

## **The uncomfortable CEO** / By José I. Sordo / Chicago, IL, June 20, 2013.

The CEO is responsible for leading the development and execution of the Company's long term strategy with a view to create shareholder value. However, what differentiates them apart from a below average to exceptional performance? The strongest CEOs approach work in a very consistent fashion: They are uncomfortable! An uncomfortable CEO is interested in what's right, rather than who's right; has a general dissatisfaction with the status quo, looking for ways to explore new boundaries.

Regardless of the nature of your business, the geography in which you compete or your market share, your company relies on information technology to operate, ranging from basic cost optimization, to digesting huge amounts of market data, running operations, transacting funds, designing products, streamlining processes, recruiting talent, commercializing business data and, wherever possible, transforming entire marketplaces. Information technology has become truly ubiquitous.

I would like to quote a key learning obtained from three memorable meetings during my consulting experience. The first one was actually a question. A key vendor turned to me and asked: "What's your comfort level with this idea?" The second was a statement by an associate in my own firm: "I know this is a powerful idea, but I feel a little uncomfortable with it." The third one was from a project manager planning to implement a new work process. She simply said: "I'm just not comfortable".

Those three separate observations, uttered in three separate meetings, had three things in common:

- 1) They were all centered on the notion of comfort, and how important it is to be comfortable with an idea before you go ahead with it.
- 2) Each one of those remarks turned out to be dead-end roads for an idea that just might have been a great one.
- 3) In our business lives, we are going to have to choose between comfort and progress.

I cannot think of a single progressive idea—in history, culture, business, or information technology—that was comfortable to contemplate when it was first proposed.

Disruptive ideas, almost by definition, have cutting edges. Cutting edges are rarely safe—and they are never comfortable. Disruptive ideas question the sanctity of old ideas—and questioning sanctity is not comfortable. Disruptive ideas are usually risky—and risk is almost always uncomfortable.

And yet, if the only decisions we ever made were the decisions with which we were comfortable, history would have unfolded differently. Columbus would never have discovered America because it can hardly have been comfortable to contemplate sailing off the edge of a flat world. Steve Jobs would never have revitalized Apple from near bankruptcy to profitability during his second CEO term because it cannot have been comfortable to create an entirely new market (e.g. "1,000 songs in your pocket" as he referred to the first iPod in 2001).

John E. Pepper (Former P&G CEO and former Director of the Walt Disney Company) once wrote: "Embarking on something that you are not sure you can do—but being sure it is right and that you have to try—we have found that many of the most important things in life are like that."

Some business leaders are not comfortable with how information technology is changing their business model. But, it is not the job of a business leader to be comfortable! There's a dictum that says "Comfort breeds complacency, and complacency breeds failure". Complacent teams and organizations are on a slippery slope to self-destruction. Have you and your team become too comfortable?

The next time your leadership team presents you with a strategic plan, listen to the proposal and ask about two important things: (1) the business success criteria, and (2) the change- management plan. More importantly, make sure your team members understand the full scope of the business, and that they are working with you to transform the company. Tell them also that you are looking for counsel, but not for comfort.

**Remember nothing important ever happens when you are comfortable.**

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**José Ignacio Sordo Galarza** shares his international experience and provocative ideas written in his book "**The Uncomfortable CEO**". He describes tips or recommended CEO leadership actions so that executives can put learning into practice.