Why the Best CEOs Act as Catalysts, Not Commanders

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Constantine Alexandrakis: Transformation is how do you reinvent the business for the future to make sure that it continues to stay ahead of customers' needs? The CEO literally has to be at the center of the pyramid enabling all the pieces of the pyramid versus thinking of themselves as being at the top of it.

Steve Odland: This is a new book that you've written called *The CEO Catalyst*, and the central thesis of this is that the traditional command-and-control model doesn't work, which I think a lot of CEOs and other business leaders figured out.

Things have really rapidly changed, making that even more obsolete. Talk about the book and the thesis and what led you to write this book?

Constantine Alexandrakis: It's interesting Steve, we have been hearing, as probably you have over the last couple years, the repeating drumbeat from CEOs and boards of companies around the world that they need to transform how they work, in light of not only all the technological changes going on, but all the geopolitical changes and economic changes and everything else.

So we thought it was a good time to actually talk to CEOs who've driven successful transformations to try to figure out how they did it, what the pitfalls are, and how others can learn from that.

Steve Odland: Yeah, now Russell Reynolds does wonderful search work. That's where you started. You build boards, you build management teams, you hire CEOs for companies.

You do a lot of consulting back with those clients to help them build their team but also effectively lead. And so it came through that work that this was a need and transformation

needed to happen, right?

Constantine Alexandrakis: It did, exactly. Our business is a mix of search work and consulting work, and we have a growing practice around transformation and how do leaders need to adjust their organizations, how they think about the leadership agenda, how does the C-Suite move a transformation forward? It all fits together very nicely.

Steve Odland: Yeah, and transformation sounds like a big word. It's a long word. Essentially, in order to move forward, in order to grow and adapt, you have to transform, even if it's a small thing. Transformation sounds like you're going to turn the company upside down. It's not just that, but it's how do you lead your company for growth?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Exactly, and sometimes transformation honestly is an overused word. We like to distinguish between turnaround and transformation, right? Turnaround means you're in trouble and you gotta change something fast.

Transformation is how do you reinvent the business for the future to make sure that it continues to stay ahead of customers' needs?

Steve Odland: One of the things that you say in this, which I think was a really interesting point, you say, "A great CEO's job is not to be the source of all the answers. It's to build a leadership system that produces better answers than just the CEO alone could provide." It seems like ABCs, but it's not.

Constantine Alexandrakis: It seems like ABCs, but the reality is that image that boards of directors have, that the C-Suite has, sometimes the CEOs themselves have as being the ones with the answer, being the deciders, being the commander-in-chief, so to speak, continues to exist both in practice and in theory.

And the reality is that we believe that the most effective CEOs are actually catalysts of the conditions for success for the company. And ultimately, if the catalyst CEO can enable the company to transform into function without them being there, that's even better.

Steve Odland: Yeah, because the good old days of the CEO having all the answers is just silly. These companies are too complex or multiple divisions. Your geography is spread out. Why, as a leader, would you ever just count on what's in your head and what you've experienced versus relying on the experts around you?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah, not only are these organizations complex, but the amount of issues on a CEO's desk today and the speed at which they're changing is faster than ever.

I get asked this question all the time, "Is the CEO's job harder, really harder today than it was, say, 10 or 20 years ago?" You probably have a perspective on that as well. But I would say the sheer number of topics on the CEO's desk and the rate of change at which they have to take them in and figure out where they're going has never been heavier.

Steve Odland: Yeah, and it's a multi-constituency world. Customers, employees, owners, CEO, by the way, customers, employees, owners, community, environment. So all of these things have to be dealt with, and that's more complex than just saying, "I'm going to take care of my shareholders."

Constantine Alexandrakis: It is. Multiple stakeholders, and multiple stakeholders with changing agendas and priorities.

Steve Odland: Yeah. It's interesting that the CEOs who are the best at this seem to be the ones that have self-awareness and humility because if you are self-aware, if you're humble enough to know that you don't know everything, then you do lean on people around you. But that's not necessarily an innate factor.

Constantine Alexandrakis: It's not. It's a coachable factor, but it's not an innate factor. And then you add in the increased importance of flexibility, of resilience, of adaptability in this current situation, and all those things make an interesting cocktail, so to speak, of the skills that a CEO needs today.

Steve Odland: Maybe we're just all getting older, but it seems like everything's going faster, but the world around us is changing at a more rapid pace. We talk about black swan events, and that used to be once in a lifetime, and now they're happening every few years, it seems. So all of this is part of what comes at you and the need for leadership change.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes, and it also is the need for creating a continuously transforming platform within an organization to be able to adapt to all those changes, to all those issues.

