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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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alone at the top

I'm riding my bike up the North Central Trail from Parkton to the Pennsylvania line. I'm going at a pretty good clip, even though the trail rises at its steepest grade here, when a guy passes me, yelling, "On your left!"

He's wearing a tee shirt proclaiming "Alone At the Top" with the symbol of the college we both went to, more than proving the adage that you can count on a Harvard man saying where he went to college within the first five minutes of conversation. I chuckle to myself and begin to muse about what "alone at the top" means for CEOs.

I recall, particularly with my male clients, "being alone" means they crave a friendship they are not getting. Oh, they have loads of acquaintances, they have "business friends" with whom they share common interests and golf "buddies," and they have trusted Board members with whom they have rapport. But honest-to-goodness, call-at-three-o'clock-in-the-morning friends? Many would consider it incredible to have just one!

The very drive to "separate ourselves from the pack" appears to shift the emphasis from "alone at the top" to "alone at the top."

The "top spot" loses its novelty at the very time the CEO begins to feel the full impact of the loneliness. This phenomenon, which many CEOs experience as personally devastating, can make the promise of the power of "sitting in the chair" hollow.

After my clients clarify and embrace their personal definition of "friendship" I challenge them to spend unstructured time with the person or persons they feel most attuned to. I suggest they, "hang out" and wait for the benefits of friendship to spring forth. For those who make the time and have the patience, the benefits do come.

Personal friendships for CEOs are their own reward. Organizational friendships for CEOs almost always have the downsides of perceived favoritism or "untouchability." One way for CEOs to experience nevertheless some of the aspects of personal friendship in their organization is to practice collaboration. True collaboration, like true friendship, requires personal preparation and letting go, and results in "organizational intimacy."

The Art of Possibility by Rosamund and Benjamin Zander, and *Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration* by Robert Hargrove present the disciplines of leadership necessary for true collaboration

to arise.

In their last chapter, "Telling the WE Story," the Zanders suggest that, like the ebb and flow of conversation between personal friends, the "practitioner of the WE" encourages the emergence of the cooperative, rather than the competitive, characteristics of his or her colleagues. This practitioner "encourages the expression of each thing that is pressing to be said in the group, not as a problem that must be resolved, but as a statement that can take its place with others. He

does this until all that wants to be said is spoken, until all of us shows up. He holds the framework for the long line, and keeps the question alive, "What's best for US?"

Thus, the legitimacy of various views and interests is honored as it is between friends and the possibility of passionately supported new directions arises from the interstices of the human webbing of the WE.

Hargrove calls for the CEO to reinvent him- or herself as a "lateral leader," whose values are "1) openness to new relationships, 2) nurturing and supporting new ideas, 3) rigorous thinking that includes questioning deep beliefs and assumptions, and 4) operating with integrity." This lateral leader abandons the chain of command

for an up-and-down, cross-department "network of commitments, communication and support," "juxtaposing multiple talents and gifts to create new business schemes" and "thinking outside the box."

An example of "creative collaboration" is "a radically decentralized chaotic [combining chaos and order] organization where tolerance of chaos generates order as in nature." (Dee Hoch, former Chairman, Visa International, quoted by Hargrove.)

Thus, the collaborative process replicates aspects of personal friendship. Friends and collaborators allow "whatever" to come in the friendship, and friendship and collaboration deepen as dissonance is permitted to arise, play itself out, and become the source of a deeper, richer and more complex harmony.

Hargrove sees the outcome of creative collaboration as "a flock of birds flying together in V formation has the lifting power to carry twice the distance of single bird flying alone."

By implementing the following strategies, you can build a WE in your organization that will result in your feeling less alone and at the same time greatly benefit the organization:

- Assume that *everyone* in your organization has *something* to con-



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tribute to every major decision.

- Spend time devising a welcoming structure that will maximize the opportunity for meaningful input by all employees.
- Be willing to deal with whatever unwieldiness results from that structure for the pearls of perception, perspective, insight and wisdom it will yield.
- Recognize *every* contribution to the resulting process.
- Celebrate approaches and results emanating from the process.
- Welcome contributions of participants which look to revision of the process to keep it vital.

Hargrove summarizes by stating that the “Great Man” or “Charismatic Leader” theory of history is reaching its limits and has in fact done much to obfuscate the historically significant role of creative collaboration. So your role as a modern CEO is not heroic but facilitative, not dynamic but patient, and not spell-binding but cre-

ation-inducing. Not what you signed up for? Well, welcome to the changing party, where the emperor wears new clothes!

So the image shifts—it’s no longer leading a charge from Point A to Point B. Instead, it does indeed involve keeping the heat on, and not knowing which kernel is going to pop into popcorn first, or in what order. Messy, yes. Chaotic, yes. Fruitful, yes. Fulfilling, yes.

I almost forgot. When I got to the top of the hill at the Pennsylvania State Line on my bike ride, my fellow alumni, “Alone at the Top,” was there talking with his bike club members. Apparently, despite his shirt, his desire for the “WE” and collaboration had won out.

I pondered all this as I completed the short ride into New Freedom (Pennsylvania, that is).

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