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Leadership Journeys

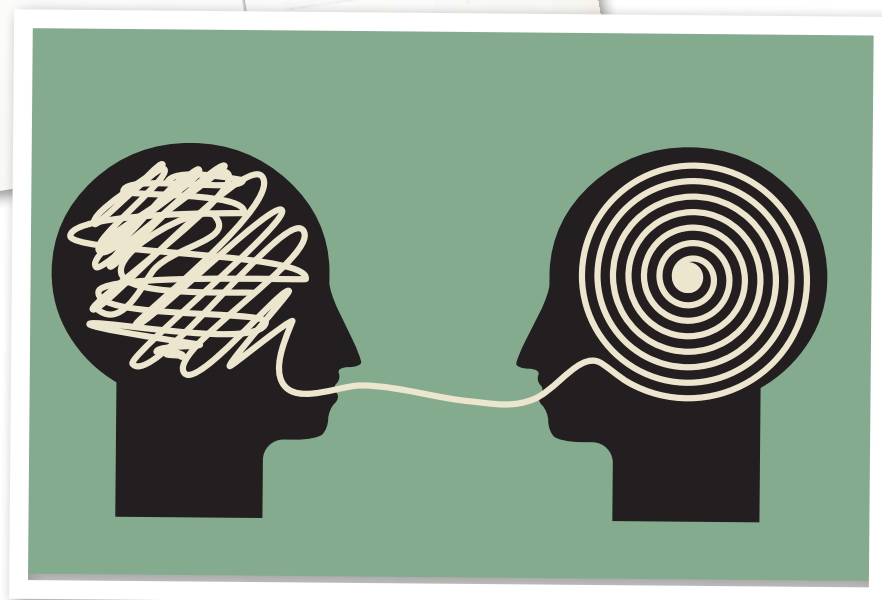
Mary Barra – Harnessing Kinetic Energy at General Motors

Since becoming CEO of General Motors, Mary Barra has been one of the world's most-watched executives. Like everyone else, we have been following the company's progress under Barra's leadership and would like to share some observations about her management style as she works to build upon the success of the past two years.

By Bob Rosen

When Mary Barra became CEO of General Motors, the auto industry was emerging from some difficult times, and GM was on the path to regaining some hard-won stability. In selecting Barra, the Board chose to tap homegrown talent – Barra came up through the ranks – rather than looking outside the company. Shortly after Barra took over, GM was confronted with the ignition switch crisis as well as a series of other recalls. Barra's knowledge of GM and its unique dynamics would prove critical as the company worked to regain its footing.

During this time of intense media scrutiny, it looked like Barra might be facing a no-win situation, or what some researchers call the 'glass cliff'. The term, coined by University of Exeter psychologists Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, suggests that women are breaking the glass ceiling only to tumble over a figurative cliff. Ryan and Haslam theorize that women are often promoted to dangerous jobs during a crisis – when the risk of failure is high – only to absorb the blame when their efforts fail or are slow to produce results.



Starting what was likely the roller coaster ride of a lifetime, Barra embraced the multitude of challenges the CEO role presented, marshalled her team and resources, and successfully avoided whatever glass cliff may have been on the horizon. In the process, she deployed what I like to call 'leadership jiu-jitsu' by tapping her deep knowledge of GM to both activate and direct the positive energy of her people. Ultimately, she helped lead the company out of the public relations crisis and established herself as the respected head of the global automaker. Today, two years later, she has been rewarded with another promotion: The combined role of Chairman and CEO.

As a company, the investment GM made in Barra has paid off. Starting her career there at age 18, Barra earned her engineering degree from General Motors Institute, a college owned by GM at the time. The company then sent Barra to Stanford University where she earned an MBA. In addition to helping build her academic credentials, GM also offered Barra a wide range of professional opportunities: Plant Manager, Detroit Hamtramck Assembly; Executive Vice President of Global Product Development, Purchasing and Supply Chain; Vice President of Global Manufacturing Engineering; Executive Director of Competitive Operations Engineering; and Vice President of Global Human Resources.

Being too close to a situation (or knowing an organization too well) can sometimes become a handicap. In Barra's case, it would seem she turned her closeness into a real strategic advantage. For example, when asked why she reduced GM's corporate dress code from 10 pages to 'dress appropriately' while she was running human resources, Barra told an interviewer: *"It really became a window into the change that we needed to make at General Motors...I can trust you with \$10 million of budget and supervising 20 people, but I can't trust you to dress appropriately? It was kind of a step in empowering...so this really encouraged people to step up."* Barra took her understanding of the specific environment at GM and was able to capture the kinetic energy within the system to create positive movement and change.

Rather than directly opposing or disagreeing with her managers, Barra channeled everyone's energy by empowering them to make some fairly obvious decisions for themselves. In the same interview, she added, *"I want them to take ownership of the rules and say 'You're accountable to lead your team.'"* That's leadership jiu-jitsu at work.

Leadership Lesson #1: Keep it honest and keep it simple.