Steve Odland: And that was one of your points, that not only can a CEO not think every thought that needs to be thunk, but also can't lead every bit of this. You need a team around you to lead the transformation, to effect it through an organization as well.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes, and to your earlier point, you've always needed a team around you to manage the organization, but now it's the complexity of the environment means that the CEO literally has to be at the center of the pyramid enabling all the pieces of the pyramid versus thinking of themselves as being at the top of it.

Steve Odland: Okay, so the word that we used to use was empowerment. You need to empower your teams. But so many people treated empowerment as abdication. Talk about the difference and why what you're saying in this book is different than that.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah. So empowerment can lead to effectively leading an organization, but it could also lead to abdication, as you say. But what we're talking about is not effective leadership. It's about rethinking the core of the business, and you need the proper system of contributors to do that, of cascading capabilities within the organization. You know as well as I do, all of these things are interlocking within an organization.

So if you're going to empower people to go do their own thing, that doesn't bring them together to actually move the system forward.

Steve Odland: Yeah. Now, you're the CEO of a very large global company yourself. So you're not only advising boards and CEOs, that's not only part of your practice, but you live this every single day. And you're a private company, but you have a board. That displays some self-awareness, and good for you.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Since our founder Russell Reynolds created the firm over 50 years ago, he thought it was important for our structure and our governance philosophy and our management philosophies to mirror those of our biggest clients. We, actually, as a private partnership, have a board of directors, which is rare but extremely valuable.

Steve Odland: Yeah, and you have to be a little selfless and self-aware in order to listen to them. I know you do. But look, when you don't have to have a board, you do. That says something. But it also says, this is the kind of leadership which is really important, and the results have been stellar as a result of this practice. So you live it every single day.

Constantine Alexandrakis: We have a lot of pride in the work we deliver for our clients. And I just leave it at that.

Steve Odland: Yeah. Okay. So *CEO's Catalyst is* the title. Call it the Catalyst model. That, you know, that would be a luxury to be able to do this and everything's going well. How does it work in a crisis?

Constantine Alexandrakis: That's a great question, Steve. It would be hard for you and me to find any transformation that doesn't hit a brick wall 12 months in, 18 months in, or some sort of crisis, unexpected crisis erupts.

The advice that we got there in doing the research for the book was to do what some people would think is the opposite of what would be expected. Not power through the crisis, but actually take a step back, regroup, pause activity, understand why the crisis is occurring, take responsibility for that, be open and transparent about lessons learned from that, and then use that to regroup and move forward.

Steve Odland: It sounds like most of the same steps and the same processes are important whether you're in a crisis or not. In other words, you can't just think every thought, you can't just be a dictator, you really do need to involve your teams and all of those things. Speed may be the one difference?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah, I think speed is one of them, but you're right. The thread is humility, a willingness to admit mistakes, and to regroup and to change course if conditions warrant, which isn't always easy for a leader.

Steve Odland: No, it's not, especially, if you're on a burning platform, command and control is very efficient. But then you go to your next point, which is it has to be effective.

It has to be implemented, and if you don't have the hearts and minds of the organization, you're not going to get it done.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah. Our research found there are three kinds of inertia that plague organizations seeking transformations. There's action inertia, there's psychological inertia, and then there's insight inertia. And insight inertia is related to actually what is the case for change. Psychological inertia is how people naturally try to snap back to the status quo, how do you prevent that? And action inertia are the execution snafus that you run into. And overcoming each one of those is critical to actually transform.

Steve Odland: It's interesting that you say the snap back piece, because that's part of culture. People say, "Oh, just change the culture." Yeah, okay. It's easier said than done. But it is that snap back piece, because people devolve back to routine and what they're used to.

Part of any transformation, we're doing this for the long term. We've gotta stick with it. You've gotta continue to drive it, right? As a leader you're saying it for the 10th time, you go, "Okay gosh, this isn't working," that's when people are hearing it for the first time. And so you really have to have a lot of stick-to-it-iveness.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes.

Steve Odland: It's not a word, but.

Constantine Alexandrakis: You have to. Every CEO we interviewed for the book said they personally were exhausted by how many times they had to repeat the same message. It's the old cliche. You have to say it any number of times for people to pick up on it, but the reality is that's what you have to do.

