

“The product-focused leader.” That’s one of the most underappreciated necessities for many enterprises, especially in our tech era. So, I’ll say it again: the product-focused leader. Now, just what does that mean?

Well, it means that the leader of the business or the nonprofit—that’s often the founder—not only starts with an initial focus on the special differentiation of the product offering, but the leader also continues to pay careful attention to the ongoing feature development and delivery to customers. Of course, that’s what this product focus is all about: the customers, the end-users being served at the very highest levels.

Some of the most amazing leaders in history are all about this focus on the essential deliverables at the functional level. In the business world, that is called being a “product-focused CEO.” And at or near the top of the list in recent times would be Steve Jobs of iPod and iPhone fame. Walter Isaacson, the biographer of great business innovators, has pointed out that Jobs would isolate himself with his right-hand person, Jony Ive, then they would carefully go over every detail of the iPhone—“not just the phone, but the plug, the jack, and the way the wire coiled.” How many CEOs truly consider it vitally important to focus on that level of detail of their core product offering? But look at Jobs’ results—his iPhone design has served Apple very well! With little significant variation in the product in the years since Jobs’ death in 2011, Apple has moved to becoming worth over a trillion dollars in stockholder value at the time of recording this episode. Now that’s real staying power for a tech product!

Likewise, another business CEO, Bill Gates, was famous for being deeply involved in the development of his company’s long-running core product, software. Even when Gates stepped down as CEO in 2014, he continued on as technology adviser at Microsoft—that’s the attention he wanted to continue to be paid to the core business of Microsoft, technology. And how about a legendary figure who is perhaps less well-known but highly effective in understanding his product-offering landscape—that’s Larry Ellison, the CEO of Oracle, the major ERP software provider serving countless large corporations, wrangling his way into having a perceived must-have product.

But, wait a minute, you might say, what about delegation of authority by the CEO? Shouldn’t a truly great CEO get *out* of the details? Besides that, you just gave technology company examples, and most companies are not tech companies!

Well, perhaps, but the complexity of our tech-enabled world is such that effective leaders must be connected with exactly what specific offerings they are putting on the table and in their pipeline. You see, the business and nonprofit landscape is littered with CEOs that last three, five, maybe seven years without truly grasping how their enterprise’s offering needed to be built, re-built, or migrated to respond to a radically-changing, tech-enabled, innovation-rich landscape. And that can mean knowing exactly what is needed in relation to the enterprise’s core offerings. Do you doubt this? Just ask the mall owners and retailers who, not very long ago, thought that the web and Amazon were pretty irrelevant to “real” retail.

And it really does go beyond tech. You see this in fashion designers being the true lead in their clothing companies, which in turn live or die based upon this season’s product offerings by the designers. How about restaurants where food is king...and therefore, the executive chef substantially determines the success or failure of the enterprise? That’s the necessity of product-focused leadership!

Here’s the reality: the consequences of leaders not effectively driving their core product offerings are devastating to the enterprise. So, we can talk about the success of a Jobs or a Gates, but it’s probably more demonstrative to talk about the companies and nonprofits that drift. How about the so-called “seven sisters” alongside IBM comprising the eight companies selling computer-mainframes in the 1970s? Listen to these corporate giants’ names: Burroughs, UNIVAC, NCR, Control Data Corporation, Honeywell, General Electric, RCA. All were positioned to be major leaders in tech today. But where does each of those seven stand now, say, in comparison to Microsoft and Apple, which were just being started in the 1970s?

Now consider middle-management that astutely upholds product-focused leadership! Unlike Gates and Jobs who were at the top, those leaders must often fight bureaucracy, conventional wisdom, wrong values, poorly-informed priorities driven top-down, and technology laggards. Here's where we look again to John Boyd, the maverick fighter pilot and unparalleled top gun instructor who became an elite fighter jet designer. As Boyd stayed with the military, he did battle with key high-ranking officers, huge defense contractors, and military bureaucrats, who often worked together to design fighter planes that weighed too much and sported unnecessary, new-fangled bells and whistles that truly would keep wartime fighter pilots from winning air battles.

And what was Boyd's response, time after time? Tenacious, career-risking opinions that were grounded in the real world of warfare. In meeting after meeting with defense contractors and with powerful military officers who outranked him, Boyd used his field experience and superior working knowledge of aeronautics to defeat lesser airplane designs that were actually harboring agendas having little to do with success in real warfare. Sad to say, by the account of his masterful biographer John Coram, Boyd's career inevitably hit a ceiling, largely due to his risky battles with the lesser competence in the organization. Part of Boyd's charm from our later vantage point was that he knew he was risking just that, but, to Boyd, getting the right product in the hands of the pilots actually risking their lives trumped everything else.

And guess what? Boyd's design savvy ruled for decades—he is indeed worthy of unusual remembrance, even as a host of his lesser contemporaries surpassed him in rank. How many colonels have such impact as to richly deserve a very engaging biography and the thanks of a nation? That's the promise of being a leader fanatically focused on the end-user experience, in Boyd's case, with the lives of pilots at stake.

And, yeah, just how about the Kingdom of God? The amazing, one-of-a-kind offering of citizenship in the Kingdom was finished by Jesus' death on the Cross. And in turn, we as believers are charged with the privilege of proclaiming that true gospel—that is, telling everyone we know about the offer of good news of grace and salvation for whosoever who would respond in faith.

You see, a key part of the story of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is deep involvement in the design and offering of the most amazing transaction placed before humanity. So we rightly gasp at God's love in leadership. Was our Father in heaven integrally involved in the giving of His Son on the Cross? Yes! And doesn't Jesus command us as believers to go forth and make disciples, proclaiming the good news that Jesus offered Himself in our place? Yes! And isn't the Holy Spirit sent to empower believers to witness of this great offering to the uttermost parts of the earth? Yes! God still remains intimately involved in it all!

Well, then, how about churches? In your local community, are most pastors and elders shepherding their churches to the opportunity of participating, of responding to this event of surpassing greatness—the Cross? Are they crafting the tactics necessary to truly “go forth and make disciples,” sensitive to how that is best done even while relentlessly pressing forward with the Great Commission? That is, are these leaders actually product-focused leaders who are keeping the main thing the main thing?

For nearly a couple of millennia, God—our Founder and Finisher—has always found a way to lift up new churches who are serious about “going forth and making disciples,” locally *and* globally. Sure, some eras seem to have been pretty dry spiritually, and in our current era there are plenty of unfocused and unfruitful travel jaunts promoted as mission trips. But the adding of hundreds of millions of believers worldwide in the last hundred years or so has got to have heaven rejoicing!

So, what's your full-time ministry? Business executive? Non-profit leader? Are you focused like a laser beam on being a product-focused leader, the kind of leader who lives large in making the details of your organization's offering work significantly in the lives of customers or end-users or believers? You go!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Is your organization's CEO a product-focused leader? Has he or she, in the name of delegation and perceived leadership, unwisely put his or her head in the sand and given crucial product-offering direction of the enterprise to others? Give examples amplifying your conclusion about your enterprise's status and make concrete recommendations about next steps.
2. Do you personally have the fullness of understanding of current tech and innovation trends necessary for effective leadership? If so, what regimen fosters your knowledge? If not, have you delegated essential tasks to others that may haunt you and your organization, like many retail leaders ignoring Amazon for years? What are your action steps to become more product-focused?
3. Just what does the Church have to offer the world? If it's "knowing nothing except Christ and Him crucified" as the Apostle Paul wrote, what is your church's track record proclaiming this "product-offering?" Be specific. If your local church's focus is not Christ and Him crucified, why not? Be specific.