

John Panichella on Creating a Unifying Culture



Q&A with the president and CEO of Solenis.

John Panichella is the president and CEO of Solenis, a leading global specialty chemical provider and one of only three water treatment companies with a global reach. Spanning 120 countries and five continents, Solenis currently has 5,200 employees and 40 manufacturing facilities. As the leader of such a large enterprise, John understands the importance of uniting everyone under a single culture.

The following are some of the most important leadership lessons John has learned throughout his career. We hope you'll take them to heart as you lead your own organizations.

On the value of experience

John: Exposure to customers early in my career was one of the luckiest things that happened to me. Upon graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, I had the opportunity to work as a technician for a sales company, which was an interesting choice since I was a chemistry major.

During this time, I learned how value is created in business — and that people and relationships are critical pieces of that process. The great thing about sales is that doing well usually means you get a chance to lead. As I improved, I progressed through various sales management roles. Without this leadership experience early in my career, I likely wouldn't be where I am today.

After branching out of the sales world, I found myself at the president level of a few companies. I started at Betz Laboratories, but a series of corporate acquisitions and restructurings eventually meant I worked for GE. It was a fascinating time that taught me a lot about talent management and how to develop people and culture.

After GE, I served in various executive roles at Ashland before taking on the role of president and CEO of Solenis. While it can be hard to reach the CEO level, I've found that it can work out if you hang in there — and have a little bit of luck. Most importantly, experience takes you far. You'll be expected to perform right away when you take the helm. That's when experience comes in handy.

One of the biggest lessons I took with me from all these experiences is the value of creating a culture that allows people to thrive. Even though everyone learns differently and has different perspectives and experiences, we can all be united under a common culture — as long as it permeates the entire organization.

On shifting a culture

John: When I stepped in as CEO of Solenis, I relied on my experience to work on shifting the vision and culture. Changing the culture is one of the hardest things I've ever done.

One of our primary goals was moving away from a storytelling mindset to a culture based on specific accountabilities. This meant that instead of relying on employee stories of why they didn't complete certain tasks, we would use cultural checkpoints and benchmarks to ensure that progress is made against our goals. My company has been working on this shift for five years now, and it's still an ongoing process. The biggest lesson I can share: Changing the culture of a company is all about consistent messaging, relentless communication, and metrics.

At Solenis, we built the culture around three things: people, performance, and results. These seem simple enough, but they're difficult to change.

For example, I received a low score on my first review while everyone else got above-average ratings. I was confused about what I did wrong. I realized the way performance was evaluated in the old culture was the reason. My rating hinged on whether we hit our sales goal, but the rest of the team was being graded on eight different things — only one of which was hitting the sales goal.

Changing the rating system to make it more accurate required an overhaul of things that had been in place for decades. I decided to rate everyone based on one or two major factors — the other items we previously scored would be expected of everyone. We now have cultural benchmarks that guide improvement.

In order to execute a massive project like changing company culture, you have to hold people accountable. I've found that breaking accountabilities down by function and tying them to metrics is the best way to do this. Making sure everyone explicitly knows what's expected of them overall — and in their specific roles — makes all the difference in shifting culture.

On recruiting the right team

John: In my experience, most people — especially Millennials — like to work for companies they can relate to. That's where culture comes into play. When you hire people who care about your company's purpose, they usually stick around and work hard. As a result, that's the first thing I consider when recruiting team members.

I learned early on that great people in the wrong culture are not going to perform well, but great people in a culture that fits their beliefs will be truly successful. People who are passionate about the work they're doing are the ones who will get the job done no matter the obstacles.

When I'm making hiring decisions, I also look for people who are creative and who enjoy a challenge. This is because my style of leading is to push people to do things they don't think

they can do on their own. This approach helps people learn and grow by gaining skills they never could have if someone had told them exactly what to do. At Solenis, that translates to a culture of asking questions. Instead of focusing on the negative and wondering what we're doing wrong, however, we take a positive approach and consider what we can do to make something better.

Lastly, I examine a person's expertise before making a decision — I prefer to hire experts over generalists. After all, it's easier to teach someone broad skills than it is to help someone become an expert at one thing.

On motivating others

John: We are all unique in what inspires us. As a leader, I make a concerted effort to tailor my approach to motivating others. Keeping it simple is generally the best way. I instill the importance of having a high say/do ratio, which is one of the foundations of our company culture.

I also encourage my team members to be thoughtful about what they can actually accomplish in a day, week, or month, which helps them avoid making false promises and failing to deliver. Data and analytics play a big part in this. My team members know they have to reach the KPIs we agree upon because that's the culture of our workplace. They need to drive execution and actions rather than tell me a narrative of what they accomplished. To keep the company on track, I regularly talk to my team about our performance.

I've also found that culture is a strong motivator in and of itself. If you create a culture that focuses on the performance of the team, people will be motivated to do the work because they'll be aligned toward one goal. I believe that good leaders should try to make someone better every day. Whether it's through constructive feedback or general life advice, this dedication to improvement serves as a good motivator for a lot of the people I've worked with over the years.

At Solenis, we take every opportunity — whether it's during town halls, presentations, etc. — to focus the team around our culture of people, performance, and results. That means highlighting team members' accomplishments, which is another great way to inspire success. When people succeed, so does the business.

Defining brilliance with John

Purpose is...	evolving your style to engage all people while focusing them on the important things — simplifying, executing, and relating to customers.
Leadership is...	realizing that you have to tailor your approach to engage a diverse team filled with unique thinkers.
Brilliant leaders are...	developers of people.
Success is...	when the mission aligns with what we accomplish.
I perform at my best when...	I'm challenged by something. It brings out what I'm good at, which is creating a vision and strategy, aligning people and resources, and engaging the team to do the work.



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