Steve Odland: And a lot of people say okay, if it's not resonating, I'm not seeing the language show up in the organization, I must have to change it again," when in fact you need to stick with it.

Constantine Alexandrakis: I think that's absolutely right.

Steve Odland: Is there any time, or can you give us any examples where the CEO's catalyst doesn't work?

Constantine Alexandrakis: No. I don't think there are any situations where the Catalyst CEO would not be the best solution.

Steve Odland: Yeah, because, regardless of how dire it is, you still have to move the organization along, right?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes. You have to, and you have to bring everyone along with you to achieve the stated goals.

Steve Odland: Yeah. No matter how dire the situation and so forth, as a leader, you can't do it by yourself. I and I think that's your point. It's an important one.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah.

Steve Odland: Yeah.

Constantine Alexandrakis: And related to that, Steve, you alluded to it a little bit, which is culture. Culture is such a critical operating system for driving a transformation. And bringing that culture along, bringing everyone along in that culture in order to really make the transformation stick.

Steve Odland: The book is going to be out in September of 2026, and they can buy it anywhere books are sold then. All right. We're going to look forward to that. Constantine, what role does the board of directors play in the CEO Catalyst?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Look, they play a very important role because they need to buy into the transformation vision and the plan for the transformation, and ultimately they need to be cheerleaders for the transformation along the way to shareholders, to other stakeholders, to customers, and to the leadership team as well. Board endorsement, board support is a critical part of having the CEO be a successful catalyst.

Steve Odland: And the board is part of the team. You can't have a board sitting on the outside, being the judges with numbers that they hold up on a score. They have to be right in there with it.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yeah. They're not operationally responsible for the transformation, but they're responsible for the direction.

Steve Odland: They gotta be in the boat and be part of this. That's an important point for boards of directors or people who are on boards to think about through this, that they have a role to play in this.

Constantine, you can't pick up a newspaper or watch any kind of show without hearing AI over and over again, and it is consuming the world at the moment. What role does AI play in any of this? On the flip side, how does AI create the need for transformation?

Constantine Alexandrakis: So AI is changing every single job description, Steve, including yours and mine. And that is a bit of the spark for the transformations that many organizations are undertaking. As I said at the outset, the difference between turnaround and transformation, companies undergoing transformation doesn't mean that their results are poor or that they're having problems delivering what they need to deliver for their customers.

But the advent of AI has prompted them to realize that there are new ways of working, new ways of finding opportunity to serve customers, and new ways of finding efficiencies

within the organization. So AI's a big part of this, and it's spurring the need for the catalyst CEO because of the speed at which things are changing.

Steve Odland: Yeah, because it's more than an app. At some level it's software, right? Ones and zeros, and it's an app or a multiple apps that you buy. On the other hand, in order to implement this, you need to change workflows and processes, and hence, it may be it's transformation with a big T depending on what you're doing, but it could be a small T too. But that deliberateness on work processes is really important.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes. Like I said, every single job description is changing, which means every work process is going to change, much like when the PC came into the workplace.

Steve Odland: Yeah, and you talk about this in the book, that AI is one of the forces that makes transformation really urgent, which kind of leads to another question.

So if you're a leader, we talked a lot about CEOs, but it's leadership in general, no matter where you are in an organization because it's the principles apply regardless. But how do you know when a transformation is necessary?

Constantine Alexandrakis: So I think many of the transformations we're seeing today are transformations by choice. In other words, seeing that there is potential opportunity in reinventing the business, seeing that in order to mitigate risk for the future, in order to protect against new entrants that are being accelerated by the advent of AI, that the company, to sustainably succeed in the future, needs to transform.

So it's not so much transformation by necessity, but transformation by choice.

Steve Odland: And at some level, transformation is another word for change. And change is necessary to do something different. Definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Okay, so everybody wants to grow. That's change. If you want the top line to move up, that's change. And so therefore, you have to do something, unless you're blessed with a trend that's going to carry over year to year, or you have to do something different. And so therefore either it's every year it's some level of change and hence some level of transformation.

Constantine Alexandrakis: In the environment we're in, Steve, most successful companies are going to be in a cycle of continuous transformation. And enabling that within the organization is the key part of what we're trying to get to in the book.

Steve Odland: It's interesting. People used to think about the strong leader as the person who would stand up and, it's kind of the military model, right? Where the senior officers will give the orders and you don't question them, you just do. And frankly, the modern organization came out post-World War II out of the military organization, and there was a

lot of that at the time.

