

# On your marks



FANCY YOURSELF AS A BIG BUSINESS PLAYER? THEN YOU MIGHT WANT TO GET YOURSELF A COACH. PHIN FOSTER TALKS TO THE MEN WHO HELP GIVE CEOS THE EDGE.

**T**he chief executive must personify his or her organisation like never before. An unforgiving market seizes upon any sign of hesitancy; a ruthless financial press exploits the slightest hint of weakness. It is imperative that the leader appears bulletproof at all times. Trappings of wealth, power and status and a life spent in the public eye elevates company bosses to the realms of celebrity.

But, in a climate where each and every move you make is scrutinised, where does one turn in times of doubt or difficulty? Board members may have their own agendas, fellow CEOs could exploit a competitive opportunity and family is not always up to speed on the latest quarterly results.

Into this void arrives the CEO super coach: consultant, consul and counsellor, as an increasing number of business leaders begin to seek clandestine guidance from beyond the walls of their organisations. The question is, are such measures a sign of weakness or strength?

#### Sign of strength?

'It takes a lot of humility for somebody in that position to call a coach,' says Paul Gibbons, chairman of London-based management consultancy Future Considerations. 'This is a complicated environment involving difficult relationships and myriad problems to solve. It can help to bring someone in who is not mired in all that and can provide an objective viewpoint.'

By his own admission, Gibbons entered this

bespoke end of the coaching market 'by mistake', following work he undertook ten years ago with the then Woolwich chief executive John Stewart and his team of directors. The founder chairman of Future Considerations, currently working alongside 15 of the UK's leading 50 companies, believes the lot of the CEO is often underappreciated. '[Nokia president and CEO] Jorma Ollila once called it the loneliest position in the firm, and that a truly effective board of directors should be there to support and care for one another first and do business later,' Gibbons says. 'He also admitted he'd never seen it happen.'

Neither has Paul Taffinder, founder and managing partner of Taffinder Consulting. Taffinder is another example of this rare breed of coach. 'Many CEOs would love to give the impression that they enjoy a great relationship with chairman and board,' the former Marakon Associates partner believes, 'but they cannot talk to these people in an open way. One often becomes very isolated.'

But why should an executive, when he has risen to such lofty heights, place his faith in the hands of an outsider? Surely part of what gets a CEO to the top in the first place is a fierce competitive streak and sheer bloody mindedness. This, both coaches counter, is precisely why so few people are operating in their field. 'What I do is a mixture of deep psychology and

a lot to the party.'

And this party can be thrown in many different guises. The situations that call for the employment of a coach may range from a newly installed boss finding his feet to paving the way for future succession.

What appears to tie all scenarios together, however, is internal-politics and what both men refer to as 'the undiscussables'.

#### Talking tough

'A lot of my time is spent helping my client understand the



### PAUL GIBBONS

Paul Gibbons is chairman of management consultancy Future Considerations, where he facilitates senior leadership development through workshops and learning events for top teams.

He is coach to executives, an academic, published writer and motivational speaker. He was formerly an investment banker at Salomon Brothers, CSFB and Morgan Stanley, and thought leader of PwC's change management practice.

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comprehensive strategy and business understanding,' says Taffinder, holder of a PhD in organisational psychology. 'It's rather a quirk, I suppose.'

Gibbons's background is equally remarkable. 'The people I'm meeting with are much more accomplished in business than I'll ever be,' he admits. 'Without meaning to sound grandiose, however, I had achieved two degrees by the age of 20 and have further qualifications in economics, psychology, business ethics, philosophy, leadership and organisational change, so I bring quite

motivations of other people,' says Taffinder. 'Often decisions aren't recognised at boardroom level because so much of what goes on is about power and control of resources. The CEO is coordinating the orchestra, but all the musicians want to play their own tunes. These are not easy issues to discuss and, where possible, need to be brought into the public domain.'

