

Book review: The Five Temptations of a CEO: A Leadership Fable By TSO Kai-chi, John

Introduction - An Irrelevant Book for Irrelevant Person

CEO is a term describing about a high flyer who leads a multinational corporation and earns millions of dollars a year. Hence, it seems that the it is something irrelevant to our daily life, so as the Patrick M. Lencioni's book, *The Five Temptations of a CEO: A Leadership Fable*.

Having read through this popular business literature, I am highly impressed by the fable and the five "temptations" of the workplace mentioned in it. As a famous screenwriter, business coach and author, Lencioni used his easy-reading and thought-provoking writing style to bring his readers out from the chaotic world to a quiet paradise where their hearts are refreshed and their minds are inspired.

The book first begins with a fable which uses the unexpected meeting between troubled high-tech corporation CEO Andrew O'Brien and a mysterious old man named Charlie to explore a series of common management traps that most executives might fall into. Old Charlie who is in fact Lencioni himself outlined the five 'temptations':

- Desires to jealously guard career status;
- Consistently remain popular with subordinates;
- Unfailingly make correct decisions;
- Constantly strive for an atmosphere of total harmony; and
- Always appear invulnerable.

At the end, Lencioni brings his readers back from the mysterious fable to the real world where he further elaborates on how to identify and guard against those traps in the real business world.

As an executive in both the financial and disciplinary services for ten years, I found that many people as well as me have fallen into similar traps before. Suddenly, I realize that this 'irrelevant book' may be 'relevant' for 'irrelevant person' like me.

Desires to Jealously Guard Career Status

Lencioni state that many people tend to jealously guard their career status once they become CEOs in their own firms. As a result, they are no longer working for any constructive goal for their corporations as well as their own. Apparently, it is a very logical mindset for the CEO since once an executive has become the top management of the firm, he or she has no further personal goals in the firm. In particular, that CEO is also reluctant to any change or new goal by sticking to the old successful formula.

I have worked in a Chinese bank which stressed on harmony Confucius management style. One of my senior colleagues had made frequent criticisms to various new management initiatives which were performance oriented. Also, he tended to be satisfied with his current position and reluctant to set further goals for his own life. During the old good days, banks did not worry about the profit as the whole local economy was booming. However, after the Asia financial turmoil in 1997, the external environment became so dynamic and competitive that downsizing and re-engineering became the themes of the day. Later, the bank's changed drastically and many new services were introduced. As this old gentleman could not change in pace with the bank, he was soon laid off.

In fact, whatever one's own position, he or she must have further personal goals as well as visions for people under his or her charge. Otherwise, he or she will soon be thrown away in this vibrant business world.

Consistently Remain Popular with Subordinates

In the classical text '*The Prince*', Niccolo Machiavelli emphasized that a prince shall not be reputed liberal by projecting himself generous or tolerant. This echoes with Lencioni's second temptation of remaining popular the subordinates by sacrificing the corporate goals. If the corporation gets into trouble because of the relaxed management of that CEO, he or she will soon lose the shareholders' trust upon him or

her. Very soon, his or her subordinates will no longer respect that powerless and useless CEO.

When I worked as a trade finance supervisor in the corporate banking department, a young and newly promoted manager of another department tried to be a good man and he adopted a 'let-go' attitude as his management style. In other words, he did not manage nor supervise his team. Later, his team committed a serious negligence which resulted in a million dollars of bad debt. This 'nice manager' was soon being isolated by all of his colleagues in the office, including the subordinates who once claimed that he was the best boss they had ever met.

Unfailingly Make Correct Decisions

Lencioni also points out how self esteem could ruin one's own career, especially when he or she has committed mistake. When I recruited as a probationary inspector of police, I had to attend a leadership camp in which all the trainees' leadership and personal qualities would be assessed in order to determine whether he or she will be classified as 'No Leadership Potential'. Obviously, a trainee with no leadership potential will leave the Force immediately.

One of the trainees was an executive from a reputable firm. He had an excellent command of communication skills and sound common senses in every aspect. At the very beginning he progressed well and received a high recognition from the course instructors. In a leadership exercise, this elegant gentleman had to find out the route to a destination in a remote rural area. He confidently examined the map and soon determined the route by his own. During his briefing, I questioned his plan since I had been hiking in this area before and I firmly believed that he had chosen the wrong route. However, because of his own pride, he firmly rejected my idea. Even worse, when our team kept on following his path, our team members started to question his decision. Once again, he refused to re-examine the map and reiterated his arguments in favour of his 'correct' judgment. Needless to say, we could not reach our destination and this bright young man was also classified as 'No Leadership Potential'.

Constantly Strive for an Atmosphere of Total Harmony

Office politics are often very destructive. However, Lencioni points out that people usually mix up office politics with conflicts in opinions. Very often, people prefer a quiet management meeting for it seems to be an indication of harmony. However, inside a quiet meeting does not mean that there is no politicking among different interest parties. Even worse, politicking is not seen but it exists. Lencioni emphasizes that CEO should not strive for an atmosphere of total harmony by avoiding a constructive opinions flows. In the simplest term, conflicts should be managed but not avoided.

Recently, I have assumed the command of a platoon. In order to tackle with the illegal employment in the countryside, I called for a management meeting. Initially, I was the only one who spoke in the meeting. Later, a sergeant started to express his ideas with some hesitation. I acknowledged his effort and encouraged the other to contribute their ideas. Later, other members started to voice out their opinions. I found that, in course of argument, some ideas may trigger the other to think about something more innovative and inspiring. At the end, we had a very fruitful meeting and the operation was successfully implemented.

Always Appear Invulnerable

Lastly, Lencioni reminds that CEO should avoid rejecting any criticism upon him or her. This golden rule seems to be understood by many people. However, as Lencioni states, even a leader could resist the first four temptations, he or she could hardly resist this very last one because of self esteem.

Despite of the fact that I always try to remind myself to accept any opinion and criticism from any person, I found that sometimes I cannot persist this virtue. A few years ago, one of my subordinates loved to criticize my work. Frankly speaking, I did not appreciate his criticisms for I felt that his ideas were indeed very naive. At last, I could not control my temper and asked him to shut up. At first, I felt psychologically comfort. However, I soon found that other subordinates

also started to keep quiet. As a result, I found that I was working on my own and could hardly facilitate any subordinates' ideas for I had destroyed their trust in communications.

All in all, I should strive my subordinates' respect for my professionalism rather than my status or rank.

Everyone is the CEO of their own Life

Having read through Lencioni's work, I do not find any hard and fast rule to be a CEO. Once again, the term CEO still seems to be something irrelevant to my life. However, I found I had encountered Lencioni's five temptations many times and even fallen into those traps. Should I aware of those traps earlier, I could avoid making so many stupid mistakes and perform better.

Hence, Lencioni's CEO handbook is indeed relevant to my life for I am the CEO of my own team, my family and my own life. I should:

Striving for continuous improvement;
Building a brand name of excellence;
Looking for the truth and reality;
Managing conflicts in opinions;
Be a humble listener.

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