



Practicing self-management can enhance the relationship between the CEO/ED (chief executive) and the board and yield benefits for the entire organization.

From BoardSource

Self-management means practicing the relationship behaviors that make oneself and others blossom. It means noticing these behaviors in others, admiring them, and reinforcing their continuance. And it means asking oneself from the very beginning: "What kind of relationship do I want and how do I sustain it?"

It can be a challenge to balance what is human nature with what is needed in a leader. There may be times when the chief executive morphs into other life forms while interacting with others. Making a list of these behavioral pitfalls is a helpful exercise. The chief executive may bark at the board chair who calls in mid-thought with a request or new idea, growl at the staff member who complains about a committee chair's lack of follow-up, or take on the qualities of a robot while moving through a project or conversation step by step, according to the plan, without regard to the value of new information.

When the chief executive recognizes that personal behavior might be sending a message that he or she has become something other than a leader, it's time to reel back in and take control. A first step in self-management is reflecting on a list of personal pitfalls. Are some of them particularly troublesome and repetitive? Did new pitfalls emerge that she had control over in the past? The executive may ask, "What led to my stressful behavior?" "What did I learn from falling off the wagon?" "How can I be more aware of the warning signs when I am allowing my buttons to be pushed?" "Would outside help from a friend, colleague, or leadership coach be useful?"

This is also a good time to review, recommit, and practice basic tenets of self-management:

Stay organized. A world of chaos can lead to chaotic behavior. Organize information for easy access. Keep a calendar handy and don't overschedule, leaving no time for the unexpected (which can always be expected) or for thought and reflection. A good chief executive also maintains an uncluttered mind, taking the time to record appointments, phone numbers, ideas, and prospective contacts and filing them in a workable system. This way there is space in the executive's head to welcome the wisdom the board has to offer.

Ask questions. Remember the wonder the world held when we were in our youth? How did the world begin? Do clouds have babies? These rich questions challenged the wisdom of our parents. Our job journey and our life journey are to gain wisdom through our experiences and the experiences of others. The chief executive who fails to ask rich questions that tap the wisdom of the board will fail to bring the value to the organization that he or she is charged with delivering as a leader.

Listen. The chief executive who gives the board member full and active attention is the leader who knows the value of building productive relationships. Interrupting, checking a mobile device, or answering the telephone are signs that a chief executive is distracted and lacks the self-control to seize the moment and the value it offers.

Concentrate. The board expects that a good deal of the value the chief executive brings to the organization is experience and wisdom. The whirling dervish who never takes time to consider the ever-changing pieces of the puzzle may show value as a hard worker, but not as a change agent. While there are many demands on the chief executive's attention, it's essential to make a space to examine the pieces of the puzzle, try new fits, and make new discoveries that inspire deeper and more meaningful action. To set the stage for reflection and concentration, some chief executives find a quiet space at the library or a coffee shop near the office, turn off their cell phones during long car trips, post a "meeting in progress" sign on their office doors, or engage an impartial outside advisor in a rousing discussion to gain insight and focus.

Be flexible. Seasoned chief executives know that flexibility and adaptability are important attributes in determining the balance of leadership that the organization needs. The chief executive who must control everything is risking constant stress, disappointment, and failure. Having control may seem to offer some sense of security and comfort. But the board expects the organization to grow and prosper and its chief executive to remain proactively engaged as they embark for uncharted territory, unknown parts, or even a familiar path that didn't lead to success in the past. A chief executive without the courage and foresight to take this journey with the board is doing the organization a disservice.

Seek feedback. It's not enough to just be open to others when they have differing opinions. A successful chief executive will deliberately ask for input about activities, about their own performance, and other challenges the organization is facing. And to gain the most value of this effort, a chief executive doesn't just request this of those who are generally agreeable, but also looks to those who typically take opposing views. By doing so, the chief executive will have a better sense of potential issues that most likely would be raised in the future — with a chance to address them right away.

Build a support network. Seek out mentors and informal groups or professional associations of chief executives who can be called on for honest feedback, to serve as a sounding board, and be helpful in determining approaches for dealing with challenges or opportunities.

Be your own devil's advocate. Consider alternative approaches when proposing a course of action. Would other ways work better? Wise chief executives think about the potential for unintended consequences of their strategies and actions. Could someone misinterpret what I'm trying to do? Are there ways to approach a problem that could yield greater success...or have fewer negative outcomes? Thinking through a situation from different perspectives can enhance problem solving and decision-making skills. And by doing so, you are able to anticipate questions, prepare for opposing views, and generally enhance your initial proposal.

Be open and approachable. Board members can give their best when they know what they offer will be welcomed and seriously considered.

Diffuse anger and conflict. Respect different opinions without judging, and if necessary, defer emotionally charged issues to a later time. These efforts can go a long way in keeping relationships on track.

Learn how to “read” people. Exercising empathy is a way of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and hearing the message as they might hear it, feeling the delivery as they might feel it, and drawing conclusions about the outcome of the interaction as they might see it as well. With successful communication as the ultimate goal, the wise chief executive will become a skilled empathizer.

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Next Steps

The chief executive has made an important first step in self-management when he or she recognizes a personal discomfort with surrendering control and the resulting negative impact on the organization. Exercising behaviors that demonstrate flexibility are the next step toward building the strength of this important skill:

Delegate projects to others.

Allow board members to work on tasks without hovering; if you don't give them some freedom to operate, they may wonder why you asked for their involvement.

Pick your battles.

Look for the positive first.

Don't sweat the small stuff when something does not go as planned.

Work with the board chair to frame ventures into uncharted territories that break the journey into smaller steps or projects that provide opportunities to check in and chart progress.

Don't put the brakes on just because you are uncomfortable.

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