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Top leaders do not receive outside leadership advice – but nearly all want it

By Ann Golden Eglé, MCC

A 2013 Stanford Graduate School of Business Survey finds that nearly two-thirds of CEOs and almost half of senior executives are not receiving outside leadership advice from executive coaches and consultants, but nearly 100% want it.

“Given how vitally important it is for the CEO to be getting the best possible counsel, independent of their board, in order to maintain the health of the corporation, it’s concerning that so many of them are ‘going it alone,’” says Stephen Miles, CEO of The Miles Group. “Even the best-of-the-best CEOs have their blind spots and can dramatically improve their performance with an outside perspective weighing in.”

The survey included more than 200 CEOs, board directors, and senior executives of North American public and private companies. The research studied what kind of leadership advice CEOs and their top executives are, and aren’t, receiving, and the skills that are being targeted for improvement.

Key findings (along with my perspective in parentheses):

- **Confidentiality is paramount.** 66% of those surveyed said the information shared in coaching sessions are kept between the leader and their coach, not shared with the board or others in the organization. (Coaching sessions are sometimes the only place a top leader can safely vent and work out interpersonal challenges.)
- **CEO’s make the decision.** 78% of the CEO’s who are being coached stated that it was their choice. According to Miles, “Becoming CEO doesn’t mean that you suddenly have all the answers. These top executives realize that there is room for growth for everyone.” (The CEO or Senior Leader oftentimes knows there is something wrong, but cannot pinpoint it out on their own.)
- **Top concern: conflict management.** By the time something lands on a CEO or top leader’s desk, an important decision is involved, one that others will not or cannot make. ‘Stakeholder overload’ is a real burden for today’s CEO, who must deftly learn how to negotiate often conflicting agendas. (Everyone wants to feel that their agenda is the most important agenda to the Senior Leader. Ineffective conflict management can come with a price.)

- **Boards' primary concern: talent development.** With an increased focus on succession planning, the top two areas board directors say their CEOs need to work on are 'mentoring skills/developing internal talent' and 'sharing leadership/delegation skills'. (The strongest leaders see and build upon strengths in their successors rather than criticize their shortcomings.)
- **Top areas CEO's seek to improve.** Sharing leadership/delegation, conflict management, team building, and mentoring. (I also find all areas of communication, especially 'listening' crucial to a leader's success.)
- **Less important areas of focus.** Motivational skills, compassion, empathy, and persuasion skills. Mr. Miles states: "These skills, when combined with the 'harder' skills, improve a CEO's ability to motivate and inspire which makes a difference in his or her overall effectiveness." (These are critical skills that are explored through the coaching process, though not initially specified.)

In addition to these areas of focus I would add 'time management'. The higher one is elevated in their organization, the more people depend upon them. The volume of meetings, travel, e-mails, texts, phone calls and required activities in and out of the office multiplies substantially. Self/time management is quite an impossible at times, yet vital skill to continually fine tune.

There's no question that it's lonely at the top. Everyone deserves support, even you top leaders.

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