

Coaching for the CEO: Everyone Needs a Buddy

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However much we talk about the importance of a strong team culture emanating from the very top of an organization – the reality is that when special circumstances dictate, those who lead the team often have to work in a vacuum. However, just at the time when dialogue with colleagues is required circumstances such as an acquisition, merger, restructuring and rationalisation often prohibit it. It is in these circumstances when a CEO or Senior Officer of an organization can benefit and profit from the special relationship working with an experienced personal coach. This short article highlights the necessity for such a role and argues that to develop as an effective CEO or Senior Officer requires continuous growth beyond personal comfort zones.

Some years ago I was working with the CEO of a major Finance House and soon understood that leadership can be a very lonely job. The business had faced many serious challenges and the CEO could not share these with his team. Because of confidentiality agreements with a potential business partner, he was forbidden to share his concerns and fears with his colleagues. He still had decisions to make, ideas to discuss, and strategies to formulate, but had no forum to test for coherence and understanding. Over time he selectively at first shared his thoughts and aspirations for the future with me – not business, but rather strategies for bringing about change. Once trust was established a special relationship developed. Later, he moved to the position of MD of another business, which he successfully developed through organic growth and a series of acquisitions. During the time I have worked with this very capable man he has shared his anxieties but *only* when ‘special business circumstances’ prohibited him from working as part of a team and to work briefly in secluded isolation.

Special Circumstances

Over time I have come to understand that, *under special circumstances*, the role and the pressure on the

CEO generates what others consider as unusual individual behaviour. These special circumstances force the leader to necessarily display uncharacteristic ‘team exclusion’ rather than ‘team cohesion’. It would be easy to be critical of those who display such independent action rather than defer to the comfort of a senior group identity. The reality of the situation may be that demands on the ‘top person’ can be so intense that only a *confidante* outside the career progression, politics and dynamics of the organization can provide the objective support necessary in times of severe change and transition.

Coaching: Dialogue for Clarification and Reflection

This may indicate behaviour that flies in the face of ‘current organizational theory’ of creating an open, team-based and empowered culture – but neglects to understand the constraints and demands of how the real business world operates. For instance, when driving significant corporate change such as a merger or acquisition, restructuring, re-engineering or in times of severe threat to the future of the business, the real barriers to speedy implementation to change to the chief executive can be members of his or her own team. In these circumstances, the CEO is the sole person battling against unknown odds and requires the support of others, external to the main business, to think through and implement what is required – objectively.

Often this ‘coaching’ role is only temporary, but our experience is that the importance of this role is underplayed. It is precisely in times of radical organizational change, stress and conflict that the top player needs support. This does not necessarily mean specialist advice – she or he knows precisely where to locate such information. Talking with the wife of a CEO – she stated, “Thank goodness he has someone to bounce his ideas off. He asks me for my opinion all the time – but I don’t know the answers.” Two points arise from this discussion. The first, is the CEO was not

asking his wife for specialist advice – he was asking about opinion to do with implementation. The second point was that answers to questions are not important.

Answers imply providing solutions to technical or business issues – that is the province of the top team or external business experts. Reference here to coaching for improved problem analysis, asking questions which have never been asked and deep thinking in areas where there are no right and wrong answers. Coaching is about stimulating others to expand their horizons, question assumptions and cause-effect relations, and examine beliefs and values which impact upon the whole business, share holders, customers or consumers and staff at every level. Any coaching which results in ‘selling solutions’ lacks credibility. The coach is there to challenge, to question, to elicit, to explore, to amplify, to confront self-limiting beliefs at the same time as rigidly maintaining confidences. The coach may require to act as the conscience of the top player – and debate with him/her that which others may think but avoid from communicating.

Coaches, Chairman and Non Executives

Every CEO needs a coach. This ‘coach’ could be the chairman of the business or non-executive director with special expertise or alternatively external to the company. The ‘top player’ needs someone to ask him/her the right open-ended questions to explore opportunities, to look at a problem from different perspectives. Often they require to be stretched beyond their specialist area and beyond their personal zones of comfort. And the areas where they need the most help are frequently the sensitive, with those issues which seriously impact upon the long-term prosperity, growth or continuation of the business.

