

Chano Fernandez

Previously Co-CEO, Workday



Workday's former co-CEO Chano Fernandez talks to Jane Wakefield about keeping his head in tricky times, why he always prefers to see the glass half-full and why dancing is sometimes the answer.

Sitting above Chano Fernandez's desk in his London home is a black and white 3D artwork which represents a cloud.

"We live in the cloud, though as my wife says, keep your feet on the ground, and I have been working on software in the cloud for a number of years and that's why I wanted it," he tells me.

His career, on and off the road, is an impressive one. It saw him launch his own business – Blue C – which he took public on the German Neuer Markt stock exchange. Roles at McKinsey, Infor and SAP followed.

And most recently, as co-CEO of enterprise software giant Workday, he helped scale the business from \$469million to \$6.2 billion in nine years. I asked him what the secret to good growth is.

"First, you need a unique value proposition that appeals to the market."

"And then it's a question of setting the right purpose and getting the right people on the bus so you are surrounded by great talent. And then to ensure that there is alignment between the planning and the ambition."

"Make sure that there is trust in the team and they work very well together, aligned and on the same direction/priorities, and if you are able to do that, that is a great recipe for scaling up businesses."

Chano's leadership skills were recognised last year when he was voted second in a poll of the top ten CEOs of large companies conducted for Fast Company.

But at Workday he took on an unusual co-CEO role, a model which the firm had used in

the early days with the two co-founders, and one credited with bringing it much success.

It meant, says Chano, that ego had to be set aside. It also meant that he, and his co-CEO Aneel Bhusri, had to play to the strengths and passions of each other.

"Aneel is very passionate about product strategy and technology. The way we divided it was me on the growth and revenue side and Aneel on the innovation and product side, but of course you cannot do much growth without a great product, right?"

Chano confides that he almost didn't take the job he was offered at Workday.

"I had had a few conversations with Workday for the EMEA President role at that point in time, and it was a combination of me being happy where I was and starting to believe that this role may go to an English native speaker."

"And that did kind of change my mind, and I called them up to say I was withdrawing."

They obviously didn't take no for an answer and Chano was persuaded to take the job.

Chano is a huge tennis fan, describing himself as "an observer of the game," not just when watching a match, but also in the workplace.

"Learning has always been a key criterion for me. If you keep learning, you keep growing," he said.

"You try to observe great leaders, and

you see what this person is good at. And then ask, what can I learn from those traits or attitudes or skills?"

But, he says, it is important to stay true to yourself too.

"I don't want to change authenticity because that has played well for me in terms of how people see me, and that has created good trust. Trust is a great element when you are navigating high-performing teams, and I'm all about the teams."

Interestingly, when I ask him who he most admires, it is not someone from the business world he chooses, but someone from the world of tennis.

"I like the approach of Rafa Nadal. He's an amazing competitor, a super-hard worker and his behaviour is impeccable. When he loses, he doesn't try to make excuses and he keeps working to improve, even when he's on top".

Chano is very much a believer that people should bring their own best selves to work.

And as dancing is a passion of his, he has been known to get on stage and perform a dance at a big work conference, although he tells me that he draws the line at dancing in the office.

Chano grew up in Caceres, in a province bordering Portugal and the poorest region in Spain.

He learned the value of hard work from

You try to be thoughtful about career changes and what is the right criteria for you on those changes. And you start thinking do I want to make the jump when I am happy where I am?"

Leaders Lives

parents who he said had grown up under the shadow of the civil war.

“My dad had his first pair of shoes when he turned 14. And they had a lot of hunger. And I am very grateful that I inherited great values from my dad, who always said it was about integrity, honesty and hard work.”

“His father also taught him that it was important to “do the right thing,” something he has carried with him throughout his life.

What does he see as the ‘right thing?’ as a boss, I ask.

“For both customers and employees, it is to keep a long-term view in place,”

he says, coupled with plenty of optimism.

He gives two examples from his time at Workday when he had to keep that long-term view in mind even when the short-term looked tricky.

