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Coaching the CEO

In our work, we find that CEOs find tremendous value in having a trusted relationship with a coach outside of their organization.

Outside coaches can be especially helpful in the following areas, which are particularly intense for the executive at the top:

- **Teamwork** – The CEO must fashion a collaborative environment, yet senior executives sometimes have little interest in collaboration, believing that they have risen through the ranks because of their own fierce independence.
- **Organizational Effectiveness** – All too often, the truth of what is happening within the organization is so highly filtered by the time it reaches the top that the CEO gets a distorted view of what is really going on.
- **Succession** – When several senior executives vie for a top job as the consummation of their ambitions, the CEO must manage those ambitions.
- **Transition** – When CEOs eventually need to move on, they often have mixed emotions about the change and may need to radically reframe their self-perception and priorities.

Coaching by Phone and Online Works Well for Oracle

A combined online and over-the-phone leadership workshop that incorporates a telephone coaching module is being used with great success by Oracle Corporation.

Participants go online in advance of the workshop to review program materials and a 360° survey report that provides feedback from their boss, peers, and direct reports regarding their demonstrated leadership and management behavior.

During the one-hour, online leadership workshop that follows, the workshop leader conducts a slide presentation that participants view on their computer monitors while listening to and responding to the presenter over their telephones. A live chat room feature also allows participants to respond online in writing as the workshop progresses. At the end of the workshop, participants receive an additional hour of over-the-phone coaching by outside coaches such as WBW&Associates. The use of independent coaches increases the sense of confidentiality.

The benefits of online and over-the-phone employee development are significant. Mark Sato, Oracle's Senior Consultant for Management and Professional Development, points out that "the cost savings are large compared to traditional approaches." He states that "the technology allows geographically dispersed business units, including international, to effectively and efficiently learn and receive valuable feedback and guidance."

Sato says the coaching that follows the workshop "maintains a high quality of intimate and confidential feedback, surprisingly so since participants don't meet face-to-face with a coach." Warner B. Wims, Ph.D., President of WBW & Associates, explains that "although you do not have the benefit of observing physical cues, keen listening and enhanced focus on both sides compensate for the inability to observe body language. In fact, we have found that coaching is actually facilitated, not impaired, when both parties employ the intense concentration and verbal precision that telephone interaction requires."

The Art of Board of Director/Management Relations

The art of creating an excellent board/management relationship is two-fold. On one hand, as simple as it may sound, it's crucial to generate genuine rapport between both sides. For example, we recently worked with the board of directors of a financial institution where rapport was so important that they passed over an otherwise very highly qualified CEO candidate because, "He had all of the experience and brainpower, but the fact is that we simply didn't feel we related well to the guy. That made us question whether he would form the relationships he needed to develop within the company."

On the other hand, each side must hold the other mutually accountable in order for a high performing relationship to be developed and sustained. Management rightly expects that the board will spend the time and effort to review management reports and actions (their "homework"). The board rightly expects that their ideas and concerns will be considered and that they will be kept informed so there are no serious "surprises".

When both rapport and accountability are part of the mix, boards of directors and management have a much higher probability of creating a successful—and seamless—working relationship.

A Way to Manage Your Boss

An important way to manage your boss—to hold him or her accountable for being a good manager—is to ask for specifics regarding behaviors expected of you. This is especially important when what is being asked can be a matter of interpretation, such as when your manager wants you to be a better "team player," "visionary," "leader," or "coach."

For example, ask your manager, "What specific behaviors will tell you that I am being a team player?" Then, dig deeper by asking, "What should I be doing, how often, and in what way so that I can achieve the behaviors you have just described?"

As your boss, your manager owes you help with professional development. In fact, your development is one of your manager's primary responsibilities. So don't hesitate to ask your manager precisely how you can achieve specific job competencies. Asking these questions is a way of holding your manager accountable for doing his or her job.

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Facilitators Supercharge Your Meetings

Using a professional facilitator at your board/executive meeting or offsite helps you go deeper into underlying issues for more efficient and effective decision-making, according to Warner B. Wims, President of WBW&Associates.

Using a professional facilitator will generate considerably more relevant and valid data than asking a member of the group to serve as the meeting moderator (or referee). Facilitators are skilled at helping groups to prioritize, ensuring that key outcomes are achieved in the time available. They also help balance the discussion styles of group members, ensuring that different ways of participating produce an outcome that considers the widest possible array of viewpoints. Professional facilitators also:

- Maximize consensus by objectively drawing out areas of mutual interest. As a result, more participants feel they have been involved in the decision, and therefore are more willing to support it.
- Increase the creative potential of the group, enhancing synergy so that the final meeting outcome is greater than the sum of its parts.
- Bring balance to underlying power and authority concerns so that these issues stay aligned with the overall goals of the meeting.
- Promote team development, cooperation, and esprit de corps.
- Provide direction toward resolving explicit and hidden conflicts.
- Prevent unproductive individual or group behavior from interfering with the goals of the meeting.
- Establish modes of operating that will help the group work together more effectively over time.
- Most importantly, provide a safe environment that supports open and honest communication, and encourage people to place tough issues on the table without fear that the discussion will fall apart, or worse, explode.