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VIEWS FROM THE TOP

TLC for the CEO

Despite the misbehaving execs making headlines, most business leaders deserve support

When business leaders appear in the news, the reports tend to be negative, particularly when it comes to leaders in government and the financial sector. Even during casual conversations among coworkers, leaders rarely receive praise. Most conversations focus on complaints, and this can lead to leaders finding themselves isolated with little or no support from their staff.

In my experience, most business leaders are good people and deserve help. I've met hundreds of leaders across Maine and New Hampshire, and most, and all I've chosen to work with, care deeply about their employees and the community. Many have taken reduced or even no income to avoid laying off employees. In some instances, leaders invested additional money or sold personal items to keep their businesses going, primarily for the sake of the employees.

There's a misconception that leaders don't do any real work, they just delegate. But in most cases, this is because leaders focus behind the scenes, which is what they should be doing — analyzing strengths and weaknesses, as well as watching for opportunities and threats. In this respect, leaders have the toughest job. They have to constantly identify and evaluate the potential impact of improvements and changes while also defining and upholding company values. Most leaders also spend significant time and effort forging external relationships that help the business in the long run. Especially in the current economic environment, many leaders are spending additional time doing frontline work, such as handling larger clients themselves or managing key products or services.

As the business world and life in general apply pressure on leaders more than ever before, leaders need, and the good ones deserve, empathy and support from their staff in addressing challenges. These challenges tend to come from three main areas:

- 1. External challenges:** The pace of business has increased dramatically during the last decade with more competition, business consolidations and technology advances, as well as more demanding, less loyal customers. The economic environment, world events and regulatory changes also make things much more hectic for business leaders than they have been historically.
- 2. Internal challenges:** Business leaders also need to change business processes and techniques more quickly. Because of rapidly changing customer demands and competition, leaders have to structure their companies to be much more nimble. For example, companies continually strive to shorten the time it takes to make changes to product and service offerings. Organizations also now tend to be leaner with a flatter organizational chart, which means leaders must do more.
- 3. Personal challenges:** Many leaders have unrealistic expectations of themselves and try to be perfect. As they hit mid-life, they likely have more personal financial pressure. They may be juggling children's college payments, retirement savings and taking care of elderly parents all at once. They also face the challenge of balancing the delegation of responsibilities vs. the desire to have complete control.

Creating a supportive environment

From the employee perspective, taking steps to assist the company leader not only helps the business thrive, but also improves the employee's value to the business. Over time, employees who step up and help their leaders are more likely to receive raises and promotions. And if they decide to leave the company for an advancement opportunity,

their boss is much more likely to provide a positive recommendation.

Here's a list of ways employees can alleviate pressure on their boss:

- Maintain good work habits and be a team player; leave personal issues at home and get work done on time
- Offer ideas for improvements, but also don't expect every idea to be accepted or implemented immediately
- Offer to lead the research and/or implementation of an improvement
- Show appreciation for the work the boss does; comment when they do things well
- Give constructive feedback; good leaders want this type of critique
- Ask to help with tasks the boss has no time for or tasks the boss does not enjoy doing

Leaders should strive to create an environment in which employees can offer support. Instead of trying to solve every problem, delegate and ask for help. Employees like to be included, but they also need to feel comfortable offering support. This won't happen without fostering the right type of environment. Leaders must be aware of how they react to suggestions and be sure to create an environment that welcomes input.

When employees support their leaders, it frees their leaders to focus on big-picture issues that will drive the company's success. In the long run, this benefits everyone. To borrow from a former U.S. president, employees should "Ask not what your boss can do for you. Ask instead what you can do for your boss."

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