

Required Reading for Growing Companies



The End of the Line

caskey's corner

By **Wayne Caskey**
for Smart CEO

What does humility do for a CEO? It might help you keep your job.

We may not have seen it coming. And even if we did, we may not have planned for it. And even if we planned for it, the full realization of the end of our power as a CEO may be a shock.

It comes in a number of ways.

Maybe the very directors we appointed say, in halting words, "Sam, things are changing in this company. You've done an outstanding job of leading it this far, but we've talked it over and we all think new leadership is called for."

Maybe one day the realization comes that we're out of our depth, that the procedures and rules necessary in a large organization are strangling us, and we need to get out before we die, in one way or another.

Maybe we merged our company into another company, and our role or the company isn't turning out the way we believed it would.

Maybe (as happened to me) the venture capitalist meets us in a parking lot and terminates our employment because the results don't meet the projections.

Or maybe the whole industry implodes and our company along

with it.

Even if we're lucky enough to have negotiated a handsome severance package or built a nest egg, or even if our succession plan is working well as we walk out the door, there's always the next day, when no one seeks our advice, no one asks us to solve a pressing problem, or, most importantly, no one counts on us to lead an organization.

Playing golf is fine. Serving on for-profit and not-for-profit boards helps, and, if we're fortunate enough to be chosen as chairperson, some of the old excitement may return. But it's not the same as being in the hot seat every day.

It's nice to draw from our wealth of experience as a paid, and even as an unpaid consultant (The Senior Corps of Retired Executives, for example, has some very worthwhile assignments). But it's not the same. The risks and the rewards aren't there. There's no greater thrill than dealing from our gut each day with the future of the company on the line, and see the company grow and prosper. It resonates deep within us.

But that's not what we face now. My coach defines "humility" as seeing things the way they are. And

"the way things are" is that we are not the leader.

So, we're in an unaccustomed situation. In fact, that's probably a gross understatement. We're hurting. Maybe we don't say we hurt. Maybe our hurt comes out as anger or bitterness toward those who "did this" to us, or who "wouldn't listen", and we predict dire times for the company. Maybe we even secretly delight when some of those dire times actually occur. "If I were there..."

Or if our whole company went down, we hold a great sadness for all of our and our colleagues' blood, sweat and tears that went for naught.

Sadness, bitterness, anger, thwarted desire for achievement---hardly the image of a captain of industry, a webmaster of the world, or a dynamic leader. Yet many of us, at some point in our lives, arrive at this place. Circumstances, or our own shortcomings, or both, have led us here.

So, what do we do?

Typical of "do-ers", we've asked the "doing" question. This may lead us to exercising vigorously to release the endorphins, developing a new

hobby, starting up a new business, or instituting a full-fledged job search. All of these are worthy, appropriate activities.

But we haven't asked the "being" question - "Who am I and how am I now?" The answer is, "I'm a vulnerable and struggling human being, whose leadership capability, honed to a fine edge by training and experience, is being ignored."

You ask, "What's the point, even if it's true?" The answer is, "Just because no one is buying it at the moment doesn't mean you've lost it." You say, "True enough, but no one is buying it."

Well, OK. Suppose you treat it as an opportunity for personal growth?

"Personal growth!" you explode. "How can there be any personal growth in a situation like this?"

Well, how can there be? Jack Kornfield says in *A Path With Heart*, "The place where we are most directly open to the mystery of life is...in the places of our struggle and vulnerability. These places always require surrender and letting go. When we let ourselves be vulnerable, new things can be born in us. In risking the unknown we gain a

sense of life itself..The seeds of wisdom, peace, and wholeness are within each of our difficulties.”

It's not an accustomed place for a CEO to be, and that makes it even harder. Nor is it what we look to ourselves for, nor what others expect of us.

You say, “Vulnerability? The V-word? No answers? You've got to be kidding! I've concentrated on making myself and my organization invulnerable - to power plays, to corporate raiders and takeovers, to

natural disasters, to market downturns. To admit vulnerability, to surrender to it, is to be disloyal to my personal and corporate creed!”

And yet we know that every CEO is vulnerable - to death, to the ravages of age, to the stripes and arrows of outrageous fortune. Further, how many times have we said, “I've really learned a lot more from my failures than from my successes”?

So why not play with vulnerability? Particularly when we've been

presented by the universe with an opportunity to do so in our lives

What will come of it? We really don't know, but that's the point! Being open to “what this problem asks me to let go of,” “what great lesson this might be able to teach me,” and “the value hidden in this situation” may grow that wisdom, peace and wholeness Kornfield holds up to us.

And it may be only after this process has proceeded that we can ask with new clarity, “What's next?

What new awareness has been born out of my vulnerability? How can I lead now?”

And when the answer comes, it will come from truly dynamic leadership, which has its own dynamism, having grown now in the ebb of struggle and vulnerability, as well as in the flow of success.

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