

the three-legged stool

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As CEOs, you may be familiar with the “three-legged stool concept” as the core philosophy of McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc. The first leg is McDonald’s itself, the second its franchisees, and the third its supplier partners. As Kroc said, the stool is only as strong as each of its three legs.

You may not be as aware, however, of the three-legged stool you sit upon each day you hold your CEO position. Its three legs are achievement, trust and the “personal.”

ACHIEVEMENT

We all understand achievement and its rewards: the solid accomplishment itself, the rush that follows the initial recognition of what we’ve accomplished, and the follow-on rush of the resulting local demi-god status. And, oh, we crave it all. In fact, for many of us it becomes our drug of choice and we will bulldoze anything that gets in the way, including our associates.

Some of us may have possessed a different natural leadership style when we began our management ascent, but we learn early in the process to produce results or perish! So we adapt. We become demanding and impatient. We relentlessly follow up to see that budgets and deadlines are at the very least met, and, more likely, exceeded.

Even though people may cower in fear, they meet our demands. We experience the power that our intelligence and the force of our personality give us over others. Gradually, we no longer rate our subordinates’ performance by some external measure, but by how high they jump at our command.

When I was an acquisitions VP at a Fortune 500, a young assistant controller was assigned to help me in the financial analysis of potential acquisitions. After we mutually reviewed his first assignment, he asked me when I would like to have the analysis. I replied, “Twenty minutes.” His mouth dropped open and consequently he had the analysis back in twenty minutes. For years afterward, I told the story of “Twenty minute Jones” (not his real name), which I thought was funny. Really, the story was less about Jones and more about my incredible impatience.

This demand for immediate compliance as confirmation of our power is deeply

embedded in ourselves, which I will illustrate in another story of mine. For eight years after my last CEO position, I was senior vice president in a small to midsize corporation. In order to get done what I needed required the cooperation of others who reported to my peers in the company. In order to assure immediate compliance with my demands, I would, as I had when I was a CEO, stand in someone’s office until what I wanted was done or agreed to be done. I would not leave until I got what I wanted, even though I had none of the CEO’s power in these situations.

I had thoroughly mastered one leg of the three-legged stool— achievement. If I did not hold onto this leg by micromanagement, however, there was no basis upon which to sustain a “freestanding” relationship with my associates.

Some of us stop there. It’s a shame because, ultimately, personal achievement is a lonely place to be and because there is so much more challenge in the CEO position.

TRUST

For the CEO of a mid-sized to large organization, certainly achievement continues to be important, but trust becomes equally important. If your associates are continually cowering for fear they’ll reap the full brunt of your anger and rage, they will not be creative. They will cease working as teams and the energy will drain away, not just from them but also from the company as a whole. Killing the human spirit kills the creative spirit.

In *Coaching the Alpha Male*, (*Harvard Business Review*, May 1, 2004) coaches Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson relate how they helped Michael Dell and his COO see that fear was detracting from Dell corporate



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performance. The coaches collected 360-degree feedback from associates, who were encouraged by anonymity to express themselves freely. Astonished by the results, Dell and his COO publicly admitted the feedback was valid, and set forth their personal development plans to change their management styles.

One of my clients, a head of operations, had 360-degree feedback that he had publicly and privately demeaned employees. He responded that he had not intentionally done so, but if anyone caught him in the act, to just say, “Remember number 2,” referring to the number of this development goal.

Many leaders are afraid that to make an admission of their fallibility and need for growth will undermine authority. Not so, say Ludeman and Erlandson:

When an alpha discloses the traits he’s working to improve, it helps convince the team he’s serious about changing. Questions like ‘How can I support you?’ or ‘How can I connect better with you?’ or ‘How can I lead more effectively?’ address old grudges in new ways, opening up a whole new dialogue across the organization.

The ogre becomes human and now engages in human dialogue.

The cynics in the readership may say, “Well, sack cloth and ashes are good for the soul, but how about the bottom line?” It depends on how sophisticated your view of the bottom line is. If your “tendency to criticize rather than validate (is) triggering self-doubt and fear in (your) most valuable team members,” your bottom line, however good, is not what it might be.

Suppose you, not one of the cynics, say, “I understand how trust is important. I’ve admitted the management style shortcomings in my 360, and asked for my associates’ help in my efforts to improve. Did that energize my team? All is going so well in fact that I’m even leaving my successor a legacy. And yet there’s something missing for me.”

THE “PERSONAL”

A reference to part of the personal usually comes at the end of the obituary. “His/Her first marriage ended in divorce.” There is no further comment, in total contrast to the voluminous detail throughout the rest of the tribute.

Part of the personal is never said. “She was not a happy person. For one so outwardly successful, she was curiously impassioned about her own life. Instead of her life opening up, it seemed to constrict.”

The old saw is “there is no place for the personal in business.” While the work/life balance movement may have made that phrase obsolete, the positive *imperative* to “have a great life” still isn’t stressed enough for CEOs.

Why are both aspects of the “personal” so important? They, and they alone, are the aspects which the CEO shares in common with his/her associates. Happiness and passion in these areas are marks of authenticity of character and occasions for identification or even genuine admiration in the eyes of associates. They humanize the gulf which associates often feel separates them from the power figure in their business lives. They result in the associate feeling “Hey, she’s just like me.”

And for the CEO, it makes the burdens and the disappointments of the position worth it. You can feel you’ve been there to provide emotional support for your loved ones when they needed it, been a good father/mother, and stood for excellence in this area of life, too. And that you individually have had fun outside the job, being who you are and doing what you love.

What is good for the CEO is good for his people and what is good for his people is

good for the company,

CONCLUSION

When each leg of a three-legged stool is exactly the same length it is said to be in “steady” position. For this steady position to hold, however, the weight must be placed over a point above the interior of the triangle made by the bottoms of the three feet.

Even when one leg is slightly longer, the top of the stool may not be parallel to the floor but the stool will be in a “stable” position. The stable position not only accommodates small errors in the lengths of the legs but also in the flatness of the floor. (Walter Whiteley at mathcentral.uregina.ca.)

So, if you adopt the three-legged stool as the model for your CEO life the, it will require that you continually attempt to center yourself on the stool. If you do so, you may be assured that unevenness in the “floor” of your life, or even small shifts in the lengths of the legs can be accommodated without loss of stability.

In other words, honoring achievement, trust, and the personal in your CEO life honors your entire life and the magnificence of that simple support system upon which you sit.

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