becoming better leaders, innovators, and human beings.

To summarize:

- **Be visionary but stay grounded:** Have bold goals but be adaptable in your approach.
- **Lead with empathy and integrity:** People are the heart of any business—whether it's your team or your customers.
- **Be data-informed and innovative:** Leverage data to guide decisions and always push the boundaries of what's possible.
- **Never stop learning:** The most effective leaders are those who never settle and constantly seek to improve.

By cultivating these habits and mindsets, you'll develop the skill set needed to thrive as a CEO—or in any leadership role.