

Courage, Character, and Candor

An Interview with
Phillip R. Cox, Chairman, Cincinnati Bell

EDITORS' NOTE Phillip Cox holds a Doctorate of Letters Degree from the College of Mount St. Joseph and Cincinnati Technical College. He is Chairman of the Board of Cincinnati Bell and, for more than 39 years, has been the President and CEO of Cox Financial Corporation. Cox is the former Co-Chairman of the Ohio Business Roundtable and the former chairman of the Business Alliance for Higher Education and the Economy. He was also Chairman of the Cincinnati Business Committee (CBC). Cox is a member of the prestigious Commercial Club and the Management Executive Society.



Phillip R. Cox

COMPANY BRIEF With headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio, Cincinnati Bell Inc. (cincinnatiBell.com) provides integrated communications solutions – including local and long distance voice, data, high-speed Internet, and video – that keep residential and business customers in Greater Cincinnati and Dayton connected with each other and with the world. In addition, enterprise customers across the United States rely on CBTS, a wholly owned subsidiary, for efficient, scalable office communications systems and end-to-end IT solutions.

How do you define the strength of Cincinnati Bell, and what has been the secret to its consistent success?

It's mostly leadership. We have had a string of CEOs, starting with Jack Cassidy, then Ted Torbeck, and now Leigh Fox who, for the past 15 years, have been the key.

Each one has been a man who was right for his time. They built on one another, and now we're looking for that one thing that we need to accomplish after spinning off CyrusOne, an IPO on which we made \$2 billion. That was a big move that kept us afloat, and now Leigh is ready to take us into a pattern of growth.

Are there certain traits that make an effective leader?

Timing is always a variable, but the skill set within any time will always be the same. Courage, character, and candor are the three things I talk about. One has to have the courage to make a decision and candidly disseminate what one did and why. That takes courage, and

the thing that is superimposed on all of that is that it has to be done when it's needed in a thorough way.

Will you discuss how you see the role of a board today, and has it changed over time?

There is much more liability and scrutiny today. People talk about how boards are elected, and they are more apt to be set upon by activists. This can sometimes be a form of fanaticism and calls for redoubling efforts because the aim is to make life better for the shareholder.

If one goes through and decimates a board, I don't know if that makes life better for the shareholder.

There is also more liability but, aside from those negative things, the people that one shares the boardroom with, the knowledge, the opportunity to learn, the personal development it provides, I would not trade that for the world. I got a chance to sit next to Neil Armstrong a few years on the Synergy board, and I got to know John Glenn at many of the Ohio roundtables, as well as other business leaders who are smart, caring people. If it wasn't for business in this country, all of the social services would be wanting, as would the jobs and tax revenue we create.

To complain about what somebody earns who creates billions of dollars for not only his company, but the common man, and who gives away millions for the good of the community, is wrong. We need to have high reverence for business leaders.

Is it frustrating that that message doesn't get across?

The business community knows that we have to invest in our communities in order to get better and more educated employees. We have no one to blame but ourselves because we don't want to look like we're bragging, but if we don't tell people how good we are, how will they know? At Cincinnati Bell, we rejuvenated Taft High School, a place where 36 kids were graduating and now 300 graduate. We have 50 employees mentoring there daily.

Somebody needs to talk about it because it motivates people who might not be in traditional businesses to also do something.

Is Cincinnati Bell well understood by young talent today?

They don't understand the exciting career it could provide because we have to talk about it more and sell it. We have to show them and tell them, but the message of what we expect and what they expect is resonating. Ours is a company where the talent pool's grandparents might have worked, so we have an advantage as a result of that proud heritage.

In a city with 10 Fortune 500 companies, we might be the most recognized company because we have Cincinnati in our name and we're the last of the bells.

What do you tell people about the Cincinnati of today?

We get caught between telling our story and not sounding as though we're bragging, but the story will not tell itself. CEOs in our town at the highest level are expected to be involved in the community, and they are.

I was born here, and I decided early in life I would not move for any reason, so I have done everything I can to make it a great place. We don't tell our story not just because we want to avoid bragging, but because no one wants anything to come back on us. We still have to take that risk and say what we believe, even if it doesn't work out.

Governor Kasich has built a strong public/private partnership. As a business leader, has Ohio done enough in attracting new businesses?

We've worked hard to reduce the taxes for the common man. It hasn't had as significant an impact with business yet. We have worked hard to make it a great place for higher education. We have to focus on people becoming lifelong learners. We are heavily reliant on the automobile and steel industry, but some people expect they can stay at a place for 30 years and never change. One always has to learn – it's what keeps one up to date and makes one indispensable as an employee.

The jobs of the future require different skills. Are you worried that the universities and secondary schools aren't training young people for the jobs of the future?

We in business have to go to the universities and talk to them about the skills their students will need. We need to present it in such a way that they don't assume this is just for white collar jobs. Other jobs will pay a lot and, even with two years of a particular kind of education, they will be prepared. ●