

groundhog, it's *your* shadow, deal with it

Up in northwest Pennsylvania, venerable Punxsutawney Phil is peering out from his hole. He says, "No sunlight? Great! I won't be able to see my shadow and can stay out here. I miss the sunlight, but that shadow really gets to me."

How much like the fabled Phil are we CEOs!

Emerging as new CEOs we survey the landscape to see what's going on out there in CEOland. Many of us encounter the "Everybody's doing it" cloudy day, obscuring our own and everyone else's shadow. In my two pre-CEO jobs I encountered cavalier attitudes toward market share- and price-fixing. More recently, it's been "managed earnings," smoothing by manipulation the ups and downs in normal corporate fortunes to meet investor expectations.

Bill George, former Chairman and CEO of Medtronic, described this latest setting of the "Everybody's doing it" cloudy day in the December 16, 2003 Wall Street Journal.:

(B)oards chose CEOs that were masters at manipulating numbers to meet expectations. They were selected more for their charisma and impressing Wall Street than their ability to lead people. Why, then, should we be surprised when they turn out to lack integrity or destroy the company's long term value?

So, the managed earnings clouds obscured the sun for a long time, permitting the CEOs of an entire decade to pretend that what they were doing was OK because "Everybody's doing it." Like Punxsutawney Phil, they welcomed a clouded sky which saved them from having to face the light of day.

Fortunately, others have not been taken in by the "this cloudy day (or decade) is OK" mantra. One of the most eloquent statements of this winter of public discontent came, not from a CEO, but from a Milwaukee baseball fan:

It's about shameless corporate spin...every cheating, fleeing and shafting and broken promise that the common person has come to expect from people who spin and downsize...it's about a high-trash media

culture and a feeling of unease that won't go away.(quoted in USA Today Sports Weekly, Nov. 26-Dec. 2, 2003)

Now we have entered a new day, when light does shine in many ways on corporate practices once accepted as normal ways of doing business, from the Sicilian and shower curtain capers of Tyco's Dennis Koslowski, to the Parmalat fraud, to the mutual fund market-timing practices, to the Martha Stewart insider-trading drama.

When we begin to confront our shadow, how do we react? Most of us disassociate ourselves from negative images with statements like "What could they have been thinking of?" or "That's a level of depravity I would *never* sink to!" A more honest few of us say, "There but for the grace of God go I," referring to actual events, or maybe in recognition of our own ethical vulnerability in the face of personal or marketplace stress.

Phil's tale can point the way for us. When Phil runs back into his hole, he retreats from the dark reflection of his own image and chooses to hide from self-illumination. Phil could choose another route: he could move into the light and explore his shadow, using what he learns as tools for becoming more authentic as a person and a leader.

In *Meeting the Shadow*, Zweig and Abrams, ed. (1991) quote Solzhinetsyn on why it is so difficult to deal with this subject:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Quoting J. R. O'Neil, they go on, describing a process that every CEO knows. Success leads to ego inflation, while failure leads to biting shame...we forget how to thrive outside of the limelight...

Zweig and Abrams themselves delineate



Required Reading for Growing Companies

Reprinted Content from
Volume 4 Number 2 February 2004

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- the stages of the leader's inflating ego:
- Endowing ourselves with special gifts...
- Killing the messenger...
- Needing to command the performance...
- Living on higher moral ground...

They correctly describe how resting on the hubristic laurels of past and present successes precludes leaders from pondering their capacity for ego-inflation with self-examination, and with "guides, mentors and sometimes therapists." Neglecting this self-examination leaves CEOs without the clear-eyed vision necessary to discover and define the route to future success.

So, what is needed for we CEOs to avoid this modern miasma, and literally do Phil one better by confronting our shadow in the clear light of day?

In *Romancing the Shadow* (1997), Zwieg and Wolf point us toward the self-examination questions,

- (whether we) feel only the power of position...the kind of power that can lead to hubris, self-righteousness and a constant need for acknowledgment...
- (whether our) one-sided competitive

personalities render (us) incapable of vulnerability...

(whether we) cannot slow down because (we)

must strive to maintain (our) image at all costs...

(whether we) cannot promote at the top because (we) must maintain (our) powerful positions at all costs.

(whether) (e)ventually abandoned by family and friends, some of (us) are left alone with the trappings of power.

George, in his WSJ article, calls for “authentic leaders running our corporations.” Debbie Ford, in her *Dark Side of the Light Chasers* (1998), gives us a path to authenticity—owning the dis-owned parts of ourselves, even though they may be distasteful, or even repulsive to us. Ford had to identify and own her fear, covertness and grandiosity early on. She finally ended up with many dis-owned parts she could own. As she owned them, she found, paradoxically, that their power over her diminished.

Specifically, Ford identified traits she detested in others and then looked assiduously for them in herself. When they showed up, she worked at seeing how they were part of her whole personality and even connected to parts of herself she appreciated and loved. When she had completed that process they just seemed to lose their power over her.

In the film, *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray visits Punxsutawney and finds himself in an apparent time distortion where he repeats the same acts each day, blaming others for his misfortunes. It slowly dawns on him that he is the perceiver of the problems and as his perception changes, the “problems” disappear.

For us as CEOs the parable is clear. To get ourselves to the light of day, we need to separate ourselves from the collective shadow named “Everybody’s doing it.” Once we’re into the light being shown on CEOs today the hard part begins. Scared by our shadow, we may be tempted to retreat into darkness, where there is neither shadow nor light. If we gradually come out into the light, we can begin to examine our shadow, noting those parts which are particularly offensive. As familiarity and comfort with our shadow increases, and fear of it recedes, we become free to authentically enjoy the springtime for our company, for others and for ourselves.

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