

The Couch in the Corner Office

Surveying the landscape of the CEO psyche.

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Sometimes CEOs need an understanding ear – but they worry that confiding in a colleague isn't safe or smart. Leslie G. Mayer is an ear-for-hire. As founder of the Mayer Leadership Group, in Radnor, Pennsylvania, and a senior fellow at Wharton, she says she has listened to and advised dozens of top executives at companies large (GlaxoSmithKline (NYSE:GSK), Aramark) and small (InnaPhase, TMX Communications). Mayer, who holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, travels sans couch – but she does bring a deep understanding of the fraught relationships, secret insecurities, and empathic blind spots that weaken healthy leadership. A former teacher, she also knows how to keep wandering attentions focused and manage the occasional temper tantrum. Recently, Mayer spoke with editor-at-large Leigh Buchanan about the personalities she has met in corner offices.

Are chief executives cagey about letting their staffs know they're working with a psychologist?

They don't call me a psychologist. I'm generally viewed as a trusted adviser or consigliere. I work on the point where psychology and business meet.

What does that intersection look like in real life?

For example, I'm involved currently with the CEO and founder of a growth company who had an offer to sell. He was very excited about accepting this offer. But his board of outside investors was saying, "Gee, this is very nice. But why don't we hold on to this for a while and keep growing?" The CEO kept pushing back, and the board couldn't understand why. They thought he was being naive and impulsive. As he and I talked, I learned that his father – who was the original investor in his company – was having serious health issues. What had become prominent in his mind was the opportunity to hand his father a big check and say, "You bet on me, and you made a good choice. I want to make you proud." That relationship was where we ended up doing our work.

And what happened?

He didn't sell the company. But he did have a set of conversations with his dad. He came to see that the currency was in what they had to say to each other.

Have you worked with CEOs who couldn't accurately identify what was troubling them?

I worked with the CEO of a pharmaceutical company who thought his team wasn't working effectively together because of personality differences. When I got further into it, I found out that they'd spent years developing a drug and taking it through all the trials. Then, when it finally got its day in court before the FDA, it wasn't approved. So there was a lot of blame going on. We had some very delicate discussions about why it happened and managed to unfreeze the team.

In that situation, it wasn't just about the CEO. There were group dynamics at play.

There are *always* group dynamics at play. The CEO and his executive team. The CEO and the board.

What do you do if you come across a CEO who simply doesn't belong in the job?

Not long ago, I worked with a CEO and founder who held a very big stake in his company. He wasn't producing desirable results, and there were a lot of tensions between him and his three partners. I gave him guidelines about improving his performance, but he wasn't able to apply them beyond a specific situation. He just was not having an effect. So I subtly switched the conversations, and we started talking about what chairmen do. After a time, he stepped down from the CEO position. But he spoke about how it was painful to him, about how he wished he was able to do the job. When I don't think someone belongs in the top job, I usually focus on the fact that they're not feeling gratified. People are angry at them all the time. It's obviously related to their competence, but I don't start there. I ask, "Is this what you want to be doing with your time? When were you the happiest?" They say, "I was happiest when I was dreaming up this idea." And I say, "Well, how can we get you back to a place where you're a visionary and not an operator?"

What parts of their lives do CEOs most often neglect?

A lot of them are extremely physically active. They're committed to being part of their children's lives. But there's a shortfall in the intimacy with their spouses. Maybe the spouse doesn't understand the business, and that's where their head is at night. Sometimes the spouse is problem-oriented, and they don't have the energy to come home and spend the evening on more problems. Or the opposite: The spouse doesn't want them to solve problems at home, and solving problems is what they do.

What do you do if there's a marital problem?

If the issues affect work performance or professional gratification, we examine them. As my understanding of the CEO develops, so does my sense of how he or she may be contributing to issues at home. When the issues are more complex, I make a referral to a psychologist or other professional.

How does one get into the CEO psychologist business?

I actually started out as an educator working with youngsters who were gifted but had learning differences. Many of the entrepreneurs I work with today are like grown-up versions of those children. They're bright but with idiosyncratic operating styles.

What do you mean by "idiosyncratic operating styles"?

Children with learning differences are sometimes unable to project themselves into the mindset of others. So they can be inappropriate – they often lack emotional intelligence, and sometimes they blurt things out at the wrong time. Recently I was working with a CEO who needed to deliver a difficult message to someone. He'd been preparing this conversation for the better part of a year. He was rehearsing it with me, and he had done a superb job of outlining all the points. But he missed the fact that the person receiving the message had no idea this was coming. And delivering that volume of information at one time, some of it painful and some of it critical, was not going to have a good outcome. He had all these pent-up feelings and wanted to let them go all at once. He wanted a catharsis, but as the head of the company, that's not something you can do.

Do you come across that frustration a lot?

Sometimes. I've heard CEOs say, "I'm tired. I'm so tired of hearing about what everybody else isn't getting or needs. When is it my turn?"

That's sort of ironic.

After all, starting a company is a major act of ego. Entrepreneurs would say it's not about ego. They'd say it's self-actualization. Doing what you must do. The painter must paint. The writer must write. I must get this product off the ground. I must build this company. They would argue there's no ego involved in it at all.

That sounds self-deceptive.

At growth companies, people always say, "Check your ego at the door." It makes me smile.

Resources

To learn more about CEO psychology, Mayer suggests *How To Act Like a CEO*, by Debra Benton, and *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*, by Hans Finzel. For other interviews with Mayer, check out her website, mayerleadership.com.