This completely evolves. Today it's a different world. But what you're contributing here is that whole deal is over. That that has run its course. It's not working. It's not right for the pace of exogenous change that is happening to us. It's not like companies have a choice here or organizations. You have to do this if you're going to survive and thrive.

Constantine Alexandrakis: That's exactly right. And it doesn't mean that the CEO's role is any less than it used to be. The CEO's still responsible for setting the strategy, for setting the tone of the company, for helping enable and set the conditions for its success, but it's not about them commanding the success of the company and the operation of the company.

Steve Odland: And thinking every thought. You talk about strong leaders, weak leaders, and that used to be judged by some stereotypical things. How forceful is this person?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Can they run the business?

Steve Odland: Can they run it? Can they be decisive? Can they give orders? That used to be a strong. And the weak ones were the ones that asked for input, right? And what you're saying is it's actually the other way around. The strong leaders are the ones that ask for input and is a catalyst and uses the resources around her.

Constantine Alexandrakis: And are able to take a step back and see their job as being one of enabling the success of the team around them versus driving the success of the team.

Steve Odland: Yeah, but you still have to lead, though. People want leadership. They want to know where to go. And by getting consensus from your team, that's okay because then you've got more followership. It's inspirational at that point.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes. It doesn't have to be all about consensus but it does need to be about collaboration and working effectively together.

Steve Odland: Okay, so building on that then, there used to be all these assessment tools where if you had these specific personality traits or something, then you were going to be a good leader. You can't do that anymore in this kind of environment, but there are some characteristics of great leaders. You talk about this in the book.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes, and there's always been a set of characteristics of great leaders, but at different times in history, some of them rise to the top, and some of them fall to the back.

The ones that are rising to the top now are adaptability, resilience, self-awareness, an ability to project a mission and a purpose and to galvanize the teams around that. It's those sort of softer skills that have always been part of the batch of skills, but are really rising to the top.

Steve Odland: Yeah. If we have listeners who are either in an organization deeply or at the top of an organization, and they look around them, and they go, "Yeah, I need some change here," how do they start?

Constantine Alexandrakis: The first thing to do is to really build the case for change, obviously, right? Through listening, through projecting what the markets are doing, through thinking about the possibilities that new technologies pose, actually crafting the case for change that others will be able to buy into and use as a foundation for the transformation.

Steve Odland: And build the case for whom?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Build the case for each other, really, and the stakeholders. That will include the board at some point, that will include customers at some point, but it starts with the employees and the leadership team.

Steve Odland: Really interesting. This is a really important point that you're making because you've gotta get everybody aligned to what the issues are, right?

Constantine Alexandrakis: And what the opportunities are.

Steve Odland: Oh great. But before you jump to, "Here's the solution," right? You've gotta get people aligned about what are we trying to accomplish? What are the objectives here?

Constantine Alexandrakis: And why? What does it mean for us?

Steve Odland: Yeah. And then you have to build the case about what's in it for them too, yeah?

Constantine Alexandrakis: Exactly. That's the only way to get them to own the change themselves.

Steve Odland: Now, one constituency we haven't talked a lot about are shareholders or owners in a private company. How do you build the case for them when you're thinking about something that maybe it's going to be costly, it's going to be a half a step back, how do you build that case?

Constantine Alexandrakis: It's really the similar case, Steve, that you're building for employees and for the board of directors. It's around what is the value proposition that we want and need to evolve to, and what will be the benefits of that over the long term? And that applies just as much to owners as it does to employees.

Steve Odland: Any final Thoughts that you'd like to share, good insights that are in the book that you want to leave us with?

Constantine Alexandrakis: I think one, one thing I'd say, there's a lot of talk in the press about how individuals are becoming more reluctant to serve as leaders of organizations because of the complexity of the environment and the overwhelming set of issues that are out there.

And I would posit the opposite, that it couldn't be a more interesting and challenging time for people to contribute to transforming organizations and to learn how to become a catalyst CEO to enable that.

Steve Odland: Yeah, but a lot of people are afraid of the big stage and everything's on social media and it's a lot of stress, but it's the reward that comes from all of that.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Yes, and the reward from taking a successful organization and future-proofing it.

Steve Odland: Yeah. Yeah, and working with those constituents and really helping people create something. Yeah.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Absolutely.

Steve Odland: Constantine Alexandrakis, congratulations on your new book, *The CEO Catalyst*. We'll look forward to reading it. It will be out in September of 2026. And thank you for joining us today.

Constantine Alexandrakis: Thank you, Steve, for having me.

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