



It's Lonely at the Top

If you're leading a company,
find a team of trusted listeners and peers
to help you in good times and in challenging ones.

by SHERYL NANCE-NASH illustration by DAVE CUTLER

You fought hard to achieve success. But now that you're on the mountaintop, you've discovered just how desolate it can be up there.

"Leadership is lonely. More than half the CEOs we surveyed said so," says Steve Tappin, Managing Partner at executive recruiting firm Heidrick & Struggles and co-author of *The Secrets of CEOs*.

What is it about being a CEO or business owner that can create isolation? "The higher one climbs on the corporate ladder, the fewer peers one has. It is like an inverse funnel, and exists across industries — it doesn't matter if you're a small-office or home-office business owner or a CEO in a large corporation," says Barbara Poole, Founder and President of employaid.com, a career Web site.

Giving in to the role of lone wolf isn't just anti-social; it can be deadly. "Run down the list of every CEO who has resigned in disgrace or been forced from their company over the past 10 years, and I bet that insularity and isolation were factors in the majority of these instances," says Chris Holman, Senior Executive Coach at ClientWise, a coaching firm in Tarrytown, NY. And in a smaller business, isolation of a CEO can cause a company to shutter its doors entirely.

CEOs should consider the pursuit of counsel from others as one of their primary duties and

responsibilities, says Ronald Mitchell, CEO and Co-founder of Gotta Mentor, an online career mentoring network (gottamentor.com).

Going It Alone

Chief executives are programmed to go it alone in most corporate cultures. Aloof and powerful is the image many have learned to exude in all circumstances. It's uncomfortable to confide in someone lower in the ranks. And it's even more intimidating to consider bringing issues to a chairman who has the power to fire members of the executive team.

As for leaning on other C-level executives, that's tricky, too. "CEOs can't be seen to have, or perceived to have, favorites. Also, because of their position, they really can't trust that they are being told the truth," points out Francie Dalton of consulting firm Dalton Alliances in Columbia, MD. Hidden agendas and pride cause people to be unreliable sources of information and advice when it comes to their careers.

Finding Support

There are ways to find support, within your company and outside of it, to reduce that dangerous isolation. Experts agree that reaching out can make a significant difference in your company's success and in your well-being.

“Start with those who share the core values of the organization. You want their minds and their hearts because that’s what drives passion and commitment,” says Wachovia’s Ty J. Williams.

Form an advisory board. Distinct from a corporate board, an advisory board is a group designed to help you make objective decisions and weather change as a leader. Putting together an advisory board should be done as carefully as if you were hiring top management in your firm. The group should typically be small, just four or five people.

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Other vital attributes for board members include critical thinking skills, varied backgrounds and experience, and the boldness to challenge the status quo and ask tough questions. Remember, though, that this may not be the time to turn to family or close friends.

Explore executive groups. There are a number of CEO peer groups, sometimes called Mastermind groups. In organizations such as Vistage, CEO Roundtable, The Alternative Board (TAB), Young Presidents’ Organization (YPO), Womens Presidents’ Organization and numerous entrepreneur networks, leaders gather in small groups to discuss professional and personal issues. Some even require members to sign confidentiality agreements.

“The discussions can range from how to terminate employees to personal issues such as how to get through a divorce,” says Mitchell.

Consider a coach. Coaches can provide clarity and give you tools to improve your performance as a leader. A good coach will hold you accountable and offer honest observations. Coaching can also help you develop stronger emotional intelligence so that your interactions with employees and others are more relevant, says Jay Forte, a speaker and writer on staff performance.

Moving Forward

Once you’ve found a few networks and formed your advisory board, maintain the relationships. “It’s tough to build wide and deep relationships for many CEOs because of the demands on their time,” says Williams. “It’s not enough to simply serve on a board and never talk to people outside of the board meeting. Take the relationship to another level,” he adds.

Frankly, these relationships must be a priority. “They are as essential to business success as critical operational meetings, client calls and analyst discussions,” says Edith Onderick-Harvey, President of Change Dynamics Consulting in Andover, MA.

Give as much as you get. By sharing your knowledge and ideas, you’ll receive back as much as you deliver to others. *R*

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