

CEO as Leader and Coach

By

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Introduction:

Leading a business is a tough job in the best of circumstances. How one balances the complex roles of business leader, steward of corporate assets and fallible human being can lead to vastly different outcomes. The roles often have conflicting demands and may leave the CEO feeling, at the end of the day, that there's no way to win. While there are no easy answers, the CEO can change these circumstances with a deliberate, considered effort to lead in collaborative ways. Leading in a way that draws others into the process as partners, rather than dependants, optimizes your organization's capabilities, and isn't that what leadership is all about? You can productively play the role of a player-coach on the company's executive team. While it takes practice, these skills can be mastered.

Getting Oriented:

Use a simple business review process to create collaborative leadership. Introduce collaboration with your executive team by initiating focused, on-going conversations about their roles in the enterprise. Emphasize dialogue and strategic listening as key conversational components. Strategic listening, as differentiated from listening in general, occurs when you listen to conversations with an ear on more than specific content. It involves listening to implications of what's said in the context of your company's purpose. What are the ramifications of people's assumptions? Are you hearing hints of confusion or misaligned priorities? These and similar questions can be addressed if you listen to the conversation within the context of your strategic intent.

These suggested dialogues strengthen the working relationships between the CEO and the executive team and between and among the team members themselves. Create partnerships designed to enhance everyone's thinking about the work. Identifying key working relationships as thought partnerships creates opportunities to examine shared and individual thinking, understand how work products are passed across organizational boundaries, and engage in authentic conversations about the work.

Contracting For Purpose:

Begin these disciplined conversations by contracting with teammates about the desired enterprise outcomes. You'll want to proceed in a way that focuses on the work, that's thought provoking for you and them, that focuses on learning rather than blaming, and that allows you to see their business realities through their eyes. Fundamentally, these conversations are a vehicle for you to partner with your direct reports to:

- Facilitate individual and collective successes
- Encourage and inspire
- Plant seeds in the minds of your people
- Gather the intelligence to run your business successfully
- Develop cohesiveness around a common, compelling purpose

The Process:

Your role is to purposefully communicate with, as opposed to talk at, your people. By listening strategically to peoples' feedback, you'll listen to both the content and the contexts of their conversations. While team members will most often report their input from their functional perspectives, you must be listening from the perspective of the overall business leader. Too often, the CEO gets sucked into the mire of solving day-to-day operational problems. There is, obviously, both skill and artistry involved in coaching well.

Listening In and On the Process:

While listening strategically to the debriefings, you'll hear the thinking behind the priorities and activities of your direct reports. The conversations enable you to look for alignment between their perspectives and the business idea. What's reported and what's overlooked are both rich sources of data.

By listening authentically, you also tend your personal relationship with each member of your team. This provides opportunities for demonstrating your commitment to their success by doing something other than telling them what to do. These conversations will allow you to ask for feedback about their frustrations, while listening for the following:

- What did you not know, overlook, or interpret differently from what you're hearing here?
- Where do they need to be coached into new perspectives?
- Where are they frustrated beyond their individual ability to remedy their situation?

These conversations provide opportunities to listen for areas of team stress and strain. Your unique perspective (hearing independently what each feels about the others) also enables you, the organization's leader, to make note of the apparent leverage points that you can address, over time that will produce significant dividends to the enterprise overall.

By listening from a strategic perspective throughout these conversations, you will learn. First, there is feedback from the trenches that you continually need to hear to stay in synch with your organization. Second, you can gather feedback relevant to your leadership style. You can listen to tales of your impact and calibrate them against your intentions. Don't be defensive. Indeed, other people perceive what they perceive, whether you like it or not, whether it is accurate or not. If the implications are that you will have to work harder to accurately market your ideas and initiatives, so be it. By listening well, you ensure the communication pipeline stays functional and unclogged.

Talking With A Purpose:

These conversations provide an opportunity for information to flow back and forth. If the efforts of your team are to be orchestrated effectively over time, you must

provide on-going input and collaboration. Here are opportunities for you to plant seeds in the minds of your team. Think of these conversations as opportunities to market your vision to each member of the team. By asking well-timed, considered questions, you can expand or focus the thinking team members. By engaging your team as thought partners, displaying amiable curiosity, you help them consider the implications of their thoughts, assumptions and perspectives.

These conversations provide rich opportunities for coaching. Points can be made, agendas set, and information shared. By **listening** to the content of specific conversations, while **thinking** from the broader business context, you'll shape your feedback in a way that better aligns their actions with the goals and values of the enterprise. During these conversations, assess the gaps or deficits in the team's collective knowledge.

- What are the things that no one seems to understand deeply enough to fulfill their collective mission?
- Where are the gaps in their collective expertise?
- What must you know to exploit the intellectual capacity of the leadership group?

It is worth noting that these same conversations not only provide you with new data, but also stretch your thinking and perhaps teach you a thing or two.

Final thoughts:

These conversations provide an excellent venue for you to learn about the best practices being employed across your organization, thus putting you in a position to cross-pollinate ideas. You can ensure that good practices are recognized across this group. You can use the perspectives you've gained to help others share those practices throughout the company.

Listening strategically, the CEO can focus the efforts of the team. Some of you might need the services of a coach to help you work this process most effectively. Others may feel equipped to dig right in. Either way, the benefits are worth the effort. Don't let a lack of confidence keep you from growing in your role.

This approach reduces the isolation of the CEO, sharing the sense of ownership for the decisions made in the family business. It also provides a business posture for strengthening the bonds between and among people in the company. It positions leaders to be thought partners rather than pretending that they alone have the answers. Finally, it minimizes your reliance on personal power to influence people at work. The role of leader as coach places you in position to be the best steward of your company's human assets.