

finding company

Ask a CEO to define the word “company” in the midst of a busy day and he or she may say “my company, the one I own [or head].” There may even be a little impatience with the question in the press of the moment. Ask the same question at the end of a workday or on a weekend, and the answer may very well change. It becomes reflective of where the CEO finds his or her “company” in life, where “I can be myself,” “let down my hair,” or “let it all hang out.” This column explores those places and how a CEO can make the most of them.

While the occasional CEO prefers complete solitude, most of us have a drive for association. It may come from the feeling that it's a relief not to be a leader in some situations, or being able to express the simple affection the CEO role constrains us from.

Some may find company at the frequented bar or club. Others may prefer a complete change of context like a road rally group, a paint ball exercise or a golf foursome. All these sources of company make our everyday status disappear. We're in a new world with a more level playing field. Feedback is not filtered by deference to our status, because we have none. It puts us back in “normal” reality, not the hyped version in which our leadership role often casts us.

Some of us may find company in association with pets or animals - they don't talk back, they don't require constant care and feeding, they're always happy to see us, and don't complain. Yet they do have distinct personalities and they are outlets for the affection we may feel we can't show at the office. Our companionship with them changes over time, too, as they and we age, and there are the lessons of loss, when we must say good-bye.

So we have an opportunity in real time and then in memory to pay tribute to the company we have kept with animals. Since it's without words (except for talking parrots) we get to feel the power of wordless communication, love and affection. It can be quite poignant.

Some people like to entertain company in their homes. Careful matches of attendees can result in the release of uncontrollable laughter or scintillating conversation (or both!). The sense of lives mutually celebrated with good friends can be most gratifying.

Some find that association in an adventure, whether it's white-water rafting or, like one of my clients, mountain climbing, provides that occasion for close, non-hierarchical sharing that breaks down barriers. We can appreciate each other for who we are, without titles, levels of income, or where we live separating us from our fellow human beings

Some of us find company with our husband or wife, or with a long time companion. The shared experiences, the appreciation of the opposing or shared viewpoint, the joint facing of joys, sorrows and crises, give us a relationship which seems to have an existence separate from the two of us.

My wife Anne and I cruised up the Rhine for six days over our fortieth wedding anniversary. It seemed to us that it was more about celebrating how our relationship, a separate entity from each of us, has grown, changed and shifted over the years, than it was about either of us.

The common thread running through all of these activities is our deep need for intimacy with other human beings. To get the most out of our social and many of our personal endeavors we need to develop our capacity for intimacy. This may be particularly difficult for us as CEOs.

What gets in the way? Certainly our concerns around cash flow, financing, expansion, systems, staffing and strategizing our firm's future. We feel we “can't take our eye off the ball” long enough to ask some penetrating questions of ourselves, like:

- How fulfilled am I?
- How fulfilling are my activities?
- How is the balance in my life?
- What do I need to yes and not to, to achieve greater balance?
- What's holding me back?
- How can I deal with it?

And, on an even deeper level, ask:

- What is the purpose of the life I'm leading?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses as a person?
- How do I deal with them do maximize my satisfaction and contribution in life?
- How much do I need intimacy and where is it lacking in my life?
- Who will I be and what will I do to bring more intimacy into my life?

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2400 Boston Street, Suite 330, Baltimore MD 21224
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www.smartceo.com

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Wayne Caskey

If you're still reading at this point, you may be saying to yourself “This isn't possible. Who is Caskey kidding?”

In my experience honest answers to these questions, and conscientious application to being who you uniquely need to be and doing what you uniquely need to do, enlarge capacity for intimacy. Passion and accompanying intimacy begin to exhibit themselves across people's lives. Far from experiencing decline in their businesses, CEOs find that the businesses themselves find new, exciting and sometimes unforeseen sources of growth and prosperity, giving their owners and leaders a sense of material abundance not experienced before.

In her poem, “I Want To Know,” Native American Elder Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes:

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living...

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have...

It doesn't interest me who you are or how you came to be here...

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the

empty moments.

I submit that to “find company” with others you need to find it with yourself. Work on this capacity gives you a sense of peace and abundance and results in an expanded capacity for intimacy with others. The accompanying sense of authenticity and prosperity infuses you and your business with new life.

What more is there?

Wayne Caskey is a three-time CEO who is now an executive coach, speaker and workshop leader. His web site is www.waynecaskey.com and e-mail is wc@waynecaskey.com.