

# The Pros and Cons of Cult Personality CEOs

In Greek mythology, Icarus' father warns his son not to fly too close to the sun or too close to the sea. In either case, the wax on his homemade wings would be destroyed, so a middle height is necessary. Buoyed by hubris, Icarus goes too high, and his wings melt. He falls into the ocean and drowns.

CEOs can learn an essential lesson from this myth.

Today's meltdowns occur mostly online via social media, where the intersection of CEO and company reputations must be managed with care and foresight throughout the 24/7 news cycle. Let the Twitter bird's wings serve as a reminder of how quickly that delicate balance can be destroyed, leading to potentially damaging consequences for company leaders, employees, and stakeholders.

With CEOs engaging more than ever in non-revenue driving activities, from the sociopolitical to environmental spheres, developing an integrated strategy for navigating these issues is now required. According to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, "Your brand is what other people say about you when you leave the room." This definition must apply both to your company and its leader's personal reputation.

In securing and upholding your own company's ideal level of CEO engagement, you'll create the right conditions for longevity and strength. There are variables to weigh and plenty of lessons—both mythical and real—to draw from. Here are some pros and cons to consider from the experiences of strong-minded and vocal CEOs.

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## Pros

### 1 Team Integration

CEOs with loyal followings can drive excitement around a brand and everything it touches. This ongoing, broad awareness—not necessarily tied to a particular service or product launch—can attract investors who want to work with a company whose CEO they believe in.

Think of Elon Musk, whose influence extends far beyond the innovations of his companies Tesla and SpaceX. In symbolizing the future, he leverages that power through his public persona. Or Oprah Winfrey, whose OWN Network continues to evolve and shape public consciousness. Through her eponymous show, her book club stamp of approval, and her SuperSoul TV series and podcast, Oprah has launched countless careers and ideas. In response to her 2018 Golden Globes speech, there's even been talk of her [launching a political career](#) (though she recently [debunked these rumors](#)).

### 2 “Parallel Brand” Benefits

When a CEO is personally linked to philanthropy, his or her company reaps the benefits. This kind of goodwill can improve company culture and attract talent, bolstering its reputation as a progressive, socially minded place of work.

Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard embodies such personal and corporate brand integration: The author of [Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman](#) has a no-holds-barred approach to environmental activism.

In a profile titled “Patagonia’s Philosopher-King,” [The New Yorker reports](#): “[Chouinard] has frequently disappeared for months, sometimes for half the year, to fish, climb, kayak, surf, ski—and preserve—the planet’s untamed precincts.” Additionally, this past December, [Fast Company posted](#), “Not only did [Patagonia] turn its website into a

battlefront declaring ‘The President Stole

Your Land’ on its home page, but they filed suit to block the [Trump] administration’s plan to shrink the two national monuments.”

Chouinard’s uncompromising integrity is woven into his company’s manufacturing and customer service, and that reputation draws in customers. In his book, [Forbes reports](#), Chouinard says sales grew 25% in the middle of the 2008–09 financial crisis, and a company statement said profits tripled between 2008 and 2014.

### 3 Contagious Curiosity

Highly engaged and opinionated CEOs tend to be curious. Their constant inquiry and exploration of critical questions—both internally and publicly—drive ongoing improvement in both their personal lives and at their companies.

“In my own research for my book, *A More Beautiful Question*,” [writes journalist Warren Berger in Harvard Business Review](#), “I found numerous examples of current-day entrepreneurs and innovators—including Netflix’s Reed Hastings, Square’s Jack Dorsey, and the team behind Airbnb—who relied on curious inquiry as a starting point to reinventing entire industries.”

Berkshire Hathaway’s Warren Buffett is another example of how continuous learning can lead to well-founded judgments, resulting in a highly respected public and corporate persona. As [CNBC reported](#) last year, “Buffett has also always been a reader... he said he lived his college days in the school library. Today, at 86, Buffett says he reads between five and six hours a day, and particularly loves biographies.”

## Cons

### 1 Reckless Endangerment

If your CEO is prone to ill-considered or inappropriate remarks or actions, your company is at high-risk for media scrutiny and abrupt changes in leadership.

American Apparel founder Dov Charney, for instance, was forced out of his own company for [sexual harassment violations](#) and jeopardizing the welfare of children in [sexually explicit advertisements](#). In 2014, [The New York Times reported](#), “American Apparel’s share price has plunged more than 80% over the last five years... [And] financial companies flatly refused to have anything to do with American Apparel as long as Mr. Charney, 45, was at its helm.”

But Charney doesn’t exist in a vacuum. As the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements continue to permeate national conversations, organizations across industries must ensure they’re protecting employees from sexual harassment and gender discrimination, which might require disciplining and removing egregious CEOs.

## 2 War with the Board

When a CEO’s personal failings continually jeopardize the health of his or her company, its board of directors will take control. Such internal conflict can be ugly to the public eye.

Among the many scandals Uber has faced in recent years, Travis Kalanick’s argument with an Uber driver in February 2017—captured on a dash cam [video](#) and seen by the world—was a final straw. A few months later, [The New York Times reported](#) that he had stepped down as CEO of Uber “after a shareholder revolt made it untenable for him to stay on at the company.”

In today’s hyperconnected work environment, CEOs’ actions are more viewable than ever before. While this transparency can foster trust with customers, it can also show a side of a CEO’s personality that is undesirable and highly damaging. As seen with Uber, when such an instance occurs, it’s up to a company’s boardroom to make a difficult, executive decision regarding its CEO’s fate.

## 3 Excess Charisma Turned Toxic

[According to Harvard Business Review](#), individuals who self-nominate for leadership

often ascend by bullying and dominating others. “This is one of the principal reasons for the low representation of female leaders in senior political or corporate roles; it also explains why the few women who managed to break through the glass ceiling exhibit more aggressive, ruthless, and pathologically ambitious personalities than their male counterparts (think Marissa Mayer or Margaret Thatcher).”

As Yahoo’s CEO from 2012 to 2017, Mayer attracted intense criticism for her opulent lifestyle despite the company’s financial struggles. After several years of living in the penthouse suite at the Four Seasons Hotel in San Francisco, she threw a multi-million-dollar Great Gatsby-themed company holiday party, alienating customers and stakeholders. In late 2015, [CBS reported](#), “Eric Jackson, a Yahoo investor who wants Mayer removed, claimed the [holiday] party cost \$7 million in a presentation to shareholders.”

[Bloomberg later reported](#) that the board withheld Mayer’s 2016 bonus after it was revealed that hacks of Yahoo had exposed hundreds of millions of users’ personal information. In 2017, she was forced to testify before Congress about the breach, and later that year, she stepped down as CEO when Verizon acquired Yahoo in a multibillion-dollar deal.

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