

Coaching the coach

How CEO coaching helps company leaders ignite organizational change

Interviewed by Kristen Hampshire

Sometimes, even the coach needs coaching. CEO coaching is an integral step to change an organization for the better. After all, change must start at the top, and the top should recognize strengths and, more importantly, weaknesses that a company must overcome to compete effectively and grow.

“A lot of times, CEOs are experiencing a level of pain or are looking to raise the bar,” says Bill Willbrand, member, Brown Smith Wallace LLC. “They know something can be improved and realize they have to change to accomplish that.”

Accepting that change is necessary in order to boost the bottom line, attract talent, fix or streamline an operations problem, expand the company, or attend to any number of areas in a company. How you effectively work with a “coach” or adviser to embrace and execute change in the organization is the key, he says. Like therapy, the first step is to admit there is a problem or opportunity, and then be willing to take sometimes-uncomfortable steps to change.

Smart Business spoke with Willbrand and John Wunderlich, a senior consultant with Brown Smith Wallace, about the benefits of CEO coaching and how change effected from the top can reignite employee morale and jump-start a company’s performance.

How does a CEO know when to seek coaching and execute change in the business?

You may have been focusing on growing the top line, and your bottom line doesn’t budge or it drops or moves up imperceptibly, and something inside you says, ‘Wait a minute. We work so hard, and we increased our revenue 50 percent compared to last year. This doesn’t make sense.’

Another sign that you may need a coach to help you ignite change is the loss of a key person in the organization that has been with your company for a long time. Maybe two or three managers leave before you wake up and realize there is a trend occurring. It means that something is rotting at the core of the organization.

Or, you may seek a coach to assist with succession planning, which involves quite a bit of change as you prepare the company to pass down to another generation or to sell.



Bill Willbrand
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What steps should a CEO take after identifying a problem?

First, you must really want to embrace change, and recognize that if you continue to do the same things, you will get the same results. Also, it’s important for most CEOs and their employees to get some instant gratification — fast results, whether improved sales, more efficient operations or a happier work force. CEOs need to seek out the ‘low-hanging fruit’ to get momentum going.

The best framework for moving forward with a plan to change is to get all key people on board. This includes managers and employees who play critical roles in your operation. For instance, a manufacturing company may invite a shop worker who knows the operation in and out to the table. During this initial meeting, which generally should be off-site, initiate a mini-strategic planning session where strengths and weaknesses are identified. The weaknesses are actually the most important. A company that can successfully address weaknesses head-on and overcome them will improve.

How can a CEO measure the success of new initiatives?

You must identify the critical success factors for your organization. A critical success

factor is any measurable occurrence that must happen for a project to meet its goals and objectives. These factors revolve around your organization’s strengths and weaknesses.

For instance, if your production lines are not as efficient as they could be, a critical success factor is to manufacture more products with less manpower in less time. Then, you establish key performance indicators (KPI), which are leading indicators. These are real-time measurements, such as how many products are produced per minute. By measuring KPIs and setting goals, you can evaluate your progress toward improvement.

This manufacturing example can be applied to any industry. The change process is different for every company — and so are the critical success factors and KPIs. Also, KPIs and critical success factors will change over time — this is a fluid process. The nice thing about KPI is that you are measuring performance during the process rather than after, like in accounting when you reflect on past numbers and make historic observations. Because this method of tracking and measuring success is ‘right here, right now,’ you always know where your company stands.

How will the CEO know if the rest of the organization is embracing the plan?

The most obvious sign is meeting goals and driving key performance indicators. Your measurements should tell you whether your company is headed in the right direction. Also, as you delegate roles to managers and employees, and everyone in the organization gets involved in the process, you will find that you have more time to plan and strategize what’s next. If you can take a vacation, are having more fun at work and are putting out fewer fires, the business is running behind you and supporting you. The plan is working. You should notice improvements in your organization within 60 days if your people are truly embracing change. <<

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