

succeeding at succession

Three of my CEO clients are at various stages in the succession process. This column identifies the very personal questions that a CEO needs to ask himself, both about himself and his successor. (This column specifically applies to a male succeeding a male; however, it may be of interest in other types of gender succession.)

ARE YOU READY?

The CEO of a publicly held company names a successor, to great public hoopla. The successor is then dissected piece by piece in the business press, and questions are raised. Under the successor's provisional leadership, results do not immediately improve or perhaps even worsen. Within three to six months doubts arise. And within twelve months the former CEO returns from his chairmanship position to run the company. In extreme cases, this happens again and again.

What is going on here? Well, any number of things, but probably at least this — the CEO knows that he is getting to an age when he *should* move on, and perhaps his Board of Directors and large stockholders are voicing that sentiment, so he caves in and names a successor. But the CEO doesn't really *want* to move on, since he doesn't want to admit his mortality, or he's defined his whole life by his CEO status, or he's failed to create any appealing vocational or retirement alternative.

So the CEO can never fully dedicate himself to giving the attention that the successor needs and deserves. And the CEO never steps aside in the gradual and measured manner necessary for the successor to test his mettle in the larger arena before the full responsibility falls upon his shoulders.

The process may be even subtler. The CEO prepares the successor but does not prepare his Board of Directors for the successor's leadership or management style. The board longs for the "old days" and having the power. Staggered terms for directors almost guarantee that this issue, if not addressed in advance, will surface.

If you're ready, you will have anticipated these pitfalls, dealt with yourself and your board in ways that will not undermine the succession.

IS YOUR SUCCESSOR READY?

I remember the VP of Human Resources at a Fortune 500 having multi-colored boxes on charts to indicate readiness for succession. CEO succession, while it may be colorful, is not such a two dimensional process.

You may look at how round of an experience your potential successor has had in the corporation — sales, marketing, production, finance, or technology, or seek to tutor him or broaden that experience. You may send him to executive courses at Wharton, Harvard or Carnegie-Mellon. You may see that he gets training in public speaking. You may seek to model leadership qualities where you feel he's deficient. But after all is said and done, one question will remain: *Is your chosen successor an Apollo or a Zeus?*

Jean Bolen, in her *Gods in Everyman*, describes Apollo types as:

Zeus's favorite son...having golden hair...indeed a fair-haired Son whose purpose was to carry out his father's will...Favorite sons usually rise only so far, because they are perceived as light-weights, lacking the driving ambition and capacity to consolidate power and rule as a father figure with the ruthlessness of Zeus.

In contrast,

A Zeus wants authority and power, and does not mind taking risks to reach his goals. He would rather be his own boss than work for somebody else... Zeus is characteristically on the lookout for what he wants to acquire. It may be a particular product, a potential employee, or a company; when he spots what he wants, he goes after it single-mindedly.

He excels at ... forging alliances and determining boundaries, in arranging

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quid pro quo agreements. His word is enough. He wants to deal with others who have authority and are decisive [whether they be] bankers and suppliers, distributors and even competitors, or ... referral sources or bureaucrats, or donors.

So which successor have you chosen, Apollo or Zeus? Apollos are a lot easier to deal with in the succession process. They're content with "the orderly process of succession" and don't want to wrest control from you at the earliest possible time. But will they be able to draw from inner resources when *their* time to be tested arrives? Will they instinctively know what needs to be done in a crisis? Zeuses on the other hand can be hell on wheels, disrupting the orderly succession process with their impatience and bridling at restrictions. But it is their instinctive drive for power that may ultimately serve your company well.

IS YOUR SUCCESSOR RIGHT FOR THE TIMES?

You've been right for the times you've held sway. Your genius at cost containment

and insistence upon financial accountability has been great. But your talents are not what the future calls for. You've positioned the company as a well-oiled machine capable of massive future growth and what you need is someone whose ambition and flair will serve to power that growth. A clone of yourself would ultimately strangle the company's growth, and it would never achieve its potential. So what you need is to choose that successor with whom you will be very uncomfortable in the succession process (because he is so unlike you) and yet will serve the company magnificently as he succeeds.

There are infinite variations on this theme, but all CEOs must consider it in some fashion to succeed at succession.

HAS YOUR SUCCESSOR SUFFICIENT MATURITY TO CARRY OFF THE JOB YOU'RE GIVING HIM?

In *Iron John*, Robert Bly states that the necessary "masculine sequence" goes from early prideful, arrogant, angry, antisocial intensity to later crusading engagement to ultimate non-judgmental appreciation of humanity. Those who immediately emerge as crusaders without experiencing their anti-social tendencies are insufferable bores whose message falls on deaf ears. Likewise, a humane approach without the intensity or the engagement from the earlier stages will lack depth and resonance and may well be viewed as warm, fuzzy poppycock.

So you need someone who has moved through the stages to a maturity that speaks for itself and gives instant credibility.

ARE YOU WILLING TO SHIFT YOUR ROLE WITHIN YOUR COMPANY?

Maybe you're satisfied with your answers to the previous four questions, however once the succession is underway, do you ease the transition? As Chairman of the Board you have a dual role — support of your successor's administration and be a leader to that group charged with upholding the interests of shareholders and other constituencies.

Some find it very hard to carry off the shift involved in balancing this dual responsibility. They may find themselves in a situation like that of the recently appointed judge who, in response to a line of questioning from a lawyer appearing before him, stood up and loudly proclaimed, "I object!"

So it's hard to change gears. But if you're prepared and motivated, and have a deep

and abiding interest in the future of the company, you can do it.

Ultimately, succeeding at a process of succession requires an attitude on the part of the CEO somewhat like that of the *Cathedral Builders* described by John Ormond, who:

Saw naves sprout arches,
clerestories soar...

Decided it was time to give it up.

To leave the spire to others...

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