

The CEO Advantage: Ego-talk in the Boardroom can Undermine CEO Success

By Nancy MacKay, Ph.D

CEO challenge:

At a recent board meeting, a CEO was shocked to discover he was on the verge of being fired. His executive team adored him, but the board viewed him as arrogant, dismissive, disrespectful and defensive. Why? Loud ego-talk.

CEO mistake:

There are more than six billion people on the planet, and we all have egos. Our egos help us distinguish ourselves from others and maintain our self-image and esteem. But sometimes our egos can take on a life of their own and get in the way of creating trust and connections with the people around us.

Ego-talk is the blaming and judging of others, whether out loud or to oneself, which stems from a strong need to look good and be right. In the words of our CEO, "My chairman couldn't run a meeting if his life depended on it and the board members are idiots. They ask stupid questions and don't understand our industry. They waste my time and then challenge me as if they know more about the business than I do."

Harsh words indeed. No wonder board members couldn't warm up to him. He was a brilliant leader and delivered incredible results, yet over the past six months every board member had suggested to the board chairman that he be dismissed.

CEO solution:

The board chairman sought my help. The reality is that looking good to the board, or anyone else for that matter, is not the goal. The CEO's job is to allow other people to influence him or her toward becoming a better CEO.

How we manage our egos is all about self-awareness, and the vital leadership behaviour to help minimize ego-talk is to get feedback. In this case, our CEO was anxious for coaching, so I gathered feedback by conducting formal interviews with his reports and board members.

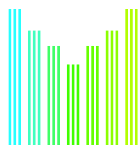
But you don't always have to go to that extent. Just sit down with your staff, your peers, your board, your spouse and ask what's working well and what's not.

After collecting feedback, I met with our CEO to deliver the news.

Not surprisingly, his direct reports gave glowing reviews. However, when it came to the comments of the board, he was chagrined, having no awareness of the impact of his ego-talk.

"I am so embarrassed that they can actually see what I think about them. I'm not an arrogant jerk, but I thought I had to look good."

Wrong assumption.



Knowing how the board members felt about him, the CEO showed up at the next meeting with his ego-talk firmly in check. He asked questions of board members, he listened attentively and he didn't judge. After the meeting, three members approached him and thanked him for being so respectful and accommodating. They asked him what happened. "I got the feedback and it was very impactful to me. I realized that ego-talk was getting in the way of connecting with board members and serving the company."

He has since committed to developing and sharing a 90-day action plan with the board with the intent to improve his working relationships and minimize the destructive impact of ego-talk. •

Dr. Nancy MacKay is the president of MacKay & Associates (www.mackayandassociates.ca) and co-author of the book *The Talent Advantage: How to Attract and Retain the Best and the Brightest* (with Dr. Alan Weiss).

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