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TOP 100 BUSINESSES

CRIS CONDE

The SunGard chief's worldview: The age of the bossy CEO is over. Time to collaborate.

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TINA FINEBERG / For the Daily News

The big idea: What Conde described at this year's World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, as "the last nail in the coffin of the imperial CEO."

He foresees a new direction in organizational dynamics that gives workers authority to green-light their colleagues' best ideas, taking the boss largely out of the loop.

Wayne-based SunGard Data Systems Inc. uses what it calls a "collaboration architecture" — a software system and mindset — to let employees direct their own projects. "CEOs in the future need to be very good at putting together these collaboration systems instead of bossing people around," Conde said.

Davos on the Blue Route: SunGard, a tech firm, is best known for its data-recovery services and its financial-services software, which handles more than five million trades a day for the world's financial markets.

Using software that the company wrote for its own use, SunGard programmers regularly vote on one another's ideas after discussing them in forums. "It's not the typical hierarchical structure," Conde said. "They decide things among themselves."

In another collaboration initiative, developers at a branch office in Malvern work together around large tables, like screenwriters. They account to one another for their progress every day — again without looping in the boss.

Can't we all just get along? Conde said human nature, in general, makes collaborating trickier than it seems. "Ignoring people is easier, and competing with each other is a lot more fun," he said. "Collaboration is really hard, and you have to approach it as something that's hard."

On black holes, Greek poets and Dilbert: Conde was born in Chile and moved to the United States as a teenager when a military government took control of his native country. He studied astrophysics at Yale, "writing big computer models of black holes." For leisure, he has read the classics of world literature sequentially, up

to the Russian novelists. (He recommends the Greeks, and particularly Euripedes.)

He also enjoys the comic strip Dilbert. "Oh yes, yes. I am a fanatic," he said — to the point of subscribing to a daily feed from Dilbert.com. "Whenever I write something that's going to go to all the employees, I always think, 'How would Dilbert deal with this memo?'"

Thoughts on the unthinkable: During the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Conde was on the 33d floor of the World Trade Center.

Having survived, he has become more mindful about showing gratitude. In business, he has noticed that people seem embarrassed to acknowledge a job well done, and he now makes it a point to say "thank you."

"I stop myself. I say, 'Hey, that was good.' I tell people."

He also is careful not to dwell on petty disappointments. "It's an active choice to not make a big deal of it," he said.

Superdad and the dolphins: Conde was a point man for the \$11.4 billion private-equity acquisition of SunGard in August 2005. In the calm before the deal was announced, the single dad took his three young children on vacation. They were getting ready for a swim-with-the-dolphins outing when Conde learned that news of the deal had leaked.

In a daring feat of work-life balance, he lined up his response calls for 11:30 a.m., when the children would be in the water. But it turned out his youngest was too young to swim unaccompanied. "So I put on a life jacket," Conde said, "and I jumped in."

At 11:30, he was bobbing in the water with his brood, watching his two cell phones vibrate on the dock.

Big idea he wishes he had: Nothing big, actually. Conde said the ideas that he most admires are the seemingly unremarkable changes that suddenly change everything, such as a disk drive small enough to be used for playing music. "They're not net new," he said, "but they're transformative."

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