

Interview

Leadership Development

An Interview with John R. Ryan,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Center for Creative Leadership



John R. Ryan

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to becoming President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), John Ryan was Chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY), which is the largest comprehensive system of higher education in the United States. Before assuming that post in 2005, Ryan served as President of SUNY Maritime College and as interim President of the University at Albany. From 1998 to 2002, he was Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy. A former pilot, Ryan commanded squadrons in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East during a 35-year career in the military. He has served on CCL's board of governors since 2002.

COMPANY BRIEF The Center for Creative Leadership (www.CCL.org) is a global provider of executive education with an exclusive focus on leadership education and research. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit, educational institution, CCL helps clients cultivate creative leadership through an array of programs, products, and services. Ranked number seven worldwide in the 2007 Financial Times executive education survey, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, North Carolina, and has campuses in Colorado Springs, Colorado; San Diego, California; Brussels; and Singapore. More than 600 faculty, coaches, and staff members support the center's work.

Which products and services does CCL offer today? Have you found there is sufficient market awareness of what CCL does?

First of all, the market is greatly aware that the Center for Creative Leadership is the leader in individual leadership programs. We have open-enrollment leadership development programs, and we pioneered this work in the '70s – I stand on the shoulders of some giants that came before us. We're not currently as well known for our customized programs and another area we're moving into, which is organizational leadership development. There's real opportunity for us there because, quite frankly, so many businesses, educational institutions, not-for-profits, and government agencies need more than just individual leadership development; they need customized programs to help them with their strategy, culture, and talent sustainment.

What sort of organizations comprise your target market?

We used to be a niche organization, in that we focused on individual leadership development for many years. Our clients and customers told us that CCL needed to be involved not just with individuals, but also with the corporations and enterprises that the individuals we train work for. So we listened to our clients and have moved into organizational leadership development to help the entire organization. That work is virtually unlimited. I've been to 95 countries and all of them needed more individual and organizational leadership development in every sector. I certainly see double-digit growth rates in CCL's future.

Will a good deal of that growth come from international markets?

We're already doing very well in North America, and Europe has taken off in the past year or two. We expect to see Asia do the same in the next year or two. So a lot of our growth will come from the international markets. That's probably one of the reasons why I was hired; I have experience in those markets. We're growing in double-digit rates in Europe and Asia, and we have established an office in Singapore to bridge the India and China markets. We'll open a representative office in India this year, but because we're an educational not-for-profit organization, we use low-cost market probes to do these things. In India, we're working with a very helpful partner, Tata Group. So we always like to initiate our work in a new region by focusing on research. For instance, we have eight people based in Singapore who are researching the differences and similarities between leaders in China and India, in both multinational and state-owned businesses.

Is CCL experiencing a strong demand for its customized services?

Yes. We generate almost \$90 million in annual revenue, and about 40 percent of that comes from customized organizational work. There are tremendous opportunities to expand our work in that area. In the past, we've turned down custom work for capacity reasons, but we have built additional capacity and expect to do more of it in the future. We bring more of a research component to our work than our competitors do. I don't want to denigrate other organizations in our line of business, but as a nonprofit, educational organization, we really do come at it from a more academic and research-based approach.

In developing customized services for organizations, are you working with their C-level executives?

Yes. We need to have support from the senior-most levels. Quite often, we'll first perform a needs assessment for an organization. We're not a business consultant per se, but we do need to understand the client's challenges, strategy, and their roadblocks to achieving their mission.

Do you target specific industries for this kind of work?

We have a little more than 500 full-time faculty, coaches, and staff members, so we have to limit the main sectors we target, though we do work in many sectors. We're developing expertise in areas like law, and we're working with some of the largest firms in the world on customized programs. We're focusing on the legal, financial services, technology, and health care sectors at the moment. We touch over 2,000 companies each year and want to expand, but we're never going to be a 20,000-member firm.

What are your key priorities for CCL in the coming years?

There are three things: First, we need to continue listening to our prospective and current clients to determine what solutions they need from us; Second, it is incredibly important that we expand our global presence to meet future demands and increase our impact on people's lives; Third, I don't think any organization gets better without talent, so I have focused on helping CCL and our clients deepen and sustain their talent pipeline. CCL has an incredible pool of faculty, coaches, and other professionals who really can impact and provide solutions to our clients on every continent. ●