

stayin' alive

As CEOs, we know we'll have to deal with opposition – from competitors, from the government, from various groups with vested interests other than our own. What we don't always anticipate, or at least deal well with, is opposition from within our organizations. After all, we're the chosen leaders – we have the vision, we have the leadership expertise, and we have the company's and its employees' best interest at heart. Why would anyone mount an effort to resist, undermine or openly oppose?

We're no strangers to strife within an organization – sales versus production, marketing versus sales, finance versus human resources or marketing, public relations versus legal. We know that there is tension inherent in the relationships between various functional groups within our organizations. We probably participated in these functional wars on our way to the top. But now we, who are charged with inspiring, motivating and leading our organizations, must face opposition from within? If it's not unthinkable, it's at the very least most unwelcome.

My introduction to this phenomenon came as an innocent bystander. I was attending our Fortune 500's annual board meeting where it had just been announced that my competitor in the presidency succession contest was being elevated to executive vice president. In my discouraged and despondent state, a board member approached me who demanded to hear my side of the story. I felt I was receiving sympathy, and responded accordingly. It gradually became apparent, however, that I was merely a pawn in a much larger game – the attempted overthrow of our CEO in a board coup. Unhappy as I was, I reported the board member's approach to the CEO. It turned out that the board member was being retired as Chairman and CEO of his own company, was looking for another CEO position, and considered our CEO fair game in his ego-driven quest.

Knowing his board member's situation and character, my CEO immediately sensed the board member's incentive for attempting to manipulate my disappointment into an example of poor decision-making by my CEO. He was able to deflect the effort easily.

Opposition from within is often less dra-

matic, taking the form of resistance rather than outright betrayal. A client of mine is currently making an acquisition, which will increase his company's size by approximately fifty percent. The acquisition puts his company in new product lines and significantly affects production, distribution and technology.

While there is great excitement about the acquisition, the executive team is not all of one mind concerned about it. Several actively resist the change by repeatedly raising problems as blocks rather than seeking solutions. My client knows that there is a resistance to change deeply embedded in organizational life. His knowing, patient handling of this resistance is assuring his team they can accommodate the changes required by the acquisition.

As Heifetz and Linsky demonstrate in *Leadership on the Line* (2002),

Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs and values...It asks them to...experience uncertainty and...challenges their sense of competence.

It's no wonder that my client is experiencing some resistance. But like the CEO of my Fortune 500, he's at home with this landscape. He sees it coming with the territory.

Another experience of mine illustrates how critical it is to know the reasons for the limits of supportive entities and be prepared to act accordingly. My charge from the Chairman of the British food conglomerate in my first CEO position was to grow the U.S. restaurant chain in Dallas by acquisition. I responded and in two years acquired

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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

the thirty-five Texas fast food restaurants of Del Taco from W. R. Grace, and the fifty Black-Eyed Pea restaurants from the chain's founders. Our acquisitions were applauded by the Chairman, and my associates and I were featured in an appearance before Fleet Street analysts in London.

These successes stoked my vision. I conducted preliminary discussions with three Mexican fast food chains throughout the southern tier of the U.S. and believed that creation of a "Sunbelt Taco" chain to challenge Taco Bell was within reach. Simultaneously, I met with the President of the Po Folks chain to discuss acquisition of half of their restaurants for conversion to Black-Eyed Peas, which would result in the creation of the first nationwide home style cooking chain.

The reaction of some of my British colleagues was "My, that's ambitious." My reaction was, "You bet it is, and we better act soon before these windows of opportunity close."

I failed to appreciate the cumulative strength of the following: that the Chairman was significantly bothered by what seemed to me relatively minor issues in the Black-

Eyed Pea acquisition; that the British culture strongly supported the bureaucratic procedure for the formal due diligence around both the Del Taco and Black-Eyed Pea acquisitions; that the Black-eyed Pea acquisition went forward, not on my assurance but on the assurance of a acquisition specialist from the London finance department; and that shortly following my acquisitions, I was asked to report to the conglomerate's CFO, and a conglomerate financial analyst was installed in our Dallas offices.

I also failed to recognize that the significance of the fact that the board members of the London conglomerate, whose basic business was dairy and food processing and distribution, referred to the subsidiary I headed as the Chairman's "American Adventure."

Against this aggregation of circumstances, I believed that my vision and timing were right and would sell themselves if I could architect sufficiently definitive deals to present to the Chairman. The deeply symbolic conclusion was that I was dismissed by the Chairman on my return from a meeting with the Po Folks president where we had agreed on the final architecture of a deal.

What are the lessons here? One is that my heroic view of the situation blinded me to the inherent limits of my support from the Chairman. I did not understand that I was in some ways merely a vehicle for the Chairman to engage in his fantasy of running a more lively business. He supported my program, but only in a very limited way, and I was threatening to far exceed those limits. While there were other factors in my dismissal, I participated in my own undoing by failing to appreciate how much resistance my activity would generate within the organization.

Had I gone to London and had a sit-down with the Chairman, I might have appreciated these things more fully. At least part of my reluctance to do so was based upon the subliminal realization that I would have to abandon, at least for the time being, my ambitious projects. I would then have had to make the painful decision whether I could remain in such a situation.

I focused on part of the Bee-Gee's "Stayin' Alive" lyrics, "Got the wings of heaven on my shoes./ I'm a dancin' man and I just can't lose" and ignored what immediately follows. "You know it's all right. It's OK./ I'll live to see another day."

As Heifetz and Linsky state:

Asking people to leave behind something they have lived with for years or

for generations practically invites them to get rid of you. Sometimes leaders are taken out simply because they do not appreciate the sacrifice they are asking from others. To them, the change does not seem like much of a sacrifice, so they have difficulty imagining that it seems that way to others.

Take the time to understand your internal allies and what will limit their alliance with you. Seek to identify sources of betrayal and resistance inherent in the situation. Determine how much it is worth to you to continue to press the issue and what you can live with short of complete realization of your vision.

Stayin' alive is often more important than complete victory.

Wayne Caskey, three-time CEO, is now an executive life coach. His Web site is www.waynecaskey.com.