“I took the decision to grow ourselves, at a time when we were decelerating,” he says.

“And, when the pandemic

hit, we were very calm, very thoughtful. And we tried to do the right thing by understanding what our employees were going through and what our customers were going through.”

“Workday now offers flexible working, but Chano believes it is important to spend time in the office together—because that is where company culture is

cemented in ways that can’t be achieved over Zoom.

Company culture is hugely important to Chano, and he acknowledges that the fast growth of Workday, which meant the hiring of many new managers, caused a drop off in employee work satisfaction.

It was something he witnessed first-hand.

“You go to the headquarters and you see people who are not smiling that much in the morning or not saying hello. Or someone drops a piece of paper in the parking lot and it’s not picked up. Or at a big company gathering, people are complaining that the



I try to understand and analyse and not over-react. I am not the type of person who gets angry or shouts, but I think it’s important to always do the right thing, even if it is very difficult to know what the right thing is.



What are your top three tips for a successful business?

- Foster a great culture
- Get the right people on board
- Seamless execution and huge sense of urgency

How do you relax?

- Quality family and friends time
- Listening to music

Tell me something surprising about you!

- I practice salsa, disco dancing and kickboxing a few times a week

What piece of tech, other than your phone, could you not be without?

- Headphones

hamburgers are 45 minutes late, and then one or two people are complaining about it on social media.”

He recalls a management meeting about the issues in 2016 set up to tackle the problem.

“We talk about values and culture in action, how to manage our employees the Workday

way and do the right thing with our customers, but we also talk about fun and we talk about integrity.

We talk about what would be the right decision to make based on real life cases, and we have roundtable discussions about those scenarios.”

Chano studied Physics at the University of Salamanca in Spain, and went on to gain an MBA at the Instituto de Empresa in Madrid.

“I’m a data-driven guy,” he tells me. At Workday, where he said the mantra was “employees first,” not “customers first,” it was obvious to turn to data to gauge how happy employees were. This was done via a

Friday survey.

“We ask two or three questions and it takes 30 seconds to complete.

Sometimes it is about strategy, sometimes about diversity, sometimes it can be more about just testing the mood.”

He says that 80-90% of employees take part,



We created a program that we’ve been doing for the last six or seven years. We get people together, either junior first-time managers, or more senior managers, and we have 800 to 1,000 people together for two or three days.

and it provides “great feedback on the state of the nation, and where people feel happier, or areas that we clearly need to double down on or focus on.”

Data also shows that a diverse workforce performs better, so he’s been passionate about encouraging that.

“We put a program in place focused on our Black and Latino populations, and we’ve achieved those targets to increase significantly the number of Black and Latino managers across the company,” he says.

“We’ve also been hiring for some positions based more on skills than university grades, and

Leaders Lives

that also provides opportunities for under-served or under-represented communities.

The gender balance of senior positions at Workday is around 50%, he tells me, and he is also proud of the training programs the firm runs to entice women back into the workforce – including mothers who may

have left the labour market to start a family and those who've retired.

Chano stepped down from Workday in December, and officially leaves in April. He is coy about what the future holds – “let’s just say there are some new interests that I want to pursue and leave it there” – but

he is looking to the future with characteristic optimism.

“I think it’s important to try to see the glass more half full than half empty, because there are great opportunities.”

And he remains characteristically generous about the decision to appoint a new CEO at Workday.

“This job drains you of a lot of energy. So I think to re-energise companies at some point, and find people that can bring different perspectives, why not take that opportunity?”

As he looks back on a stellar career, I ask him what he views as his greatest achievement.

“I’ve always been continuously on the road – too

much on the road. I travelled a lot throughout my career – several tours around the world, more than several. But I always aim to minimise the numbers of nights that I’m away from home. If I need to meet customers and

employees, I try to bring it all together so I can return home as soon as I can.”

And he is very much looking forward to spending more time at home as he decides what’s next.



I’ve been happily married for over 26 years and I have three wonderful children. That’s my main achievement because that also gives me energy and keeps me happy.”

