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CL's clients tell us frequently about the growing importance of collaborative leadership in their organizations. In a 2007 CCL survey, for example, a group of global executives cited collaboration across business units and geographical boundaries as one of the most critical leadership skills for the future. The same survey found that leaders in Asia and Europe have embraced this style of leadership more quickly than their colleagues in the United States, where a command-and-control approach remains surprisingly prevalent in many companies.

From the President



But U.S. companies are becoming believers in collaboration as well—and John Chambers is leading the way. Chambers, chairman and CEO of Internet networking

and communications equipment giant Cisco Systems, credits collaborative leadership with transforming his company. Increasingly, the world is taking notice of his revolutionary approach to corporate leadership. *Harvard Business Review* devoted eight pages in its November 2008 edition to an in-depth interview with Chambers. He and Cisco also were the subjects of the cover story in *Fast Company* magazine's December 2008 issue. In Chambers's ideal company of the future, "you won't have to depend on the CEO anymore."

That's a far cry from Cisco's practice a decade ago, when the company faltered badly amid the bursting of the tech bubble. Faced with eight thousand layoffs and \$2 billion in write-downs, Chambers knew Cisco needed to change the way it operated. He found the answer in collaboration. As *Fast Company* recounts, Cisco used to rely on about ten top executives to make key decisions; the company now involves five hundred individuals in decision making. Promotions and executive compensation were based on individual unit performance; now, collective business goals take precedence in deciding pay and advancement. Innovation used to depend on the power of individual champions; now, boards and councils representative of the whole business drive key projects and new products. The bottom line is that profits are up and operating expenses are down.

This is not to say that creating a collaborative culture is easy. It's not. When Chambers began changing Cisco's leadership culture, he lost 20 percent of his top executives because they wouldn't buy into the new approach. The transition to collaboration, Chambers told *Harvard Business Review*, was "hard for me at first. . . . The minute I'd get into a meeting, I'd listen for about ten minutes while the team discussed a problem. I knew what the answer was, and eventually I'd say, 'All right, here's what we're going to do.'" When Chambers learned to check himself, he found that his teams made either the same decisions he would have made or—many times—better ones.

I have learned similar lessons in the more than a dozen leadership positions I have been privileged to hold over the years in the military, in higher education, and in the nonprofit world. It can be hard to sit and simply listen. In a fast-paced environment, it's tempting to make the calls and move on. Gripping authority too tightly, however, costs you innovative ideas, engaged employees, and many times the most valuable people in your talent pipeline. Letting go a bit—as Chambers and Cisco have found—might just take your organization's performance to a new level.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John R. Ryan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

John R. Ryan, president and CEO, CCL

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