

Forbes

LEADERSHIP

How The CEO Of National Life Group Drives Continuous Improvement

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Organizations talk about continuous improvement. Better processes. Improved customer interactions. Product innovations. More efficient workflows. Enhanced financial results. But few apply this process to the heart of all improvement: leadership. Leaders drive improvement at every level of an organization. So, wouldn't it follow that leaders who are continually improving will drive improvement in the work they lead?

Mehran Assadi, the CEO of National Life Group, believes that the continuous improvement of his organization starts with him.

Every Sunday morning, Assadi brews a pot of coffee at home and reflects on his past week. He does this with deep intention: he seeks continuous improvement—in his personal and professional life. Assadi has done this weekly reflection consistently for the past twenty years. His focus on self-evaluation, serving others, daily learning, and what he calls the “seven Cs of leadership” have fueled his personal and organizational success for more than two decades.

Self-Evaluation

As CEO of a 168-year-old Vermont-based company that insures millions of people, Assadi knows that the success of his business depends on his leadership.



Mehran Assadi, President and CEO, National Life Group

In order to deliver on his organization's purpose of bringing peace of mind to its customers, he must be able to engage with those around him. In the insurance industry, there is nothing more important than ensuring that customers feel that their policies will be fulfilled when needed.

“I learned early in my career that leadership is a privilege and not an entitlement. Inspiring teammates to be their best and to reach their fullest potential is a priority for me,” Assadi says. To keep himself centered as a leader, he uses muscle memory—a method of consolidating a specific motor task into memory through

repetition. Basically, creating a muscle memory requires that you repeat the same behaviors over and over again until they become a natural extension of who you are. They are something you do but don't have to think about deliberately.

Since his first leadership role in the 1990s, Assadi religiously practices weekly self-evaluation, a ritual taught to him by a mentor early in his career. His Sunday morning process is the same every week, and it takes place in the den of his home before his family is awake.

“I walk back over my week,” Assadi explains, “working through meetings and decisions, assessing how I showed up. Showing up for me means that being an active listener is more important than speaking; it means that I have to seize opportunities to provide positive feedback as well as constructive coaching advice; it means that I have to invite debate and intellectual wrestling; it means that I have to welcome different opinions and points of view.”

Assadi's review of his week consistently leads him to the realization that there was something he could have done better, something that he could have tweaked or approached differently. “Some of my colleagues tell me that I'm too hard on myself or that I have overly tough standards. However, I feel that being focused as a leader is what my colleagues deserve,” Assadi affirms.

Serving Others

When a person moves from an individual contributor role or mindset to a people leader, they shift the focus of their work. They must serve others before themselves. This shift fosters growth and success for the leader and those they serve.

“I learned how to lead people from my mom and dad. When you’re watching your parents give so much to you and others, you learn how to show up in life,” Assadi suggests. While some people may not have been fortunate enough to have such a keen example of servant leadership in their childhood homes, most can think of someone in their lives who demonstrates the qualities well. This foundation is key to Assadi’s success as a leader.

According to Assadi, great leadership requires an element of IQ, plus emotional and social intelligence. “We are all born with certain gifts that are part of our DNA. If you have the IQ, can you teach people the emotional and social part? Maybe, but the key is finding satisfaction in serving others. You have to lead with a servant heart and show up in authentic ways,” Assadi insists.

Learning Every Day

Assadi attributes his dedication to lifelong learning to the childhood influences of his father. “I love learning,” Assadi declares. “When you learn, you are growing. I believe deeply that we can all improve ourselves daily. Self-improvement is a personal commitment.”

“Many people have a false belief that being a CEO means that you’ve gotten it all figured out. I feel the opposite. I work every day to be a better leader today than I was the day before,” Assadi explains.

Daily learning for Assadi may be as simple as watching how a teammate handles a sensitive situation or how she successfully influences others. His trick is to learn from those moments—he works to add the new skill to his muscle memory, and to make it part of his DNA.

Seven Cs Of Leadership

During his weekly ritual, Assadi focuses on areas he calls the “seven Cs of leadership.” This sequential framework provides a structure for assessing and measuring his effectiveness as a leader and for examining ways he can do better. By asking, “How well have I embraced these seven tenets during my week at work and in my personal life?” Assadi can identify the actions he needs to stop, start, or continue as a leader.

Assadi’s “seven C’s” of leadership are:

1. Comprehension—clarity of mind and thought. All leaders must be able to gather information by asking the right questions and listening intently to the responses. “This first C allows me to anticipate what is ahead and what changes in direction I will need to make to avoid danger and seize opportunities in my business and life,” Assadi explains. By being proactive in this way, a leader moves from firefighting to true strategic planning.

2. Competency—once a leader has a clear view of the road ahead, he must be able to navigate accordingly. “This requires that I be able to get the right people around me to help make the change happen,” Assadi says. He believes that clarity without competency has no value.

