



Gary Burnison

The Why of an Organization

An Interview with Gary Burnison,
Chief Executive Officer, Korn/Ferry International

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to his current post, Gary Burnison is also a member of the firm's board of directors. Burnison previously served as Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer for Korn/Ferry from 2003 to 2007. He joined Korn/Ferry as Chief Financial Officer in 2002. Prior to Korn/Ferry, Burnison was Principal and Chief Financial Officer of Guidance Solutions from 1999 to 2001. Before this, he served as an executive officer and a member of the board of directors of Jefferies & Company, where he worked from 1995 to 1999. Earlier, Burnison served as Partner at KPMG Peat Marwick from 1984 to 1995. He holds a bachelor's in business administration from the University of Southern California.

COMPANY BRIEF Headquartered in Los Angeles, Korn/Ferry International (www.kornferry.com) is the world's largest executive recruiting firm and a top talent management consultancy with over 2,400 employees and executive recruiters in more than 90 offices in 40 countries. Their services range from executive recruitment to leadership development programs, enterprise learning, succession planning, and recruitment outsourcing.

What makes Korn/Ferry unique and how has it remained so consistently successful?

We view the business through the eyes of our clients. Any CEO needs to attract great people but that is only part of the story – you then have to get them to work together. The goal is to align your workforce to your strategy and then motivate them to achieve. We've chosen to follow our clients and build solutions and services that help the CEO and the board create a more engaged workforce.

From an inside-out perspective, we've always been a firm that has an insatiable curiosity, a firm that is ultimately a meritocracy and that has remained very flat. And we always strive to do better.

What are the biggest challenges that CEOs face in driving innovation?

Around the world there is a fight for growth and relevancy. Every CEO is in that fight, so it's about your strategic levers. You don't have conspicuous consumers in Western economies like you had over the past few decades. So you either have to look to the East, consolidate or innovate. The way you move somebody through an organization is also changing and we have to be at the forefront of that.

How critical is global experience for CEOs today and is it challenging to be effective without it?

It's the number one request we see from clients – they're looking for leaders who can meet a culture where it is and move it over time. This is the key to moving any workforce. People don't change unless there is a reason to change – you have to meet an organization where they are and move them.

Leadership today transcends borders given that consumerism is happening all over the world. In 20 years, two-thirds of the world's middle class will be in Asia, so you need the skills to motivate a workforce across cultures.

You've finished your second book, *The Twelve Absolutes of Leadership*. Your first book, *No Fear of Failure*, was a *New York Times* Best Seller. What encouraged you to write these books?

I've been fascinated by the topic of leadership, which is ultimately about making others believe and enabling that belief to become reality. In our business, we have the good fortune of working with the outliers of achievement in the world in terms of global leaders. I've been struck by the similarities that link great leaders, be it the President of a country or of a corporation.

How do you define what makes a successful CEO today?

Past performance is a predictor of future success. You also have to explore who someone really is to determine a match between an organization and an executive.

Great leaders invariably are humble, they have the ability to learn, and they're authentic – and authenticity trumps charisma any day. In the leadership business, you're in the followership business, so the biggest risk you take is charging up the mountain because once you get halfway up, you might find nobody is behind you.

People have to be able to look into your eyes and see your soul – they have to see you as authentic. Those traits carry forward from one setting to another with great leaders.

How critical is it for CEOs today to have an engagement in the HR component as well as to have metrics in place to track employee engagement?

It's how you build a great team. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves, they want to be stimulated intellectually, and they want to know that what they do matters to somebody else.

So as a CEO, you're in the "what" business, the "how" business, and the "when" business, but one thing that is often overlooked is

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the "why". Of course we're in business to make money. But as a leader, you have to paint the bright lines – the left out-of-bounds line and the right out-of-bounds line. You're going to have hundreds of people making thousands of decisions, and what you have to ensure is that those decisions are made generally in line with your intent.

So it's critical not only in terms of engagement but also in terms of alignment, to make sure people are acting with the common purpose in mind – the "why" of the organization.

The expectation is that you must be a great leader.

A lot of the principles around leadership sound so intellectually simple, but in practice, they are tough to actualize. As a leader, you cannot have a bad day; and you have to wake up and go to bed thinking about the organization. Whatever you reflect will become your team's reality. So with every interaction that you have with an employee, he has to feel better after that conversation than before. If you try that all the time, you will be amazed at how effective it is. Sometimes it's about two simple words: thank you, or telling someone what he or she did make a huge difference to the organization.

Have we lost some statesman-like leadership over the years, especially in Washington?

The left has become further left and the right has become further right, and differences have overshadowed commonalities. Many western economies over the past two decades have spent beyond their means. And there is a fight for growth and relevancy. In the political area, people aren't defining reality and there is a seesaw between growth and austerity, like it's an either/or choice.

But what is missing is the common purpose – the why. As a leader, you not only have to define reality but you have to transcend and convert the self-interest that grows out of times like this into shared interest. ●