

CEO Coaching Brings Corporate Brands To Life...in Flesh and Blood

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Michael Jordan may have built his fame by *being the ball*, but now, as president of operations for the Washington Wizards, he joins the growing ranks of business leaders seeking to *be the brand* as a means of leveraging the reputation and visibility of their corporations.

It's a trend that Makovsky & Co. President Kenneth Makovsky calls the "iconization of CEOs" (*PRV*, Jan. 3). "There are so many information channels and messages hitting each individual person that simplicity in branding has a major advantage for a corporation," Makovsky says—particularly in an age of unprecedented global expansion and merger activity, in which businesses are struggling to put friendly, empathetic faces on their empires. Align your CEO's defining characteristics with your corporate identity, and you've got an extremely powerful reputation management tool.

Today's business landscape is rife with living, breathing brands, such as Southwest Airlines' Herb Kelleher, who, by nature, exudes the same impish wit that the airline is known for—and Richard Branson, whose impulsive curiosity and stunt-man flair actually make the hodgepodge of business lines under the Virgin name gel. HP's Carl Fiorina bears the same entrepreneurial gusto that drove her forebears to build an empire from a modest, wooden garage. Now Wizards strategizers are hedging their bets that Jordan's competitive zeal will rub off on the flailing basketball franchise and its players.

Of course, not every corporate leader has the stuff it takes to be like Mike. "The CEOs we work with often come from engineering or accounting or management consulting backgrounds," says Joyce Newman, president of The Newman Group, a New York-based firm specializing in speaker, media and executive coaching. "They get into these positions because of their brilliance...but they don't necessarily have the skills they need to become public figures."

A common assumption among freshman CEOs, for example, is that they have to start wearing officious suits and appear unemotional in order to be taken seriously, Newman says.

Quite the contrary. "What people want to see is the real deal, not someone who is phony or pedantic," says Cherie Kerr, president of ExecuProv, a public speaking and skills training outfit in Santa Ana, Calif. "I look at someone's strengths and weaknesses in the same way a director looks at an actor for a part. We play up each person's idiosyncrasies and what defines them."

Finding Mr. (or Ms.) Right

Executive training has come a long way from the age-old practice of holding up a magnifying glass to a CEO's shuffling, hawing, droning, nose-picking and other shortcomings. Most of today's top coaches focus not on faults, but instead on what's right about a leader.

"I ask [CEOs] to look at themselves in the third person," Newman says. "Forget the fact that you were fat in the fourth grade, or you don't have as much hair as you did two years ago. Tell me what you like about [yourself]. What would you like to see more of? What is your vision?"

Quirks aren't necessarily a negative when it comes to leveraging the CEO for brand differentiation, Kerr adds (consider nerd boy wonder Bill Gates). "People buy *people*, and then they buy things," she says. Companies are more likely to win the trust of stockholders, employees, the media,

consumers and other stakeholders if their leaders appear genuine. For example, "a lot of CEOs are highly neurotic, but their companies grow at break-neck speed and do revolutionary things," she says. "I'm not sure if they weren't obsessive-compulsive that their companies would grow like that."

Eat It or Outsource It

The big question for corporate communicators hoping to deploy this strategy is how to get close enough to the CEO to pinpoint his or her "unique selling proposition."

Kerr suggests the basic tactics of interviewing and shadowing. Ask senior leaders about their role models, what drives them and how they feel about their work, she says. "Listen to them on the phone, watch the way they walk, the way they interact with people, the way they make eye contact, the way they [lead meetings]. Then report back," she advises. "Say, here's what I think is terrific about you and here's how we should leverage this."

That works if your CEO is a teddy bear. But Newman is quick to add that she's been brought into more than a handful of corporations by way of staff interventions (à la the age-old AA technique). "No one wants to be singled out" as the one telling the big cheese he needs help, she says. Bringing in an objective third party can help temper a touchy ego. But an outside consultant will cost you anywhere from \$3,000-\$7,000 for a one-day session—plus travel expenses.

Whether your plan is to *be* the executive coach or hire one, Newman offers one caveat: "Training has to occur around something that's real—like when there's a major news announcement, product launch or analysts' meeting coming...or when there's a crisis [brewing]," she says. "Otherwise [you won't get the CEO's] attention or intention." Solve a real-world problem for your leader, however, and "you become their best friend for life," she says.

Dangerous Liaisons

As with all strategies, there are pitfalls to investing your corporation's reputation in a single person. Exhibit A: former Coca-Cola CEO M. Douglas Ivester's tenure proved short-lived when his management style didn't jibe with employees at the century-old brand and the company's stock took a dive. "He wasn't modeling his decisions in terms of how the company wanted to be perceived," Newman says. (It didn't help that his legacy was maligned by the European contamination scare last summer...but that's another story.)

Furthermore, you can't always hold a good leader down—particularly in today's labor market. "Say you build up the CEO and then he leaves," Makovsky notes. "That could definitely have an impact on stock if it's a public company. The stock market places enormous emphasis on corporate leadership."

Which brings the issue full circle: Can today's corporations really afford *not* to have leaders with fitting personalities who are comfortable being themselves in the limelight? A recent Burson Marsteller study showed that 40 percent of a company's reputation now hinges on the CEO.

"No one remembers CEOs who are nondescript," Kerr says. But they do remember the ones who snag Time's "Man of Year" slot, charter hot air balloons, or win NBA slam dunk competitions. Might as well go for the three-point shot.

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