

Route 66

Seen in:

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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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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

At the end of July, my son and I drove a 24-foot panel truck filled with his family's possessions from Brooklyn to Santa Fe. From St. Louis on we followed old US Route 66, which runs from Chicago to Los Angeles. As we traveled along, the parallels between our journey west and the CEO journey became increasingly clear.

HAVE AND HOLD VISION

On the second day we crossed the Mississippi at St. Louis and passed near the Gateway Arch. This is the gateway to the West and a tribute to Jefferson's great vision in completing the Louisiana Purchase.

CEOs need a vision of their West they can then articulate and hold for others in their organizations. It may be a high-tech or low-tech innovation, an economic or societal service, or a product or service for the individual. But the leader, the CEO, must have and hold the vision to carry his or her associates over the rough spots in the road.

PLUMB THE DEPTHS

Near Stanton, Missouri, southwest of St. Louis, we stopped to take a tour of the Meramec Caverns. Piled around the walls of the huge initial cave are 3,000 folding chairs for attendees at concerts given here. From there the tour guide led us deep into the earth. Dripping mineral-rich liquid had formed stalactites and stalagmites over hundreds and thousands of years. Jesse and Frank James hid the loot from their bank and train robberies here. John remarked he didn't think he could work here in the dark all the time.

Sooner or later, CEOs need to visit their Meramec, their dark side, explore what ravenous Jesse James-like desires reside there and accept those desires as part of their character. Denied, these shadows may erupt and dominate the organizational landscape. Their oppressive and depressive nature can gradually become a company culture, rather than just part of the normal human equipment.

SEEK INSPIRATION

"Precious Moments" are the child and angel figurines created by Sam Butcher. Enerco, a California company, began mass marketing Sam's creations in the early 90's. Soon after that, Precious Moments purchased three thousand acres near Carthage,

Missouri. Since then it has developed a park containing a chapel, a museum and gift shop, a wedding island, a motel and RV facility and a Biblically-themed light and water show. While the figurines and the development may not be to everyone's taste, John and I found the energy in the museum truly warm and loving. The testimonials revealed that Sam's story and creations have strengthened the faith of many.

CEOs must be the keepers of the flame for their organizations. Whether or not it is their story or their words that are the source of faith in the dark days that come to any organization, CEOs must be the pillars that others can lean on. Communicating information helps, but the faith of the CEO is indispensable on those to organizational survival.

STAND ON YOUR OWN OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT

Road Trip USA mentions the aptly named Trade Winds Inn at Clinton, Oklahoma. In what had obviously been better times for Clinton, Elvis and his brother had stayed at the Trade Winds, and in memoriam the motel has decorated their room with Elvis artifacts. We put our names first on the waitlist for the room. We didn't get it and had to be satisfied with a regular \$35 room, perfectly adequate, but with no reflected star power.

Many CEOs are real leaders but not media darlings. They lead fine companies with enviable growth records and they seek no public recognition. They also don't need association with celebrities to feed their egos. They find plenty of challenge and fulfillment in their own space, which is adequate for them.

DON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

Adrian, Texas shows on the map but has no population listed. Less than ten structures comprise the town. Its claims to fame are that it is equidistant on old Route 66



Wayne Caskey

between Chicago and Los Angeles, and is the site of the Midway Café. *Road Trip USA* said they served steaks. John asked the teenage son of the owner for one "We aren't serving any" said the teenager. John asked if his mother wouldn't fix one anyway. To my surprise she said yes and John and I shared a great ribeye.

Not taking no for an answer is a great attribute of CEOs. Questioning the rules, getting an exception, even changing the rules are all great qualities. Heroic tales grow around such incidents, becoming the folklore of companies and magnifying the CEO's reputation for leadership.

ACCEPT HELP

Southeast of Amarillo, a 1000-foot crevasse indents the Texas plains. We hiked for a couple of hours in the Palo Duro Canyon State Park. The trails weren't well-marked and the temperature was around 100 degrees. At the end of the hike, my sense of direction was so turned around I started taking the path away from the car. John's sense was true and we avoided a big time delay.

CEOs need to admit they're fallible. Ego or their natural desire to lead the troops can

result in great damage. Saying “I’m confused” or even “I’m clueless” is acceptable and will elicit immediate help from their team. Expression of vulnerability by strong people highlights their humanity and makes them even more appealing.

RUN ON EMPTY

As we approached Clines Corners, New Mexico (the turnoff toward Santa Fe from old Route 66, the modern I-40), the gas gauge buzzer sounded and the indicator precipitously dropped toward empty. When it was pointing directly at the big E, I asked John how many miles our gas guzzler was getting to the diesel gallon. He said “Four.” “How many miles do we have to go?” “Six.”

Sometimes CEOs have to run on empty, empty of their own or company resources. The cash flow slows to zero, the bank reduces or cancels the credit line, the top salesman leaves. Getting through these times requires endurance, grit, a clear head, persistence, perseverance, and an awareness of ways and means to preserve resources until the organization passes the space between the rock and the hard place.

CELEBRATE

After we maneuvered our 24-foot panel into a motel parking lot for the last time, we had a celebratory dinner in Santa Fe, marking the end of our four-day 2200-mile trip. We had learned much, and measurably strengthened our already strong bonds as father and son.

The CEO needs to be the chief celebrant, honoring others for their contributions to the company’s journey. Fulfilling this role strengthens those intangible bonds so necessary for the accomplishment of tangible goals.

As CEOs, we don’t come fully equipped. We develop our talents, gain our experience, and learn our lessons as we go along. Knowing that this is the nature of our journey, and absorbing and integrating our experiences along the way are important to full realization of ourselves. In the words of the old Nat King Cole song; “If you ever plan to motor west, travel my way, take the highway that’s best, Route Sixty-Six.”

Wayne Caskey is a three-time CEO who is now an executive and team coach. His web site is www.waynecaskey.com.