

Coaching CEOs

A recent CEO coaching survey of more than 200 CEOs, board directors, and senior executives of North American public and private companies by the Center for Leadership, Development and Research at Stanford Business School indicated that:

- **Little coaching at the top** – Nearly 66% of CEOs do not receive coaching or leadership advice from outside coaches, while 100% of them stated that they are receptive to making changes based on feedback. Nearly 80% of directors said that their CEO is receptive to coaching.
- **CEOs are the ones looking to be coached** – When asked “Whose decision was it for you to receive coaching?” 78% of CEOs said it was their own idea. Twenty-one percent said that coaching was the board chairman’s idea. The researcher conclude that “We are moving away from coaching being perceived as ‘remedial’ to where it should be something that improves performance, similar to how elite athletes use a coach.”
- **Coaching “progress” is largely kept private** – More than 60% of CEOs responded that the progress they are making in their coaching sessions is kept between themselves and their coach; only a third said that this information is shared with the board of directors. The researchers believe that, “keeping the board informed of progress can improve CEO/board relations.”
- **How to handle conflict ranks as highest area of concern for CEOs** – When asked which is the biggest area for their own personal development, nearly 43% of CEOs rated “conflict management skills” the highest. “How to manage effectively through conflict is clearly one of the top priorities for CEOs, as they are juggling multiple constituencies every day,” says the researchers. “When you are in the CEO role, most things that come to your desk only get there because there is a difficult decision to be made – which often has some level of conflict associated with it. ‘Stakeholder overload’ is a real burden for today’s CEO, who must deftly learn how to negotiate often conflicting agendas.”
- **Boards eager for CEOs to improve talent development** – The top two areas board directors say their CEOs need to work on are “mentoring skills/developing internal talent” and “sharing leadership/delegation skills.” “The high ranking of these areas among board respondents shows a real recognition of the importance of the talent bench,” says the researchers. “Boards are placing a keener focus on succession planning and development, and are challenging their CEOs to keep this front and center. However, there is still a long way to go in the area of succession for most companies, especially as you get further down the reporting structure.”
- **Top areas that CEOs use coaching to improve: sharing leadership/delegation, conflict management, team building, and mentoring. Bottom of the list: motivational skills, compassion/empathy, and persuasion skills.** “A lot of people steer away from coaching some of the less tangible skills because they are uncomfortable with touching on these areas or really don’t have the capability to do it,” says the researchers. “These skills are more nuanced and actually more difficult to coach because many people are more sensitive about these areas. However, when combined with the ‘harder’ skills, improving a CEO’s ability to motivate and inspire can really make a difference in his or her overall effectiveness.”

