

“Our industry does not respect tradition — it only respects innovation.”

That blunt challenge was perhaps the core message shared by newly named Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in an email to the entire company on Feb. 3, 2014 as he followed Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer in becoming the third CEO in Microsoft’s storied history.

In the five years since then, Microsoft has flourished under Nadella’s leadership by remaking itself in ways that, while profound and often painful, were the only

viable approach to meeting Nadella’s rallying cry to put innovation at the center of everything Microsoft does, particularly in what it offers and delivers to customers.

While much has been written about Nadella’s impact across those 5 years, I wanted to share his first-day message to the company. Because in today’s tumultuous business environment, every company is undergoing some form of transformation and could almost certainly benefit from taking a look at how Nadella laid out the journey ahead for Microsoft.

While Nadella’s entire letter to his colleagues is worth a full read, here are 5 specific thoughts from that email that are likely, in these high-change times, to resonate with every leader across every industry.

Highlights from Satya Nadella’s first email as Microsoft CEO

1. **“Our industry does not respect tradition—it only respects innovation.”** Certainly under Gates and occasionally under Ballmer, Microsoft established an extraordinary tradition through its growth, market share, reach, scale and influence. But as Nadella implies, tradition is fleeting. It represents where you have been and not where you are headed. And of all the counterpoints to tradition that Nadella could have cited, his choice of innovation back in February 2014 was ideal; at that time, Microsoft had lost its way in being able to focus on and deliver world-class innovation at world-class scale. The company had begun living off of its past in an industry that, as the new CEO said, quickly relegates past accomplishments to the storage closet in the basement.
2. **“Our job is to ensure that Microsoft thrives in a mobile and cloud-first world.”** Perfectly obvious now, but not so obvious 5 years ago. And that comment underscores Nadella’s vision for redefining the bounds of enterprise computing to go beyond mobility and out to the edge in a variety

of ways through the centrality of a cloud-first strategy that would quickly become the model for businesses across the globe.

3. **“I buy more books than I can finish. I sign up for more online courses than I can complete. I fundamentally believe that if you are not learning new things, you stop doing great and useful things.”** Again, the central message: for all the great things the company has achieved in the past, for all of its previous successes, Microsoft’s central mission is to reinvent what the company does and how it does it. And that requires the ongoing reinvention of—and re-imagining from—every employee.
4. **“The coevolution of software and new hardware form factors will intermediate and digitize many of the things we do and experience in business, life and our world. This will be made possible by an ever-growing network of connected devices, incredible computing capacity from the cloud, insights from big data, and intelligence from machine learning. This is a software-powered world.”** Yeah, I think he nailed that one pretty good.
5. **“The opportunity ahead will require us to reimagine a lot of what we have done in the past for a mobile and cloud-first world, and do new things.”** Again, while the focus on particular technologies is essential, what really matters is that every employee must make changes in how she or he views the world, views her or his job, and imagines what is or is not possible.

The business accomplishments in Nadella’s 5 years as CEO have been remarkable, and are perhaps highlighted by Microsoft having clearly established itself as the world’s largest and most-influential vendor in the enterprise cloud.

But underneath that, and serving as an absolutely essential element in Microsoft’s turnaround and ascent to the very top of anyone’s list of the greatest companies in the world, is the ability of Microsoft’s CEO to use his personal, human and humble touch to inspire hundreds of thousands of people to change not just how they work but how they view the world.

And that might be the greatest lesson of all:

“Finally, I truly believe that each of us must find meaning in our work. The best work happens when you know that it’s not just work, but something that will improve other people’s lives. This is the opportunity that drives each of us at this company.”

“Many companies aspire to change the world. But very few have all the elements required: talent, resources, and perseverance. Microsoft has proven that it has all three in abundance. And as the new CEO, I can’t ask for a better foundation.

“Let’s build on this foundation together.”