



The Common-Sense CEO *Or, How NOT to Manage Your Business*

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The philosopher Voltaire once wrote, "Common sense isn't all that common." On the other hand, Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know." So, here's what I know - after nearly 25 years of "managing" people and working with CEOs and top executives in all sizes and types of companies - Voltaire was right.

Sadly, as people rise through the ranks - even in the smallest companies - accurate information becomes increasingly scarce (people fear to tell you the bad news). That scarcity, coupled with the artificial environments created by corporate perks and hierarchies, doom many CEOs and companies to failure. The CEO may cry all the way to the bank to cash in his or her golden parachute...but employees lose jobs, customers lose money, and the economy loses more momentum. Do you want to run your business that way? Of course you don't. *So what do you do?*

Don't believe your own press. Enjoy your successes and appreciate your accomplishments, but also work to keep your perspective. Swing a hammer at Habitat for Humanity, work at a homeless shelter, take your dog for a walk, or better yet, call your mother and try to explain what you do for a living. Mine knows she's proud of me, but she isn't really sure why. Do whatever it takes to remember that you're human and very much a part of this world. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Yes, this is a hoary maxim, but it's all too often forgotten when you're on "mahogany row" or in the corner office.

Hire good people and let them do their jobs. Let them know it's okay - even expected - that they'll make mistakes. As Theodore Roosevelt once said, "If a man isn't making mistakes, he isn't trying." If your people look good, you'll look good, and everyone will be successful. Hire people that are smarter than you (you can't know everything.) And, if all you ever hear from your staff is "yes" you're very likely missing something and are on the road to thoroughly mediocre performance.

Talk to customers. Avoid carefully organized and screened dinners or meetings. Pick up the phone and call someone you've never talked to. Get in the car and go to their office. You might be surprised. Grit your teeth if they tell you things you don't want to hear. Don't automatically punish your employees; do go and fix the problem.

You're responsible, period. You're accountable to your company, your employees and yourself. "I didn't know" wasn't an acceptable excuse when you were a first-grader, and it's certainly not good enough now that you're a leader.

Talk to your employees. And I don't mean engaging in chitchat at the annual Christmas party. Management by walking around really does work, *if* your employees know you mean it when you ask for suggestions, or drop by to just see "how things are going."



You can mandate behavior; you can't mandate beliefs. And, beliefs are the foundation for people giving you a 100- or even 150% of their efforts. Otherwise, they are just going through the motions for the paycheck. If you're going to invest in team building exercises and methods, use them and support them. Your employees can spot "happy talk" a mile away.

You *can* be a leader without being a jerk. If you're thinking the "Attila the Hun for Managers" type of book is a good idea, think again. I've worked in some extremely toxic environments; one in particular stands out as what not to do. The CEO ran around the halls in his stocking feet screaming obscenities at his staff. If Attila showed up at my door, I knew it was bad news. The screaming may have gotten 110% effort on some days but it didn't motivate *anyone* to give 150% - which is what you sometimes need in a fast-paced market (and every market these days is fast-paced.) If you are hated, you're not respected, and your people are doing the bare minimum to keep you at bay. Fear is a lousy motivator. Act sane - don't scream.

Stay informed. Become knowledgeable not just about your company or market, but also about your world. Reading a book about a non-business topic could be just the jolt of creativity you need to think about a problem in a different way. If nothing else, it will give you a break from your business, which can help to avoid burnout and recharge your batteries.

Finally, remember all things change. Cisco Systems built up its inventory as if the internet/telecom boom would last forever. Uh-oh. Keep in mind that you often "don't know what you don't know." And, if you're not prepared to listen to unpleasant news from your customers or employees, you can't effectively lead.

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