

# the harley CEO

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You've been the house rebel for years. You've chafed at the bureaucratic restrictions of the organization. You've scoffed at the political games. You've been the chief critic (at least privately) of the leadership. And now you're the CEO. This column examines where you came from and what you have to deal with now.

## BIKER VALUES

Maybe you actually are a biker. But at the very least you have had allegiance to the biker's values. What are these values? The Guggenheim had an exhibition of motorcycles in 1988. It characterized the motorcycle as "An immortal cultural icon...More than speed, it embodies the abstract themes of rebellion, progress, freedom, sex and danger."

On April 7, 2006, Harley-Davidson opened its first dealership in China. At the Beijing opening the managing director for China said, "All around the world [Harley] has been synonymous with freedom, open roads, raw power and good times."

Chinese biker Bai Haifeng capsulated the biking experience when he said, "You feel the wind, you feel the vibrations. You get the feeling you're flying."

Further focus on the Harley experience appears in *Harley-Davidson and Philosophy: Full-Throttle Aristotle* (2006) where one of a group of philosopher-bikers states

The motorcycle can be a powerful talisman for releasing and expressing one's dissatisfaction with life. Free yourself from the meaningless demands of the herd, then. Be a badass outlaw biker.

Even the H-D jacket becomes a magical object, capable of transferring to its wearer the properties of aggression, independence and anti-authoritarianism.

So before you were CEO, you had embraced all these values. The organization had become your foil. All the inanities and absurdities of corporate life were targets for your sarcasm and derision. In fact, you had defined yourself in your opposition to the established order. You said, "I don't bow to the established order like other people here."

## CEO VISION

Then one day the offer comes to elevate

you to CEO. Your private thoughts are "Are they crazy? They're putting the fox in charge of the hen house!" You know the money's good and after long consideration, you say "Well, maybe if I were in charge, I could clean house, get some like-thinking progressives in here, and make this company truly visionary and a leader not only in this industry but in American business." You gradually talk yourself into it. However, you continually catch yourself thinking in your customary anti-establishment manner.

You're like the CEO in the Sprint ad who, after praising the features of his new cell phone, says to his assistant:

CEO: *It's my way of sticking it to the man.*

Assistant: *But, sir, you are the man.*

CEO: *Yes, I am.*

Assistant: *Then you're sticking it to yourself.*

CEO: *Maybe.*

In any event, you don the leadership mantle. Like one of my younger clients, you find that balancing all the constituencies is not as easy from the inside as it appeared from the outside, and that rules and procedures are necessary for stability in the organization. You may even find that for the good of the whole organization, you can't tell the whole truth in a given situation. So, like many rebels before you, you find that governing with your rebel values intact is no easy task.

## BALANCING VISION AND VALUES

Your issue is treated in a new book on George W. Bush, *Rebel-in-Chief*. The author Fred Barnes is executive editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard* and co-host of a Fox News Channel program. He characterizes Bush's typical conduct as edgy, blunt, self-confident, a bit smart-alecky, disdainful of what the media icons are peddling.



Wayne Caskey

Barnes states that Bush has a vision [whether you agree with it or not] of where he wants to take the nation and the world, "despite his wise-guy tendencies and cocky demeanor."

So, as a Harley CEO, your task is to keep your vision without sacrificing your values. How do you do that?

David Jones, a Georgian philosopher-biker offers a suggestion in the *Full-Throttle Aristotle* chapter on "The Dao of Riding." He states that

Motorcycles bring their riders into the moment needing to be attentive and aware learning to balance and blend with the forces of sun, wind, gravity and the presence of other people [and the need] to respond appropriately to all beings encountered.

So this is your challenge. If you keep your vision and stay in the moment, which you learned as a rebel riding your real or figurative Harley, you'll get to the end of the road, appropriately accommodating all the elements and people you encounter along the way. If you lose that presence in the

moment, you're open to the risks of the road, and the remains of your literal or figurative body may be found along the shoulder of that road you've taken.

## STEEP CURVES

Sometimes renaming yourself from rebel to "change leader" makes it go down easier for the organization. However, in his article, *Rebel with a Cause*, Estienne de Beer states that by whatever name you're known by, you have to fight an uphill battle against self-justified complacency and inward focus. [Change leaders] create cold sweats with the custodian of the status quo. The reason for this: their unconventional way of viewing business and threatening that which is familiar.

When I succeeded the founder of a Texas restaurant chain in my first CEO position, I announced it was a new day, that I expected independent judgment from my entire executive team, and those that exhibited dependence on me as they had on the founder would not survive. Try as they might, there were a few who could not adapt. They had grown that way. It was a sad but necessary day when I had to terminate their employment.

## SELF-ACCEPTANCE

What's the key to being an effective Harley CEO? It's certainly vision and values. But there's more. It's a self-acceptance and appreciation of who you are - both a rebel and a leader. As Edward Field said in his poem, *Mae West*,

Every work and look and movement  
spells Independence:  
she likes being herself.

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