

significant other

CEOs rarely talk publicly about what their significant other means to them. Oh, there may be a reference to “my other half,” “my better half,” or a favorite picture on the desk or credenza. But what does this person *really* mean to them?

This issue is important. Meaning in life comes from love and work. To focus on the latter without articulating the former makes CEO Jack or Jane a dull boy or girl. In this New Year's column, I invite you to take the time to write down who your significant is for you and what roles they fulfill in your life.

e. e. cummings said it best in *since feeling is first*:

the best gesture of my brain
is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says
we are for each other.

Whether our relationships are straight or gay, who significant others are for us, and our relationship with them, precedes, succeeds, survives and dwarfs our momentary accomplishments at work. He or she is just there, and the love, laughter and delight, unlike our CEO strivings, requires no effort. The best strategic plan, even having achieved double the profit goals of the operating plan, pales when compared to our significant other and our relationship with them, which just is.

There's a quietness that goes with a deep love relationship. Kenneth Rexroth describes it in *Quietly*:

Our hearts slow, quiet, reliable
In their interlocked rhythm.

And there's a celebration of desire for each other. As Steve Scafidì wrote in *Prayer for a Marriage*:

and I hope
while we stand there in the kitchen
making tea and kissing, the whistle
of the teapot wakes the neighbors.

So, this is who a significant other is. What roles do they fulfill for us?

FEEDBACK

Very few CEOs have anyone other than significant others who will tell them when the emperor or empress is wearing no clothes.

When I don't have the facts to back up a

position I'm taking, I tend to slide through situations on charm. My wife Anne recognized this trait in me long ago, and calls me on it, saying “Caskey, that's BS and you know it.” In a similar vein, one of my CEO clients and I were discussing how he was getting along. He quoted his wife and said “The wives really know.”

How rare and how valuable for CEOs is clear-eyed “calling it as it is,” without sugar-coating, or fawning, or ego-massaging, or pussy-footing? It's such a benefit to a CEO that if you don't have it, you're probably wondering where you can buy or rent it!

SOUNDING BOARD

Closely related to the feedback role is the sounding board. Trying out ideas on a knowledgeable significant other who will sit and listen while the ideas play out, making helpful and encouraging comments along the way, is such a benefit, particularly to an orally oriented CEO like me.

Understanding—Close association over years fosters understanding of how differently we see the world from our significant other.

In 1982, Anne and I attended a National Training Laboratories conference in Tampa for CEOs and CEO wannabes (which I was at the time). We each took the Myers-Briggs personality test for the first time. We differed markedly in two of the four scales of the test. Anne's type was SJ, which denotes sensory gathering of information and rapid decision-making, while mine was NP, which denotes intuitive gathering of information and information-seeking prior to decision-making. Our responses to the test results were indicative of our differences. I said “I finally understand why you are the way you are.” She retorted “Wayne, we've been married over 20 years, and you still didn't understand me?”

MODEL FOR OPPOSITE ENERGY

My observation is that after age 40, certainly after age 50, I began to develop what are traditionally viewed as feminine qualities—nurturing and support—while Anne has developed traditional masculine qualities—action and results.

During these years, we were both curlers, an Olympic sport performed on ice with granite stones and brooms. Anne taught me

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the virtues of the so-called “draw game,” one of finesse and placement, as opposed to the “takeout game” which I had been playing and which relies upon accuracy, speed and force. The change of style I then made in my game gave me an initial appreciation of how conscious embracing of my feminine qualities, far from being unmanly, gave me a much larger array of behaviors to meet the challenges of business and life.

FAITH

As CEOs we all have our dark days, when it appears that the market, the competitors, the government, our team, and/or our own shortcomings have let us down. The confidence which brought us as leaders to this place is shaken and we wonder if we've lost our touch. In severe situations, we may even become depressed, and it may affect our performance and make events appear as though they are on a downward spiral.

How refreshing, how reinvigorating to have our closest “associate,” the one who knows us best, express faith in our ability to weather the storm and chart the future. Priceless! A gift from heaven!

And how sweet it is, after the storm has passed, for the “associate” to break out the

champagne to celebrate the storm's passage and the return of blue skies for us and our venture.

So this column is a celebration of significant others, yours and mine, for all they are and all they do. We owe them a great debt. As Robert Phillips expressed from the masculine perspective in *The Changed Man*:

It's all because
of you. Because of you and me,
I've become one changed man.

Wayne Caskey is a three-time CEO who is now an executive coach. He dedicates this column to Anne, his significant other of forty-five years. www.waynecaskey.com