

quiet

Key Colony Beach, Florida – Our visitors for the last two weeks have left, and Anne and I are looking forward to two weeks of peace and quiet. For me, this prospect raises the topic of the role of quiet in a CEO's life.

Some of you will stop reading right here. “What an idiotic topic! I never have time for quiet. And I don't know any CEOs who do.” Or, “I don't know what I'd do if it were quiet around here. It's the action that keeps me going.” Some self-reflective types might say, “I don't know if I could stand the quiet. I find that activity is an escape. Otherwise, I'd have to be alone with myself, and I fear I wouldn't do too well with that.”

It is true that CEOs do not live the life of hermits or mystics. Interaction with associates, customers, vendors, board members, stockholders, bankers, accountants, lawyers, industry leaders, the media and various consultants fill each day. Sometimes, the mere keeping of order in these interactions exhausts both the CEO and his/her assistant, even if the communication between them is excellent, which is not always the case.

On vacation, you may shift gears – to facets of your business you haven't had the chance to consider in your work-a-day world. For example, who is your successor? You need reflective time to weigh the demands of the job against the demonstrated or embryonic qualities of the successor candidates and decide how to promote the appropriate qualities and measure them. Or, if you don't have a formalized operational or strategic planning process, you need quiet time to pick out a realistic revenue target for next year, or to visualize what your company might look like in three to five years. If you have a thorny regulatory, financial, personnel or legal problem, you may need time to sort out what your position may be, versus the positions of your advisors or associates. Perhaps you may need time to sort out what is good for you in the short or long run, versus what is good for the business.

Even after you've covered all these company issues, you may fill your time and your mind with reading the *Wall Street Journal*, or the latest business bestseller. With all these company and business thoughts occupying it, your mind has no respite from the busi-

ness world. Even if you avoid business-related topics, you most likely will rush around seeing the sights, playing the golf course or eating at the latest “in” restaurant. If you're reading the latest non-business bestsellers, you may measure “success” by how many of them you read, not what meaning you draw from them.

To the extent you continually lead your life at a frantic pace, you deprive yourself of the great benefits that flow from quiet time. Most of us would admit that quiet can be preciously valuable—when we have time for it. Yet, have we ever taken the time to inventory the practical benefits that personally flow to us from quiet?

How many people do you know who say “I get my best ideas in the shower?” I remember one of my father's fellow economists at the U.S. Treasury Department in World War II who told me he had received an idea in the shower which saved the government twenty billion dollars – no small sum in the 1940s. He characterized it as the crowning achievement of his career.

Inspiration often comes like a bolt out of the blue. And it comes when intense structured thought is not present, freeing those parts of our brains that access brilliance. New neural pathways emerge, and the way we perceive problems and their solutions radically changes. We get “outside the box” of our usual approaches.

Enough of us have had some experience like this to admit its validity, yet we might still resist, saying, “Well, it's great when it happens, but I can't sit around, staring blankly at a wall waiting for a lightning bolt to arrive!” Why do we abhor sitting around? One of my clients had a simple answer. “I'm just fearful of being alone with myself.”

A more complicated answer, and a primary one in my case, is that we crave attention and praise, which don't seem to be present in quiet. We CEOs often share with politicians and movie stars either a surfeit or lack of parental attention. As adults, we exer-

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2400 Boston Street, Suite 330, Baltimore MD 21224
Phone: 410-342-9510 Fax: 410-342-9514
www.smartceo.com

Publisher: Craig Burris, Editor: David Callahan



Wayne Caskey

cise our considerable talents to get that much needed attention. We may even begin to occupy the role of chief applauder ourselves so we can whisper, say or shout, “Oh, what a bright boy/girl am I!” Or we may create emergencies so we can engineer rescues and receive praise. Sometimes this incessant need for other-praise or self-praise becomes a compulsion, and we have trouble sitting quietly at all, even for an instant.

Quiet strikes right at the heart of the praise syndrome. No one is doing, no one is praising and, in fact, no one is even talking. In quiet, the praise circle is broken, and we need to deal with ourselves just as we are, with our foibles and faults, non-heroic, plain Jane or Bill.

So, how do we become quietly comfortable with being who we are, with our considerable talents, but without the necessity for continual heroic performance? One key for me has been focusing on those qualities that are naturally and easily mine, not those strident and compulsive behaviors that come to the fore when I'm heroically controlling outcomes. I know that charm, playfulness, appeals to intelligence, and uttering succinct sound bites to make sense out of complex situations let me lead from my strengths.

When I rely on these strengths, it's amazing how little resistance there is to my leadership and how my need for heroic leadership evaporates.

Dominance and strength of character are hallmarks of CEOs. When dominance is replaced by the authority which rises from strength of character, our authenticity energizes associates. When dominance is isolated as power over others, grudging acquiescence and demoralization result.

So, what true talents arise from your strength of character rather the behavior of heroic performance? Answering this question is important, because acceptance of those talents as an ordinary part of yourself may very well alter your view of yourself and the world. Permitting yourself to discard the compulsion around recognition and praise will allow you to acknowledge the true nature of your leadership. Once your self-perception is anchored in reality, your authenticity shines through, compulsion fades away and leadership anchored in your strength of character prevails.

One of my clients has recently begun meditating. He was sharing this with one of his associates, who said, "Oh, you've decided to become a human being instead of a human doing." This shook him because it starkly pointed him to his compulsion. Out of this realization, however, he is reclaiming his being, based on quiet acceptance of himself and his talents. His authenticity is growing, and with it, his true talents as a leader.

Are you a human doing? Do you aspire to be a human being? Quiet is a great place to start.

Wayne Caskey, a three-time CEO, is now an executive life coach. His Web site is www.waynecaskey.com and his e-mail is wc@waynecaskey.com.