

Self-awareness critical for high achievers

To be objective is not easy, but it is surely rewarding

A CEO's job, like any leader's, is a lonely one. The CEO of a startup is especially lonely. He's expected to manage finances and investors, the board, motivate employees while dealing with recalcitrant ones, engage with, influence and grow relationships with key customers, partners, suppliers and industry players. The CEO needs to be emotionally strong to deal with all the pulls and pushes. And he has to always present a sunny disposition even when times are difficult.

It is a job that requires enormous confidence and humility. Confidence to keep executing towards the goals of the company and humility to keep learning and unlearning. Not surprisingly, these are uncommon traits that only the more successful CEOs have. Rarer too is the desire to know one's weaknesses and the willingness to work on improving oneself.

I was therefore delighted when I recently received an email from a CEO saying he wanted an honest appraisal from me of his leadership. He had commissioned a 360 degree appraisal of himself to understand his limitations and how his leadership style is perceived by others around him. He had set ambitious (audacious?) goals for his company and believed that the market presented the opportunity to realise those goals.

He was also humble and more importantly, displayed amazing self-awareness, in realising that he did not possess all the capabilities and qualities necessary to lead the company towards those goals. And he wanted to understand what those limitations were. How many of us do or would do the same? Our egos would come in the way, our insecurities and fears would prevent us from an honest self-assessment. CEOs who aren't self aware tend to be insecure and in extreme cases become delusional surrounding themselves with sycophants and yes-men. Constructive feedback on capabilities, need for improvement and development of inter-personal skills especially in groups need maturity and self-awareness to appreciate and internalize

Obviously, there are different types of leaders. Some self-aware and others not quite. To become an objective evaluator of oneself including one's behaviour and values is not a trivial task. It requires one to be con-

scious, serious and committed to transformation. One has to first manage oneself effectively before one can manage others and/or a business, let alone transform them. Self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence are required to do this; they're connected and entrepreneurs tend to implicitly know and react to these concepts in practice. It leads to people being honest with one another, acknowledging that they don't have all the answers and that they're keen to learn from outside. It is OK for the CEO to say, "I don't know" but it is not OK to be defensive or otherwise to be a "know it all". This results in the CEO's credibility getting enhanced and his points being respected. Such credible hon-

est behaviour also creates an organization with low levels of politicking. It ensures that one doesn't become judgemental about events, situations and others. Learning to listen and marshalling the facts and data before arriving at a decision therefore become far easier to achieve.

The first step in problem solving is to recognize there's a problem and then to

identify the source(s) of the problem. Only then can any problem be resolved. Daniel Goleman, whose studies and practice of meditation in India decades ago played a crucial role in his developing the celebrated theory of Emotional Intelligence, describes self-awareness as a critical competency of high achievers. Being self-aware, they realise their strengths and weakness and are comfortable with the realization. They surround themselves with the appropriate talented and competent people who then fill in the gaps, so to speak.

The result? A well-rounded, competent, complementary team consisting of team members who're comfortable with each other and with the company's goals. There's no dissonance with regard to values, objectives and action.

As the saying goes, all bottlenecks are at the top of the bottle! And self-awareness has to start from the top of the organization.

What do you think?

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