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Top Dogs Are Lonely

Confessions of a CEO Coach

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Executive coaches are now commonplace in organizations. It is estimated that over 60% of Fortune 500 companies CEOs have their own personal coaches. My experience for the past decade as a CEO Coach has been an energizing and rewarding one. It would seem like the dream job, sitting on the right hand of the seat of power and providing advice and counsel. And while it has been a heady experience, it is also fraught with tension and complexity.

The role of CEO Coach is unique, because the job of the CEO is unique. There are no pressures greater, no challenges as complex as the job of CEO. And the average longevity for CEOs in North America is less than 3 years. CEOs are beleaguered by constant pressure from shareholders, boards of directors, government regulators, the media, and special interest groups. The list goes on.

The job of CEO is unique from several perspectives: no one else needs to hear the truth more, and gets it less from employees; no one else is the focus of criticism when things go wrong; no one else is the final decision maker on difficult, and often *lose-lose* decisions; and finally, no-one else enjoys the almost hero-celebrity status.

For these reasons and many more, no-one in a organization needs an honest, close and long-term relationship with a trusted adviser than a CEO. As many CEOs have told me, the most significant issue for them to deal with is the feeling of intense and profound loneliness at times.

So the role of a CEO Coach becomes critical for a CEO who uses the coach

wisely. And for the coach, working with a CEO poses a number of potential minefields and dilemmas that must be dealt with:

Over identification. The coach must be able to immerse himself in the CEO's world and experience without merging identities. While the coach's presence in the organization may be common place, they are not part of the organization. And while the coach can empathize and be compassionate with the CEO, the coach's job is to be detached, and sometimes brutally honest.

Communication . How much information and the kind of information that is provided between the CEO and the CEO's boss—the Board, President or Chairman—and employees can be very dicey. The Coach must be vigilant about peoples' ulterior motives and yet be a source of information than can help the CEO.

Feedback. One of the CEO's most important tasks is to develop leaders in the organization, which requires honest assessment. The coach's feedback can have enormous impact on careers, and must be handled delicately, reminding the CEO that his judgment is the most important one.

Loyalty. If the CEO pays for the coach, who the coach serves is obvious, But if the coach's bill is being paid by the organization, the board may require some kind of reporting of results by the coach. So the nature of feedback and data collected by the coach must both be rigorous and transparent to the CEO.

Friendship. Often, the coach develops a friendly, personal relationship with the CEO, who will often share more personal information with the coach than anyone else. And while a friendly relationship can help, it can sometimes be too close. The coach

must maintain a professional perspective, one that allows the coach to be honest with the CEO.

Ego. Being a CEO Coach can give the coach considerable status which could inflate the coach's ego. The coach must ensure that his or her self-worth is not intimately tied to that of the CEO's status.

A CEO coach can be a trusted role model, advisor, guide and mentor who helps the CEO shape visions, tap new energies, and generate desired results. But more than anything, the CEO Coach can provide an oasis of calm, a relationship of trust and honesty to help the CEO fulfill an extremely demanding role.



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