

the columnist and the CEO

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This column enters its fifth year with this issue. It's an appropriate time to review the parallels between my experience as a columnist and the experience of CEOs.

THE RELUCTANT COLUMNIST/CEO

In October of 2001, a client mentioned a fellow who was founding a magazine in Baltimore. He said, "You really ought to meet him. They're targeting CEOs and entrepreneurs." I met Craig Burris and at the end of our conversation, he asked, "Have you ever done any writing?" I said no. He said, "You ought to think about writing a column for us." I did think about it, but I didn't do anything about it.

Two months later Craig called and said, "We're still looking for a columnist. How about it?" I thought of a topic, submitted it and the column began. The key here is that Craig sensed capability which I had but barely considered, and he pursued it.

Realization that one has CEO talent may come haltingly. I know in my case I was quite pleased to continue as a labor negotiator and had consciously rejected the CEO path. It was only after I was forced to make a decision whether to accept a promotion that I consciously began to seek higher office.

Talent hunters often need a sharp eye to spot the talent. Then it may take patience or gentle encouragement, or, as in my case, a life defining moment of choice, for the candidate to accept the calling.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

In my early days as a columnist, I was uncertain what style I should adopt and what positions I should take. Peggy Millin, a writer in Asheville, North Carolina, had identified my writing ability in a seminar some years before. In my uncertainty, I asked her to review and comment on my columns prior to submission to *SmartCEO*. She has continued to polish my prose ever since and, more importantly, has continually urged me to take well-defined positions - "That's what a column is all about, Wayne."

It takes new CEOs a while to find their voice and longer to stake out positions which

are uniquely their own. Articulating those positions, which then become their hallmarks, can take years.

This kind of maturity in CEOs is a natural development and cannot be rushed.

THIS IS NOT A POPULARITY CONTEST

In the early days of the column I had visions of all the magazine's readers being uniformly enlightened by my column. Then one day I expectantly asked *SmartCEO* editor Dave Callahan what he had heard about my column. He said, "Caskey, they either love you or hate you."

A CEO quickly learns that running a company is not necessarily about pleasing employees, officers or even board members. Often, it means just the opposite. The main thing is remaining true to your vision for the company, regardless of its popularity.

THE NEED FOR EXTRA SPACE TO EXPERIMENT

Within four months in the column's first year, I wrote two poems, each over a thousand words in length. After I had submitted the second one, Dave Callahan informed me that he did not intend to turn *SmartCEO* into a poetry journal, but he would go along with it. The latitude he extended helped me develop my ear for the poetry I now use in many columns to deepen and enrich their meaning.

CEOs also need latitude from their investors and boards of directors so that they, too, may experiment, "find themselves" and get their "wings" for future ventures. The results of these experiments often become the ingredients for great successes.

THIS IS A LONELY JOB

My fellow columnists and I talk about how little we hear from *SmartCEO* readers. I have received a total of two emails, neither of



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them in direct response to any of the forty-eight columns I've written. At *SmartCEO* events, there are many people who say, "I read your column," but even there I've only received two comments on specific columns.

CEOs often feel lonely, too. No one is there to give instant or even delayed feedback. While the CEO knows these initiatives are impacting the business and its employees, the "distance" between others and the CEO often results in silence.

FRESH OUT OF IDEAS

About a year ago, the ideas for the column wouldn't come. As the deadline approached and the pressure mounted, I finally decided that I would write about having "No Inspiration."

At times CEOs are out of ideas, near their wit's end. Transparency is sometimes the best policy. If others in the organization know, they can help jump-start the idea-generation process which has momentarily eluded the CEO.

VULNERABILITY

As I've become more assured as a colum-

nist, I've told more and more about myself as a vulnerable, discouraged, failed human being with less than totally praiseworthy emotions and motives. Some of my confidants have said, "You're not going to tell that! It will destroy your image." Well, I've felt that showing my fallibility will help readers more fully relate to the columns and will paradoxically increase their strength.

Likewise, I've told many stories about CEOs who have had their finest hours of relating to employees and other stakeholders by treating themselves, their fallibility and their very human emotions transparently.

DELAYED GRATIFICATION

For a long time, I believed that writing this column was its own reward. I was growing as a writer and as a person, and discovering things about myself which I had barely realized. This was great for me, one of my premier self-development activities. In the last twelve months, I've also begun to get multiple coaching clients either directly or indirectly from the column, so in addition to all the intangibles, tangible rewards have begun to appear.

Entrepreneur CEOs confront the same situation. They love what they're doing, but are fully cognizant that start-up businesses often take three years to attain profitability. They need adequate financial and psychological capital for the long periods of negative cash flow and losses.

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