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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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gremlins in the executive suite

As an executive coach, I often use a concept developed by Richard Carson in his book, [ital]Taming Your Gremlin[end ital]. Gremlins, pictured in the book as various repulsive-looking lizard-like creatures with leers and smirks, are constructs for those parts of ourselves that find ingenious ways to resist change, maintain the status quo and effectively take us out of awareness of the present moment.

Recently, I was thrust into a leadership position and had to perform in a tightly compressed, two hour time frame. It was as if all the gremlins I had helped my clients tame over the years lined up to have a go at me. Besides being a humbling experience, it was a rapid-succession, sharp-relief example of how parts of myself massively resist change and seek to keep me less than the situation requires I become.

As a CEO, you know how important you are as an agent of change. And you know how critical it is that your antennae have full access to a 360-degree arc concerning what may be coming at your business from any angle. I hope that this "gremlin survey" may assist you in identifying and dealing with those of your thoughts that may impede change and divert your vigilance.

The **"I'm Not Prepared and Must Defer" Gremlin** - In my case, the thought immediately surfaced, "I didn't sleep well last night, and I'm really not as rested as I should be to take on this additional responsibility." How often have you as a CEO thought, "I really don't have the knowledge, experience, or resources to take on this additional task, and I'll just have to defer it until I do?" In my case, I said to the gremlin, "That's silly. I don't sleep that well anyway, so I'm as well-prepared as I usually am, and I can do this." This debilitating thought retreated, and the next one appeared.

The **"You're No Good" Gremlin** - This gremlin attacks frontally, disputing basic competence, undermining confidence, summoning up legions of images of failure from the past, and ending with the polemic, "You're lucky to have fooled people this long!" Do you know this gremlin? Has he/she visited you in the middle of the night or the first thing in the morning? In my case, this is a familiar gremlin and I know how to deal with her. "Go outside and stand there for a few hours while I perform this new responsibility." She leaves, and I get down to business. Then the next gremlin appears.

The **"Aren't I Doing Well, Look At Me" Gremlin** - Having banished two gremlins, I'm fair game for the pride gremlin. This gremlin bids me shift my attention from the business of the moment to myself and engage in some self-admiration at how well I'm doing. This is known as "taking your eye off the ball" in baseball, and more generally as "pride cometh before a fall." It's one many CEOs are prone to when things are going well. My response to this gremlin is "You're in the way of what demands my critical attention right now. Get out of here."

This gremlin doesn't leave, but merely changes shape and texture, morphing into The **"Great Performance" Gremlin**. This gremlin hops onto a couple of complimentary remarks from my associates and says, "Observe how well you're performing in this difficult situation." He's trying to take me out of the moment by suggesting I become a spectator of my own performance. I say to him, "Begone! I've got more important things to do than contemplate myself."

This gremlin still doesn't leave, but morphs again into The **"Great Growth" Gremlin**. He shifts his compliments,

saying "Look at how much you're growing, handling these gremlins!" My response is, "True, that's what happens when I have to deal with the likes of you, so be off." It is true that there is great growth in being a CEO, and it is possible to lose sight of task in self-worshipful ways. In any event, my pride gremlin finally leaves, and he is quickly replaced by—

The **"Is Everyone OK" Gremlin** - I've had to ruffle some feathers in addressing my new responsibilities, and this gremlin, who is very sensitive, is concerned that no one's feelings be hurt. I respond, "These actions are necessary for the good of the entire team. I know the members of my team, and any momentary hurt will be superceded quickly by the perspective of the good of the team." This gremlin apparently bows to my reasoning.

What he's actually done is merely massage his message via The **In the Face Of Others' Comments Gremlin**. The new message is, "You're beginning to take criticism over your actions. It looks like your power base may be eroding. Pull back now." My response here is, "What's done is done. I'm going to finish this." Now this gremlin looks like he's going, but he's not.

Instead, he changes shape and message again and, as The **You're**



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Not Appreciated Gremlin says, “You’re doing all the real work around here. No one else appreciates how much you’re doing. They’re just a bunch of hangers-on!” Every CEO is tempted to make his or her head heavier than it in fact is by virtue of wearing the crown. Giving in to this kind of thinking is isolating, self-fulfilling, and the antithesis of meaningful teamwork. I finally send this gremlin packing by saying, “You’re just blind to the good will and fine performance of my associates.” Following him is—

The **“I Wish It Was Over” Gremlin** - This gremlin says, “Wayne, this is hard! Dealing with your associates in this new responsibility and, on top of that, having to deal with all these gremlins! Wouldn’t it be more fun to imagine what it will be like after these rough times are over and go there in your mind now?” How many times have you as a CEO longed for a respite and in your mind gone there? Yet this gremlin, like the others, seeks to take your attention from the present moment, the now of your responsibilities, so that you withdraw from addressing them. My response to this gremlin is, “There will be plenty of time to relax when this responsibility’s been performed. Wait for me then, and we’ll have a good time.” This gremlin slinks off. Enter—

The **“Hang Onto What You Have” Gremlin** - This one says, “As you continue to perform these new responsibilities, there is the chance that you could lose it all. Wouldn’t it be better to pull back and preserve what you have?” How often does timidity dress up in the clothes of reasonable risk avoidance and sing you her siren song? My response is “I’ve already taken the risk. Now all I’m doing is seeing it through.” Her image recedes and is replaced by the final gremlin—

The **“Rest On Your Laurels” Gremlin** - This one says, “You’ve done so well, your responsibility has been fulfilled. Sit back and relax. You’ve earned it.” How often has your vigilance been diminished by this gremlin? My response here is “Each situation is new and my job is to be responsive to what’s in front of me now.”

And that’s what your responsibility as a CEO is—to be in every moment, with a watchful eye, drawing on your knowledge, your experience, your leadership, being the best you can be, for yourself, for your Company, for the world. And to develop effective means of dealing with those thoughts that get in your way.

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