

# CAERE AND THE GLASS CEILING OF MANAGING



In the latest episode of Semco Style Stories, the Indian housekeeping and cleaning company CAERE takes us through its transformation journey. After 20 years in the business, CEO and founder Christopher Blessing felt an urge to change things up. Being at the center of an organization that offers its services in almost two dozen cities comes with a great deal of challenges. Even a 100-hour workweek would by no means cover the time needed to micromanage all establishments. Hence, a personal and organizational deep dive was necessary to bring the focus back to the mission the company set out to pursue, and mold it to meet current aspirations.

The story of Christopher's entrepreneurial passion started to take shape while visiting another part of the globe. During his travels through Africa in the 90s, he encountered a standard of living that he was not used to in his home country. He noticed that there was a better sense of organization and cleanliness there, despite not having reached the level of prosperity as some of the Western countries. Pleasantly surprised with the African way of doing things, and led by passion and purpose, Christopher decided to take some of his learnings home. And just like that, his entrepreneurial journey began.

Staying true to his nature and following the traditional way of doing business in his home country, Christopher established a family-run enterprise with a meaningful name – CAERE. CAERE went on to fill a gap in the market with its vision to transform workplaces. By building the brand, translating the vision and expanding, CAERE was able to grow to employ over 5,000 employees, working in 22 different cities across India. To be successful and become a household name across geographies, a strong foundation and steady growth are essential.

## A father to many

Christopher, however, pondered over how successful his company really was. In the initial phase of the organization, CAERE did manage to achieve its goals, and therefore, could be considered successful. Christopher's doubts arose from whether the company had managed to reach its full potential.

CAERE changed tremendously over time without people being actively aware of it. New employees were hired almost on a daily basis and brought their own context to the organization. For Christopher, every new employee meant having an extra individual under his wings whom he had to care for. This 'fatherly' instinct is the result of it being a family business, where a strong support system is central. It also ensured that there was a central figure in the organization who is responsible for the team. Due to Christopher's supportive nature, and his urge to constantly provide for and explore, his peers would often describe him as a 'real father figure' – one who walks the talk and is first in line to take on challenges. A taskmaster by nature.

However, due to expansion, being the central figure now meant a massive increase in workload, and with it, more responsibilities. This was the starting point to the issues they were about to face – decentralizing of duties in decision-making.

The issue that arose while expanding was that employees lacked the ability to make decisions, even when solving minor problems. And with an organization that is spread across 22 cities, there are a lot of issues popping up. This problem became strikingly visible when Christopher learned that minor problems, such as repairing small breakdowns, would take up to a

month to solve. This, it was understood, was the result of having to go through three or four managerial layers before decisions could be taken. Rather than treating employees as professionals and trusting their judgement, managers often gravitated towards micro-managing everything. This hampered quality, quantity, and productivity.

## “AT A CERTAIN POINT OF TIME, WE HAVE REACHED THE GLASS CEILING OF MANAGING”.

Christopher realized that the once successful strategy of positioning himself at the center of things made the organization stagnant. Constantly trying to motivate peers and delegating tasks is stressful, especially when you are doing everything in your power to create progress.

As Christopher rightly put it, “At a certain point in time, we reached the glass ceiling of managing.” This 'glass ceiling' represents the point after which you cannot manage people in their abilities any longer – you have to let go and trust the expertise of your colleagues. This moment forced the CAERE management team to look for alternative ways to motivate its growing workforce. It was time to reverse the pyramid and reverse the top-down mentality that was institutionalized in the organization.

## Redefining 'care' at CAERE

Christopher learnt that in any ecosystem, the people who manage and maintain your workplaces are not seen as partners in the success of the business, but as mere support staff. He wanted to bestow upon these employees twice the value that they provide to the company, seeing it as the only way to transform lives. This would go beyond just monetary compensation.

In his quest for people-centric solutions, Christopher already knew that the regular 'quick-fix' approach of getting a consulting firm on board would not result in the turnaround he was looking for. He then remembered how one of his former bosses was so inspired by the story of Ricardo Semler, that he decided to gift all his clients a copy of [Maverick: The Success Story Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace](#).

He then reached out to Harini, a Semco Style Institute partner in India, and wrote, “I dream to transform my

company into one where every blue-collar worker finds happiness and fulfillment. I want to learn from you!” This was the start of a new journey. In leading the transformation, Harini felt the approach should be simple and as personal as possible. Therefore, before implementing models, training and other radical changes, they immersed themselves into the business – becoming insiders, understanding the culture, and making people feel safe and comfortable with a new team around. The gradual six-month process gave way to a strong foundation that transformed CAERE in such a way that everyone was involved.

Christopher was then ready to take a big leap of faith. He dared to let go and trust that the movement they had started was honest and sustainable, even without him being present. For Christopher, this means a three-day retreat to his farm once every 15 days. Not always stepping in when things go wrong does not mean shrugging all responsibilities. On the contrary, it means trusting your peers to connect with one another and show a sense of leadership. With 5,000 active employees, the solution should be within them. Facilitate, trust and empower them to find it.

## “IF YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE NATURE OF YOUR FRUITS, START WORKING ON YOUR OWN FRUITS.”

### Find a new ladder to climb

The process of centralizing people, both as a collective and individually, is an ongoing one which may seem to take you farther and farther away from the finish line. The goal, however, should not be to reach this finish line, but to always keep your eyes on it.

As rightly said by Christopher, “When you reach the top of the ladder of success, you ask yourself: Is this all? What's next?” It shows us how focusing on short term gains and goals creates blind spots when trying to align with the goals of the organization.



Aligning the interests of all stakeholders across regions – managers, and individual employees – became vital to understanding that without a complete buy-in from all, no change will happen. The process of breaking down regional and bureaucratic silos, installing a two-way communication mechanism, and creating a strong retrospective instrument were key to creating a sense of ownership in the organization.

For CAERE, it was all about transforming the lives of all employees, and in doing so, a chain reaction was created that transcended well beyond the organization.

## “WHEN YOU REACH THE TOP OF THE LADDER OF SUCCESS, YOU ASK YOURSELF: IS THIS ALL?”

According to Christopher, building a strong personal relationship with peers equips them with the right tools to make a difference. It also gives them a voice to express themselves, which does not happen when there is a rigid system in place. Following a philosophy or mantra urges one to contextualize a situation and adapt its principles accordingly. In order to stay aligned with this philosophy over time and create clear boundaries, Christopher and his team scheduled weekly meetings that focus on individual development. This, he says, “lies at the root of organizational progress”.

Currently, CAERE is reaping the fruits of the fertile ground that it so carefully nurtured over time. Employees have been able to better their communication skills and take charge of their own work. Taking responsibility to transform their own lives is also in full effect. With this, CAERE has showcased that even after twenty years of having traditional systems in place, it is never too late to break through invisible ceilings and challenge a culture so deeply embedded in a country of billions.



Watch the full episode of this Semco Style Stories with CAERE here!