

Lesson #1: “Learn to Whisper”

This is the most important lesson – perhaps it should be considered a rule. “*Learn to Whisper*” means that managers, particularly chief executive officers, must maintain a calm demeanor while, at the same time, being intense and demanding. It is never acceptable to yell or get angry; regardless of the provocation.

Never use profanity. A chief executive officer is held to a higher standard – almost on a pedestal. By using profanity employees lose respect for the chief executive officer. Respect is important for a CEO’s success. Once lost it cannot be regained.

Angry managers frighten and cause people to be unsure of themselves. Brains freeze. A calm, tough taskmaster who “whispers” will get better performance than will a confrontational bully. Employees know you are the boss. They have seen you discipline and ultimately terminate poor performing employees. When justified terminations are handled calmly and rationally it has a positive affect on morale and the culture.

It is obvious to those of us who use this style that chief executive officers can “whisper” and get results.

While I counsel that a calm boss has the most effective style. There is the need for intensity, a sense of urgency – a degree of impatience. My intensity certainly makes employees nervous. It was described tongue in cheek by a foreign procurement manager who was with me in Beijing China when I received a troubling telephone call from the company’s vice president of sales. He called to tell me that Wal-Mart had notified us that they would terminate our company as a supplier. Wal-Mart accounted for 40% of our sales. The manager who was with me in

Beijing later told a group of managers: *“Bob was calm, didn’t get upset. But when we got in the taxi to go to the airport he was so intense that the taxi’s windshield melted”*. (We did not lose Wal-Mart. An assistant buyer had made a mistake.)

Even though intensity makes people nervous I do not believe anyone can be a successful Chief Executive Officer without it.

I have witnessed both styles:

- Calm yet intense.
- Angry confrontational bully.

In some of my turnarounds the Board of Directors, used the angry confrontational style on the company’s officers prior to me becoming Chief Executive Officer. It was one reason that the company became a money loser. The officers were intimidated. Did whatever they were told to do by Board members who did not have a clue how to run a complex operating company. Mistakes and chaos resulted. Rule: Do not tolerate Board members bullying company officers and managers. When it does rear its ugly head, stop the meeting, ask the officers to leave and tell the offending Board member in a private one-on-one meeting to cease and desist. The bullying will always stop. But regardless of how softly and constructively you phrase the cease and desist request it will not be appreciated or respected. It will be grudgingly followed.

If you do not do this, you will be viewed as a weak, self-serving coward. People will not respect and trust you or perform at their best for you. The “A” level performers will quietly put their resumes out and leave the company. You will ultimately fail as chief executive officer. Trying to make company owners and board members like you is a total waste of time. The board members you tried to make like you because you did not challenge them will be the first to vote

to terminate you. A strong, calm always constructive chief executive officer with a solid record of performance will be respected and, better yet, intimidating to board members and owners. Performance is the only guarantee of continuing employment.

To further build respect and trust with the management team, “never back-up”. If you believe a decision is in the best interests of the company and is supported by your team, never vacillate when challenged by the Board or the owners. If the Board or owners suggest something that is not in the best interests of the company, hold firm and politely tell them no with plausible reasons. This will demonstrate to vice presidents that you are solely interested in the company’s welfare. That you are not working on a self-serving agenda. The grapevine will pick-up on this and it will motivate employees. If the Board insists that their initiative be implemented, request a Board resolution that instructs you to do it. The bank reads Board minutes and resolutions. This sometimes kills the Board initiative particularly when it is a dumb idea that the bank would question.

The worst episode of bullying that I observed was when a member of a Board of Directors punched the “resident” consultant working full-time on a technical project at the company. The consultant had his office in our building for several months and was for all intents and purposes an employee.

When introduced to this consultant the Board member said he would only shake hands with the consultant with his left hand. While shaking hands, he punched the consultant in the chest with his right fist – “twice”.

The Board member was justified in being upset with the poor results produced by this consultant. However there was no justification for this type action. Our attorneys felt that a

serious financial liability may have been incurred. Since he was a resident consultant the concern was that he would be considered an employee if he sued and it went to Court.

Nothing came of it because the consultant who was punched did not want to pursue it. I was chief executive of the company and met with him privately a couple of times. He was a very decent, hard-worker who acknowledged he failed in this assignment. The conversations with him were of a personal nature. He was seeking my advice on his struggles in his young marriage – not about the incident.

This elderly and smallish Board member was quite lucky that this large young man did not respond in kind.

I learned a lot about being a chief executive officer from Mr. Charles (Chuck) Knight, Emerson Electric Co.’s Chairman and Chief Executive Officer during the fifteen years I worked at the company. He had many positives but a major negative.

Knight was an angry confrontational bully. If we met with him for one hour or ten hours, he was angry the entire time. The use of profanity was a constant. No matter how exceptional our performance; nothing was ever good enough. The division vice presidents that reported to me would not say a word when meeting with him. They whispered their suggestions in my ear for me to tell Knight. I have seen a group vice president pass out from an anxiety attack faced with the prospect of meeting with him; we thought he had a heart attack. This angry style certainly caused Emerson to miss out on some opportunities and lose good people.

People who start at the bottom of a company’s organization or in the “bowels” have a better chance of success. They are calmer and more self-confident when they get to the top job. Knight did not start in the bowels of any company. He started at the top of Emerson as its CEO

when he was in his thirties. This may be the reason for his biggest negative – his angry confrontational style. Could his anger be due to a surprising lack of self-confidence? Not sure of himself?

Self-confidence is the currency of a successful life.