Even before she was appointed CEO, Barra had a tendency to be remarkably candid and honest with GM staff. As head of Product Development, her main directive to engineers and designers was simple: *"No more crappy cars."* She elaborated on this idea in an interview with Fortune magazine, explaining that there were *"sometimes so many boundaries put on them [employees] that we didn't give them a recipe for success. So now we're saying no excuses. If it's budget, if it's resources, we have to do great cars, trucks and crossovers and it's our job to enable you to do that."*

In return for her candor, Barra appears to expect some frankness in return. She wants GM employees to speak up when something's wrong and to confront problems directly. To aid in that effort, she is leveraging social media. She blogs monthly on Linked In's Pulse, tweets regularly and posts to Facebook.

Reflect on your leadership...

Is your communication clear, honest and unequivocal? Are you using all available tools to convey, support and promote your leadership messages? Consider making your Twitter or Instagram account a place where your employees can connect with your thinking. Your associates want to know about you, how you approach a problem, what is important to you. They talk and speculate about you anyway. Like Barra, tell them who you are and what you are thinking.





Leadership Lesson #2: Make it about the company *and* the customer.

By many accounts, Barra attributes her success at GM to keeping the company's interests – and not her own career – the focus of her attention. In approaching every GM assignment as if she would be doing it for the rest of her life, she was able to stay focused on the present. And if a solid foundation is being built in the present, then the future will generally take care of itself.

Since becoming CEO, Barra's focus on the present has necessarily become more expansive. She and her leadership team have developed a new set of core values that reflect the way in which the company's objectives – and those of their customers – are essentially woven together:

- *Customers:* "We put customers at the center of everything we do. We listen intently to our customers' needs. Each interaction matters. Safety and quality are foundational commitments, never compromised."
- *Relationships:* "Our success depends on our relationships inside and outside the company. We encourage diverse thinking and collaboration from the world to create great customer experiences."
- *Excellence:* "We act with integrity. We are driven by ingenuity and innovation. We have the courage to do and say what's difficult. Each of us takes accountability for results and has the tenacity to win."

At our company, our goal is to "transform the world one leader at a time." It is, in fact, our mantra. At GM, Mary Barra describes their goal just as succinctly but with a slightly different focus: "This is all about winning customers one at a time."

Reflect on your leadership...

While Barra's career trajectory may not be the norm these days, her apparent message is important for leaders: We live in a complex world full of paradoxes and contradictions, and we need to manage these competing forces. For example, how do you cut costs and increase revenues? How do you take charge and let go? How do you stay confident enough to lead while remaining humble enough to listen and learn every day?

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Having the ability to transcend your personal agenda – and to create value for your company and your employees – is a daily challenge. Leadership itself is both personal and business. Every leader who wants to make a positive difference must reconcile this contradiction.

Leadership Lesson #3: Use kinetic energy to mobilize people.

Jiu-jitsu is a Japanese martial art. 'Jiu' is translated as supple and flexible. 'Jitsu' means art or technique, and represents turning a challenger's own energy toward him or herself rather than pushing back directly. From our point of view, Barra taps into forces coming at her and effectively redirects them. Rather than using a heavy-handed approach to break down barriers, she is using the art of leadership jiu-jitsu (as I like to call it), turning problems into opportunities, conflict into the source of solutions to transform the company. In doing so, she is also serving as the inspiration –and champion – of the new GM culture of accountability.

Reflect on your leadership...

Most people want their leaders to be authentic and to have integrity. They want leaders who challenge them with courageous conversations and who approach them with empathy, fairness and respect. As a leader, do you find yourself saying “No, you are wrong” or “I disagree” when concerns or problems are raised? Or do you respond with a question or comment that underscores your shared concern, but doesn't put the other person in a defensive position?

If you are willing to address others in a problem-solving manner, when there is doubt or confusion over a decision or direction being taken, then you will experience more collaboration and more positive energy. Reflecting critically on your own behaviour can help you identify how you may inadvertently be contributing to your organization's problems. Is the way you go about defining and solving problems a problem in and of itself? If necessary, change how you act and interact with others. Look for leadership opportunities where you can utilize kinetic energy to exercise some leadership jiu-jitsu and create positive change.

In her quest to redesign GM, Barra draws on her deep understanding of both human and engineering dynamics. From a human perspective, she amplifies and directs her people's energy by modeling authenticity, courage, integrity and resilience. From an engineering perspective, she employs tried-and-true engineering principles – shared and aggressive goals, collaboration across functions and built-in feedback loops. From my perspective, it is this combined mastery of the human and technical that makes Barra such a distinctive and appealing leader.



Bob Rosen is an organizational psychologist and author of six books, including his latest, The New York Times Bestseller Grounded: How Leaders Stay Rooted in an Uncertain World. His firm, Healthy Companies International (healthycompanies.com), has worked with Johnson & Johnson, Brinks, Northrop Grumman, Citigroup, PepsiCo, ING and PricewaterhouseCoopers among other major organizations.

Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

The publication presents the latest thinking and most recent developments in both academic and commercial executive education provision worldwide, what it is achieving and which are the best models for success, sharing the experience and expertise of top leaders and world class educators.

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