Why CEOs Struggle With the Truth

17.11.2025 14:49:50 | Management Insights, Lukas Michel | 0 Comments | CEO

And Why Mastery in Management Begins With Seeing the Unmanaged

Most CEOs will tell you that they want better data. They say it in boardrooms, at offsites, and on stages at leadership conferences: "*We need more transparency. We need better insights. We need real-time information.*"

And they mean it—at least in principle.

But ask their teams for the same view and you hear a different story. Transparency is good, but only to a point. Data is welcome, as long as it does not destabilize the narrative. And conversations about management quality—the real conversation that shapes organizational performance—are avoided, postponed, or delegated.

This is not hypocrisy. It is not even denial.

It is a structural feature of modern executive life.

CEOs crave data, but the truth is difficult to handle—and often quietly unwelcome.

CEOs believe in transparency, but not necessarily in scrutiny.

CEOs pride themselves on great management, but rarely examine their own contribution to unmanaged states.

This is the paradox that silently constrains performance, growth, and development. And it is why many organizations continue muddling through, even when surrounded by dashboards, scorecards, and KPIs.

In this article, we explore why this tension exists, how it undermines organizational potential, and why new tools—such as the Global Executive Survey, Organization Twins, and the methodology detailed in Unmanaged—finally make it possible for CEOs to engage in the management conversation they have long

avoided.

The CEO’s Blind Spot: Certainty Without Clarity

Spend time with CEOs and you quickly notice a recurring theme. Regardless of industry, country, or organizational maturity, few leaders doubt the quality of their own management. They may lament external conditions. They may question the capabilities of middle management. They may complain about the culture, the market, or the pace of technological change.

But their own management?

Their own contribution to performance, progress, or stagnation?

Rarely questioned. Almost never discussed.

There is a reason for this.

1. CEOs rise because they are confident, not because they are introspective.

The executive ascent rewards decisiveness, conviction, and persistence—traits that are essential but become problematic when misapplied to self-assessment.

2. Every CEO inherits a narrative of competence.

Boards select CEOs based on confidence in their leadership and management capabilities. Once appointed, questioning one’s management becomes an act of dissonance: “*If my management is part of the problem, why did they appoint me?*”

3. Organizational systems protect the CEO from uncomfortable truths.

Senior leaders receive filtered information. Middle managers clean up contradictions before they arrive. Data surfaces, but meaning gets lost long before insights reach the top.

4. Transparency threatens identity.

Talking openly about unmanaged states requires admitting that something in the system—often something in leadership—is not working. That is emotionally and politically difficult.

The result is a leadership paradox: the closer executives get to the top, the less they know about what actually happens inside

their organizations. Not because people lie—though that happens too—but because the system is built to preserve stability, harmony, and authority.

This paradox is the root of unmanaged states.

Understanding “Unmanaged”: The Hidden State Between Order and Failure

“Unmanaged” does not mean chaos.

It does not mean crisis.

It does not mean incompetence.

It means something subtler—and far more common.

Unmanaged is the condition where work gets done, but without the standards, coherence, and quality of management required for sustainable performance.

Organizations in unmanaged states still deliver products, serve customers, and generate revenue. But they do so inefficiently, inconsistently, and reactively. Energy is consumed by compensating for poor coordination, unclear priorities, and ineffective practices.

Left unaddressed, unmanaged states become the silent killers of performance.

CEOs generally don’t see unmanaged states because unmanaged is not dramatic. It’s not newsworthy. It doesn’t trigger board-level alarms. It simply erodes advantage—quietly, continuously, and predictably.

To see unmanaged states, CEOs need a new level of diagnostic clarity—one that most organizations do not possess.

Why Traditional Diagnostics Fall Short

Surveys, performance dashboards, employee engagement tools, and consultant assessments all claim to reveal organizational truth. But most reveal only surface realities.

Why?

Because they focus on observable events, not management patterns.

Because they measure attitudes and opinions, not the craft of how work actually gets done.

Because they fragment the organization into silos of data, rather than reveal the systemic interplay that determines performance.

And because employees—especially senior leaders—shape responses based on what they believe is safe, not what is true.

If you ask executives whether their management is working, 70–90% will tell you yes.

If you ask teams quietly, they often tell you another story entirely.

Unmanaged states live in this gap between perception and reality.

To bridge that gap, CEOs need tools that uncover nuances, not merely numbers.

The Global Executive Survey: Seeing What Leaders Usually Miss

The Global Executive Survey emerges from 25 years of research across 500 organizations. Its unique strength is its ability to detect fine nuances in management practice—subtle patterns that leaders rarely notice but that materially affect performance.

It assesses how organizations:

- make decisions,
- collaborate and coordinate,
- learn and adapt,
- innovate and improve,
- align strategy with execution,
- and build human capability.