3. Confidence—having clarity and the skills to make needed directional changes reduces self-doubt. “Leaders who lack confidence struggle to make decisions and create a sense of uneasiness in those who follow them,” Assadi asserts. Conversely, a leader who exhibits confidence fosters confidence in those who follow him.

4. Courage—an element of personal risk is required of those who wish to succeed in life and business. However, Assadi warns that the risk must always be a calculated one. The right ideas are

meaningless if you don’t have the ability to turn them into reality. “Dreams without execution are hallucinations,” Assadi insists.

No one can know all the possible outcomes of a decision. A clear understanding of the landscape, proper preparation for the journey, and faith that you will get where you want to go creates fearless leaders. Such well-equipped leaders take paths others avoid. As we have seen from history, these less-travelled roads often lead to undiscovered opportunities and riches.

5. Conviction—doing the right thing, not just making the right decision. “As a leader, you must always ask: What is the right thing to do? It is about respect. If you do the right thing, people will have respect for you whether they like you or the decision itself,” Assadi suggests.

6. Communication—not just the ability to speak, but to listen, too. “Strong communication is about inspiring your team to become part of the solution and take their own personal risks. You must use words that they understand, instead of speaking over them,” Assadi explains.

Assadi started his career as a software engineer in 1982. At the time, people considered engineers geeks because they spoke in code. “We took pride in speaking in acronyms that no one else understood. I now lead a sales force of fourteen thousand. I must be able to effectively and clearly communicate with them. I practice speaking and listening. Considering that English is my second language, the challenge has been even greater for me. My focus is always on breaking my message down, not dumbing it down. You must make sure the person sitting across from you has an appreciation for what you are saying,” Assadi says.

7. Character—as a leader, people look to you for guidance. They watch what you do. Your actions often dictate behaviors

of others. “You have to be comfortable with living in a glass house,” Assadi says. People want to be led by leaders who have a solid and strong character. Good leaders engender a sense of trust and display a high level of ethics.

“My biggest commitment is to the people I serve,” Assadi says. “The decisions I make not only affect the life of those who follow me, but the lives of their families, too.” If you lead an organization of a thousand people and each has a spouse and two children, that is four thousand people. If you have one thousand customers, that is another four thousand people. Two thousand people turns into eight thousand. A leader must show those around him that he feels an obligation to his co-workers, customers, and their families to always do the right thing.

“Continuous improvement starts and ends with me. My weekly assessment ensures that I am giving my very best every day,” Assadi asserts. “I am not a finished product; I do make mistakes. The only difference is I am committed to learning from them. A leader must be at peace with the fact that he may be wrong from time to time,” Assadi adds.

Assadi first introduced the seven Cs at a National Life leadership conference a few years ago, where he presented awards to leaders who exhibited these traits. As the seven Cs support National Life’s values, mission, and

vision—informing processes from recruiting to leadership development to performance management—they align with the organization’s leadership and people efforts, and convey a consistent message and expectation.

One Person, One Leader

Assadi takes his leadership very seriously and believes it defines him in all avenues of his life. “You can’t be two people as a leader. The leader you are in the office must be the leader you are at home and in your community,” Assadi insists. All the same rules and his seven Cs apply to every aspect of his life. Business values are life values, and leadership is about giving in all areas of life.

“I teach my three sons the same lessons I teach my leaders at National Life. If you are giving, good things in life are going to happen to you. For me, it’s about spreading positive energy rather than being cynical. You need to inspire yourself and others to do great things instead of just looking for a big paycheck. When you do the right thing, everything else is going to take care of itself.”

Above all, Assadi treasures his quiet moments of reflection. He knows that those Sunday mornings make him a better leader and ultimately make National Life stronger. His stellar results support his assertion. National Life Group’s insurance sales have doubled since 2011, its customer base has grown from

796,000 in 2014 to 843,000 in 2016, and the face value of its life insurance policies just exceeded an historic milestone of \$100 billion—\$20 billion of it added in the last two years. He is one of the top-rated Glassdoor CEOs, with a 98 percent employee approval rating. 

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I write about people, purpose and leadership.

I am the author of *How to Find a Job, Career and Life You Love* and *CEO of Purpose Meets Execution*. While I wear many hats, my life and career has always been focused on people. As a human resources executive, entrepreneur, writer, coach, theater director, producer, speaker, consultant and founder of World Child Cancer USA, my passion and purpose involves enlightening, inspiring and teaching others with my work. For more than two decades, I have lived and worked throughout the U.S., Europe, Africa and Asia. My career credits include Head of Global Employee Engagement for Tesla Motors, International VP of HR for JDA Software, VP of HR for the Fortune 300 medical device company, Stryker and Broadway theatre. I am a contributing writer for Forbes and Huffington Post. I have previously studied Labor Relations at Cornell University, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, and Advanced Leadership at Harvard Business School. I hold a BA from California State University, Fullerton, as well as a BS and JD from Saratoga University School of Law.

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