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What's On the Minds of CEOs Today? Insights from Pedro Hipólito



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Today's CEOs face uncertainty on many fronts, from economic volatility, inflationary pressure, geopolitical upheaval, and cyber risk, to trade-policy shifts, supply chain pressures, talent shortages, and the rapid acceleration of AI. Successful CEOs are confronting these realities head on, balancing short-term pressures with long-term transformation and looking for new ways to drive resilience, innovation, and growth.

Rethinking Leadership in a FLUX context We live FLUX world—Fast, Liquid, Uncharted, and eXperimental where change is happening faster than our ability to understand it. Organizations are transforming, generations coexist with different rhythms and values, and technology redefines, day by day, what it means to work, learn, and lead. What was once predictable has become fluid, interconnected, and in a state of constant reinvention.

For decades, leadership meant mastering the business, accumulating experience, and having the right answers. Today, leadership demands something different: questioning certainties and letting go of entrenched mental models. In a context where knowledge is updated in real time, the true differentiator is the ability to relearn with curiosity.

Leading with Flexibility

But the flexibility that the present demands goes beyond technical adaptation—it is also emotional and relational. Leading well also means being able to “agree to disagree”: sustaining the tension between control and flexibility, accepting divergence, and fostering a genuine exchange of ideas. Leaders who can embrace different perspectives and handle ambiguity without imposing uniformity are the ones who foster healthier, more innovative, and resilient cultures.

Leading in a global context also means recognizing diversity as a source of richness. Today, different nationalities, cultures, and generations coexist within the same teams, each relating to work in distinct ways. For those who manage teams, this presents significant challenges and the need for constant learning. Cultivating leadership means nurturing how these differences come together, learn from one another, and build a shared understanding.

Mounting Pressures and Declining Confidence

At the same time that leadership is demanding new sensitivities, CEOs are under increasing pressure not only to protect performance, but to transform their businesses fast enough to keep up with technology and changing markets.

The PwC's 29th Global CEO Survey shows a marked decline in CEO confidence about short-term growth. Only 30% of CEOs say they are very or extremely confident about revenue growth over the next 12 months, down from 56% in 2022. Thirty-one percent say their companies are highly or extremely exposed to a significant financial loss from cyber threats in the year ahead, and 29% say tariffs will reduce their company's net profit margin over the next 12 months.

Amidst Declining Optimism, CEOs Pursue Innovation

At the same time, 42% say their companies have started to compete in new sectors in the last five years, and among CEOs planning at least one major acquisition, 44% expect to do deals outside their existing sector. Many of today's most forward-looking leaders are seeking growth by broadening their markets, rethinking their models, and moving beyond traditional boundaries.

Leading CEOs are also using productivity as a multiplier. That means growth-oriented strategies including: connecting data and analytics instead of siloing information, enhancing technologies, upskilling workforces, funding growth while managing expenses, and aligning the organization behind a clear vision. In a business climate where speed and adaptability matter more than ever, productivity is no longer just about efficiency; it is a key enabler of reinvention and growth.

Pedro Hipólito, Managing Partner at IMSA Search Global Partners Portugal and Partner at Argo, shares: “Navigating through today's challenges while projecting a positive outlook isn't easy, but it is critical for success at the top. Most of the CEOs we work with understand the need to project optimism. They need to inspire their investors as well as their workforce. Even as they control costs, they look for ways to innovate and drive growth.”

Prioritizing Transformation Through AI: Interest Is High, Returns Are Uneven

AI remains one of the defining issues on CEOs' minds. The top question for CEOs today is whether they are transforming their businesses fast enough to keep up with technology, including AI. Yet while interest and investment remain high, financial returns are still uneven. About 30% of CEOs say their companies have realized additional revenue from AI in the past 12 months, and 26% say AI has lowered costs, but 56% say they have seen neither higher revenue nor lower costs from AI. Only 12% say AI has delivered both revenue gains and cost benefits. (PwC's 29th Global CEO Survey)

This is a critical leadership challenge. CEOs clearly believe AI matters, but many organizations are still in the gap between investment and measurable enterprise-wide return. The implication is that CEOs must do more than simply support experimentation. They need to build strong foundations, clearly communicate strategy, and ensure the organization is capable of translating AI ambition into operational impact.

Corporate Governance and Trust

Board effectiveness remains a pressing issue for today's CEOs, especially as business strategies shift and the operating environment grows more complex. At the same time, trust has become a major leadership issue. The CEO Survey found that 66% of CEOs say stakeholder trust concerns have arisen in at least one area of business operations over the last 12 months. In an era of increasing scrutiny from boards, investors, employees, regulators, and the public, CEOs must lead with transparency, sound governance, and clear accountability.

Pedro Hipólito shares: “We work with CEOs on building effective boards. The skills they seek are shifting. While corporate financial and operational expertise are important, CEOs increasingly value regulatory, environmental, and industry-specific knowledge and experience.” and adds, “The best leaders are those who maintain trust through transparency, show resilience under pressure, ask the right questions, and empower others to lead and grow alongside them.”

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