

# GIVING SAGE ADVICE

Like large corporates, promoters of small businesses too could use some help on becoming effective leaders. CEO coaches are the answer

Some individuals are born leaders and thus require no training. Others, who inherit the mantle of leadership, could use a bit of help. The CEOs of some of the world's biggest corporations work with coaches to manage their companies and staff better. Unlike executives lower down the line who need skills to help them hone specific task-related competencies, a CEO needs different skills. These include leadership and people management, big-picture orientation, risk-readiness and change management. For a small business leader, it is even more critical to develop these skills to move up into the big league.

Promoters of small businesses are often unsure about the need for corporate training or coaching programmes in the first place. The most common query is: "Will it actually help a small company like mine?" The answer: It's a chicken-and-egg situation. Without adequate and effective training programmes (either in-house or outsourced), growth is difficult to achieve. And without sustained growth, there

## SOUNDING BOARD

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can be no budget for such programmes. Leaders thus need to drive such initiatives down the organisation's ranks and also give CEO coaching the importance it deserves.

### MINDING MY BUSINESS

CEO coaching for small businesses is gaining ground, albeit slowly. Sanjay Jha, executive director, Dale Carnegie Training India says, "Many senior executives in India are still resistant to the idea of a coach. They feel they have come this far without assistance, so why bring in an 'outsider' now?"

Perhaps the most important reason to work with a coach is that it enables leaders to manage events assumed to be outside their control. For example, a recession in the US may have imminent repercussions on Indian industry, but for a CEO who is only focused on his own business, the recession can at best, be taken philosophically. A coach helps bring in a glob-

al perspective and identify opportunities and risks that must be dealt with.

A CEO has various constituencies to deal with, says Pavan Choudary, author of 'Success Sutras for the 21st Century'. These include the company board, shareholders, employees, customers and environment (including trade bodies, media, government and even family). "Each constituency has its own needs and CEOs need to handle each one effectively. If the CEO is a first-timer or inexperienced, he may need a coach."

Equally important is unlearning old habits and learning new ones. Having built a business from the ground up, an entrepreneur who finds him/herself in the CEO's chair may face

some adjustment issues. Ashu Khanna, an executive coach in Mumbai says, "Working individuals have repetitive behaviours that have worked for them in the past. Being too detail-orientated, for example is sometimes a road-block. As a CEO, one needs to think macro, not micro."

Other important skills for small business CEOs, Khanna feels, are: the ability to network among the peers in their industry, communicate their vision down to the second rung of management and the ability to attract, train and retain high-quality talent. Jha agrees, "To grow, a business need a strong core team that stands through thick and thin. And the CEO must be able to foster collaboration between heads of various business units within the company. Team-building at the senior level is very important."

Knowing when to delegate work and

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promoting independence of thought is the next element in CEO coaching. At the same time, expert coaches believe that in a smaller firm, demonstration of leadership is crucial, especially during a slowdown. CEO coaches work with leaders to identify strategies to communicate better during crises and demonstrate that the responsibility for getting the company back on track lies with every single individual in the organisation.

## **TRAINING TOOLBOX**

Choudary reveals that the process of coaching involves a one-to-one engagement with the CEO. "It basically involves chatting, with some games and exercises now and then. Anecdotes and inspirational examples work best," he adds. Jha adds that sometimes the coach also plays the role of critic, asking the CEO to act out certain scenarios and help them fine-tune their approach.

According to Choudary, most small business owners he works with have their priorities and skills clearly in place. "They're wonderfully receptive, nimble footed and hungry to succeed. On the flip side, they lack resources and more importantly—perspective. You have to convince them why a change of culture is important for any organisation," he says. The approach towards risk-taking also has to be taught. Many CEOs have dreams of glory, but aren't prepared to take the necessary risks. "They have the technique on the whole; it's just about teaching them a few additional shots," Choudary says.

Finding a good coach can be a challenge. It is important to work with the right coach, someone with a mix of experience, knowledge and preferably, an entrepreneurial history as well.