What is in the Best Interests of the Business?

It can be in the best interests of senior colleagues of the CEO for her or him not to share real concerns and issues with them. At that point in time, business pressures may be so intense and risk of failure severe that their input would only complicate the issues and generate less than optimum solution. When confronted with a problem considered too big for the ‘top person’ perhaps that is not always a good time to share their concerns with colleagues. Perhaps, if occasion merits it, that is time to take the leadership role and go it alone – even if only for a short time. When a solution is not apparent, sharing concerns with colleagues who do not

have the answer may result in a lack of confidence in the ability of the leader, when the opposite is what is required.

What is important is that the ‘top person’ adopts the appropriate behaviour in the best interests of the business and that is contingent upon a wide variety of circumstances to which only the leader may be privy. Other commentators on the scene never have the full picture. Any significant organizational change is like a ‘late breaking news story’ the picture, actors and events unroll at an unsteady and illogical pace. It is at times like this when the CEO has to be trusted for being the CEO – and that is it!

Never Shy Away from Exploring the Unpleasant and Tough Questions

The role of coach should be that of listener and inquisitor – requiring the leader of the business to reconsider the unpleasant as well as pleasing outcomes. They should probe to test for understanding of key issues. They require to conduct a review of ‘current and proposed action’, assessing potential strategies for change compared against identified threats and opportunities. With significant business experience at senior level and relevant expertise, the seasoned coach knows precisely where dialogue and discussion will have most impact. Daring to ask the

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questions which other senior colleagues may want to ask, but shy away from, because of perceived risk to personal career, the coach can add real value and be totally objective.

A coach can add tremendous value to the personal development of the top team player. Although an astute business person, the CEO may not always portray the required charisma, personal presence or ability to project, communicate and market his/her ideas to great effect. The coach should also be able to demonstrate in his or her actions, that they have

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mastered the process of communication and can work together with the top business player as a seamless team aiding her or him in the presentation and implementation of proposals.

Svengali and Spin-Doctors

We have met many coaches, some good, some very poor. The good ones explore the tough and the

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sensitive questions, taking the CEO through key issues and working on delicate areas without fear of the consequences. The poor coaches are those who are selective in their discussions and consider their personal circumstances and interests rather than the long-term interests of the organisation. We reject the Svengali or Spin-Doctor approach. Political manoeuvrings will always be a fear and a concern in such a small team and can tarnish what could be a very powerful relationship. Too much collusion, rather than effective coaching, between coach and CEO, opens the relationship to abuse. On the other hand, little commitment to coaching will result in ideas remaining in the CEO's head with little exposure to keen discussion, dialogue and debate or at worst, ideas being presented poorly without prior full analysis.

Summary

People who occupy senior positions need to be able to share their thoughts for testing. They need a mode of expression where they encourage others to challenge, to criticise, to build upon, to analyse their thoughts and plans. There are many times when thoughts and ideas have to be honed and tested. In these instances, it is time to consider the benefits of CEOs and other key players in the business developing a special relationship with others who are not afraid to ask the obvious and the obtuse. Unfortunately, there is no specialist training for such a role. There are no 'help lines' to call. The trust that is developed and is displayed matures as the relationship evolves. This

happens after working with clients when the two parties experience a 'critical incident' which demonstrates the requirements for a high degree of mutual trust within this small team. Other characteristics of an evolving 'coaching relationship' exist when there is a critical exploration of critical incidents, and the CEO feels sufficiently comfortable to reflect on her or his behaviour with others by taking a good look in the mirror.

Research tells us that the top ten personal traits identified with *credible* leaders are, honesty, forward looking, inspiring, competent, fair minded, supportive, broad minded, intelligent, straight-forward and courageous.^[1] Our view is that these traits are also fundamental in establishing the trust, rapport and credibility required to enable the leader, CEO, managing director, senior executive or whatever job title to stretch beyond their comfort zone and achieve results in a climate of turbulent change. □

Reference

- [1] Philip Atkinson, *Creating Culture Change: Strategies for Success*, Rushmere Wynne, 1996. Original source, J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner, *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, and people demand it*, Jossey Bass, 1993.

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