But more importantly, it reveals the gaps—the differences between what leaders believe and what teams experience; between what is said and what is done; between the intended

management and the lived management.

This matters because unmanaged states are most visible in micro-behaviors:

- delays in decisions that nobody admits,
- improvisation treated as agility,
- accidental prioritization,
- overreliance on heroic individuals,
- leadership attention that shifts with every crisis.

The Survey turns these patterns into data.

And once something becomes data, it becomes discussable.

But Data Alone Is Not Enough: The Conversation Is What Matters

Even when CEOs receive actionable data, the hardest step remains:
talking about it openly.

Data challenges authority.

It questions assumptions.

It brings the implicit into the explicit.

And because of this, data often triggers defensiveness rather than curiosity.

This is why the Organization Twin was developed.

Where the Survey reveals, the Organization Twin enables.

The Organization Twin: A Safe Space for Difficult Truths

The Organization Twin creates a digital replica of the organization’s management reality. It visualizes data from the Survey, operational indicators, leadership assessments, and capability patterns. But most importantly, it provides a *neutral, fact-based, non-threatening* space for teams to explore the truth together.

In conversation after conversation, executives describe the Organization Twin as a mirror—a rare mirror that reflects without judgement, attribution, or accusation.

Why does this matter?

Because CEOs rarely get to see what is really happening.

Because teams rarely get to say what they truly know.

Because organizations rarely learn together, openly, honestly.

The Twin makes it possible to say things like:

- "*We are strong in strategic thinking but weak in coordinated execution*."
- "*Our decision-making is fast at the top but slow everywhere else*."
- "*We talk about empowerment, but accountability still runs vertically*."
- "*We rely heavily on heroic individuals to compensate for structural weaknesses*."

These conversations are not possible in traditional leadership meetings.

But inside the Twin, they unfold naturally—because the data does the talking.

And once teams begin talking about their management reality, something transformative happens:

Unmanaged states become visible.

Gaps become solvable.

Leaders start acting—not guessing.

This is the beginning of mastery in management.

Mastery in Management: The Shift CEOs Must Lead

Unmanaged, the book, synthesizes 25 years of research into a single observation:

Organizations fail not because they lack intelligence, resources, or strategy, but because they lack mastery in management.

Mastery in management is not perfection.

It is not a new operating model.

It is not a list of leadership competencies.

It is the disciplined craft of getting work done in a dynamic world—intentionally, coherently, and continuously improving.

The book describes nine attributes of mastery:

- Diagnostic
- Systemic
- Human
- Holistic
- Regenerative
- Integrated
- Distributed
- Unique
- Interactive

These attributes provide the standards and methodology for modern management. They give CEOs a framework to move beyond muddling through and into intentional, evidence-based practice.

But why does this matter now?

Because today’s environment punishes unmanaged states much faster than in the past.

Market shifts are quicker.

Employee expectations are higher.

Technological cycles are shorter.

Stakeholder scrutiny is sharper.

Organizations cannot afford to rely on heroic leaders compensating for broken systems. They cannot rely on clever strategies compensating for weak execution. They cannot rely on culture slogans compensating for unclear priorities.

They need mastery.

And mastery begins with transparency.

And transparency requires courage.

The CEO’s Real Decision: Defend the Narrative or Discover the Truth

Every CEO ultimately faces a quiet but consequential choice:

Do I want to be right, or do I want to know?

Leaders who choose “being right” build protective systems.

Leaders who choose “knowing” build adaptive organizations.

The future belongs to the latter.

But the journey is delicate. CEOs must:

- invite transparency without threatening identity,
- explore unmanaged states without triggering defensiveness,
- engage in management conversations without fear of loss of authority.

The Global Executive Survey, the Organization Twin, and the methodology of *Unmanaged* make this possible. They provide CEOs with a safe, structured, evidence-based way to enter the conversation they have avoided for years—the conversation about their own management.

This conversation is the hinge between stagnation and transformation.

Between muddling through and mastery.

Between managing the past and shaping the future.

The New Reality for CEOs: The Best Are Those Who Learn Fastest

The most successful CEOs of the next decade will not be the most visionary, charismatic, or experienced. They will be the most learnable.

They will be the ones who:

- seek insight instead of reassurance,
- use data to deepen awareness rather than confirm assumptions,
- invite teams into shared sense-making,
- build organizations capable of continuous adaptation.

In other words:

They will be the CEOs who stop managing—and start mastering.

Mastery is no longer a luxury. It is the core competence of leadership in an uncertain world. And it begins with a simple but profound act:

Looking honestly at what is unmanaged.

- Version zum Drucken
- Per E-Mail versenden
- Newsletter abonnieren

- Twittern

No comments yet.