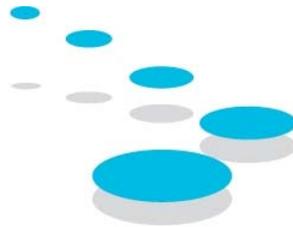




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Key Executive Role Clarity
Closing the Gap:
Creating Alignment
With Your CEO



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Closing the Gap: Creating Alignment with Your CEO

Based on experience, many executive advisors believe that a huge gap exists between what CEOs want from their direct reports and what those direct reports think their CEOs want. Obviously, CEOs expect key executives to excel in their given areas of expertise. Beyond that, however, the waters start to get a bit muddy.

Specifically, CEOs desperately want three things from their key executives:

- **Clarity.** In particular, CEOs want their key executives to have clarity in regards to their vision for the company, their strategy to achieve that vision, and their expectations for the key executive's functional position.
- **Leadership.** Leadership for key executives is stepping out of your comfortable, technical/functional role and expanding beyond the areas that got you to your current level of success. It means doing what you can to move the company forward. This requires exercising leadership on the management team you are part of and for the departmental team you head up.
- **Generalized problem solving.** CEOs want managers who can solve problems in many areas of the organization. The more you can contribute to the CEO's job of removing obstacles to getting the job done, the more value you will have as a key executive.

Of these three areas, clarity is by far the most important. When the CEO has clarity and alignment with a strong management team, anything is possible.

Some experts see the disconnect between CEOs and key executives as a wiring problem. They believe that most entrepreneurs are hard-wired very differently than their direct reports. In particular, CEOs spend much of their time out in the future, where very few people roam. They see what doesn't exist and try to make it happen.

In contrast, key executives live in the present, partly because that's their nature but also because that's what they've been charged to do -- run the company (or parts of it) in an efficient and effective manner. They see what already exists and strive to make it better.

CEOs who fail to understand this critical distinction end up with unrealistic expectations for their key executives, which often leads to friction in the relationship.

The solution is two-fold. First, both sides must understand that CEOs live out in the distance and key executives live in the here-and-now. Second, they must reach an alliance based on mutual respect and tolerance for each other's different roles and ways of looking at the world. In this alliance, the key executive understands and supports the CEO's need to look into the future and develop the vision, because without it, the company will quickly die. In turn, the CEO recognizes and accepts that the highest and best use of the key executive's time and attention is to run the company in the present.

The key to avoiding unproductive conflict is to formally recognize the different roles in every encounter. For example, when the CEO gathers the management team to do strategic planning, they should start by going around the table and recognizing everyone's role. When you meet individually with your CEO, begin the interaction with a brief recognition of the different roles each of you fill. Over time, it becomes ingrained into the culture.

Here's a simple but effective solution -- once a month the CEO and key executive schedule a "direct report one-to-one" in which they discuss the short- and long-term expectations for the position and the developmental goals and objectives for the key executive. The CEO also provides any coaching, resources, etc., the key executive needs to get the job done.

The critical factor is to not sit back and wait for something to happen. If a key executive isn't getting clarity from his or her CEO, then they must ask for it. There's nothing magical about this process; it's very straightforward. But common sense is not necessarily common practice. One has to commit to making it happen.

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