

# giving back

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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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We've all heard CEOs talk about "giving back." Many say that "I've received so much, now it's my time to give back." This column deals with the question of what's really going on when CEOs make this statement.

## EGO

One possible thing being served is the CEO's ego.

I personally learned this lesson when we lived in Milwaukee. I held the third highest position within Universal Foods, a Fortune 500 company. Universal had a tradition of "service to the community." Accordingly, I succeeded to a number of key positions in area not-for-profits. One of these positions was a seat on the allocations committee of the Performing Arts Foundation. Soon after my appointment, I overheard a neighbor who was active in the local opera say "Well, I guess I'd better be really nice to Wayne."

I had acquired a power over my neighbor which I hadn't sought, but which fed my ego. That my neighbor's calculated subservience and my acceptance of it cut off the possibility of a friendship developing seemed less important than my growing prominence in the community.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

Another thing that may be served is the image of your company.

One of my best friends in corporate life was Jack Felton. I met Jack at Interstate Bakeries in Kansas City where he was the public relations director. (Jack later served as VP of public relations under three CEOs at McCormick.) His job, he said, was to put forward the best face of the company to the public, so that the company was always perceived as "the good guy," both in business and in the community. Jack was a true professional and I learned a lot from him. He dealt in images and he dealt with them creatively and well. He distinguished clearly in his own mind between image creation and

What seems to be generosity is often no more than disguised ambition...

- Duc de La Rochefoucauld

the complex reality beneath, and he always made sure that there was a solid connection between the two so that he didn't over-promise or misrepresent.

Some CEOs do not make the distinction and connection which Jack made. They begin to serve the public image of the company at all costs. We're all familiar with the Enrons and the Worldcoms. They cling to the image and sought to perpetuate it after the fortunes of their companies had in fact changed. The catastrophic downfall of their image as reality caught up with it was guaranteed.

## GRATITUDE

Many CEOs give back out of a sense of gratitude.

Gratitude is defined as "an appreciation of benefits received," or thanks for "an excellence or power granted by God." In the thesaurus, "thankful good will...thank offering" are listed.

Surrounding the related word "generosity" in the thesaurus are the expressions "good feeling, good wishes...loving-kindness...fellow-feeling...warmth of heart..."

My Baltimore CEO friends respond to their opportunities to give back by whether they feel the presence or absence of these emotions.

One is a leader in the community and has held chairmanships of several key community organizations. His gratitude for the gifts and talents which have been given him manifests itself in his choice of leadership spots where he feels passion and warmth for the cause.

Another has developed an aversion to not-for-profit "development consultants" who take no time to get to know him, his preferences and his values. Instead, they parade before him the "crying needs" of their worthy causes. He has become so turned off by this approach that he is considering cut-



Wayne Caskey

The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the light's focus; we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and be judged in the wholeness of our character.

- George Eliot

ting off a charity he has supported for years.

A third has resigned a not-for-profit board position where he was sought out solely as the "giver of last resort," making up the annual shortfall of the development campaign.

True "giving back" is not ego building nor cultivation of an image but rather a "gift back."

What that means is having received gifts of resources that result in achievement and recognition, the CEO gives freely of his/her

singular talents to community endeavors about which they're passionate. That keeps them focused and on track. Otherwise, they may lose their way, becoming victims of organizational burnout or cynics regarding the manipulation or mutual back scratching of fund-raising.

## **FOUNDATION RAMIFICATIONS**

When your individual wealth has achieved a certain size you may choose to establish an individual foundation. Likewise, when your corporation has grown to a certain size you may establish a corporate foundation. How do you keep the warmth of feeling as your giving back becomes more institutionalized?

Among the brick and mortar projects and the careful surveys yielding funding for much-needed community services, keep in mind the occasional project which celebrates the human spirit. In a park in Milwaukee there's a large fountain which faces the lake-front. I remember the day of its dedication. Universal's CEO said it was given to the city as a place "where children and animals play, where lovers embrace and where the human spirit is renewed." It was a gift of the heart, not of the head, and its inspiration continues to this day.

As Bryan R. Hirst said, fountains indicate and signal well-being to all. Not only that, they share their karmic energy with all who see, hear, smell, taste and touch them...Fountains have come to symbolize the generosity of a god, an institution, or a person.

So, whether it is your personal or corporate time, talent or money, as you sift through your own motivation in measuring whether you are truly "giving back," keep in mind the image of the fountain.

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