Gibbons highlights the negative effect that a breakdown in communication can have. 'When two people don't get on, it chews up vast amounts of time,' he says. 'It's a particular problem

### Paul Gibbons' case study

Fred Lane (not his real name) was CFO of a Fortune 100 company for five years. His natural caution helped the business avoid many moguls, but his lack of aggression earned the company criticism.

Given his admirable history Fred saw an opportunity to progress when the CEO position became available. Regrettably, he was told that, despite his impressive track record, the job was likely to go to an outsider with more aggression and edge.

Wanting to succeed, Fred called me and we worked intensively for four months. He sought hard, honest feedback

from his peers and CEO, which didn't look good. Fred needed to work on his presentation, passion, confidence and speech. I repeatedly asked him the tough questions he would face: What was unique about his ideas? Why did he deserve the top chair? Why should the company select someone previously criticised for being over cautious? And what would he do for his shareholders?

This repetition exercise together with breathing techniques and work on his speech resulted in Fred being able to boom out the answers and control his anxiety at the same time. He was ready to walk into interview as the obvious man for the job. Fred was a success and we continue to work together.



when we're taking about the CEO and chairman or FD. I sit them down for as long as it takes and tell them I want to hear all the rage, jealousy and disappointment unleashed. Once that's out in the open, we can talk about building something. It doesn't always work. Sometimes it comes down to deciding which one is going to go, but the system does need to become unstuck.'

Other unmentionables can be cultural. Taffinder cites the example of Louis Gerstner's astonishment upon discovering that IBM product launches were always on the same day of month because 'that's the way we've always done things'. Undiscussables are not always unmentionable by nature, they are often simply invisible to all but the outsider.

Being encouraged to speak one's mind, both on a personal and professional level, is what makes the work so valuable. 'You need to be big and ugly enough to tell it how it is,' says Taffinder, 'and there are times when it is a matter of actually taking charge,' Gibbons concurs. 'We don't do much shouting,' he chuckles, 'but we would be of no value if we agreed on everything. I'm outside the political system and can challenge this person in a way nobody from within the company ever would, stretching strategic thinking and challenging assumptions.'

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**PAUL TAFFINDER**

Paul Taffinder is the founder and managing partner of Taffinder Consulting, which specialises in leadership and organisational change.

This may be all well and good when the coaches arrive at the CEO's behest, but it can be a different matter when the issue of succession raises its head. 'Carl Jung once said that the psychological problems of anyone over 40 could all be traced back to their relationship with their own death,' Gibbons says with a devilish grin. 'It can be a very tricky situation.'

'They hate it,' agrees Taffinder. 'Boards often have an imperfect understanding of what the perfect candidate for their circumstances should look like. When you're looking three years down the line, it is not enough to anoint a single successor, you need to form a cadre and work with them. Getting the outgoing CEO fully on side can be a struggle.'

An imperfect understanding of the role of the CEO is something that both men comment on, a failure that harks directly back to a lack of requisite preparation. 'The key component of the job is to make perhaps three or four key leverage decisions a year,' Taffinder believes. 'Quite often, however, there's no model for what the position actually involves and people are overawed by the number of constituencies they face. It can be quite a culture shock.'

### Lack of motivation

Another problem that often needs addressing with newly installed CEOs is an abrupt loss of motivation. 'I'm often asked how these people make it to the top,' says Gibbons. 'They are not always the most intelligent guys in the organisation, and they are often not even that good with people. The one characteristic I always see is that they've wanted to get where they are for as long as they can remember. However, once they are there, the race is won and a new game is needed. A lot of the work I do is based around people's values and career vision. What do you want your legacy to be? How do you want people to talk about you in five years time? There's always a new sport to be found.'

Belief may be a key driving factor, but a more surprising one highlighted by Taffinder is fear. 'It's amazing the number of CEOs I've worked with who've been waiting their entire lives to be tapped on the shoulder and told a mistake has been made,' he reveals. 'Despite the bravado that one is required to adopt, there is often a sense of not fully belonging'

Gibbons agrees, so I ask him whether he is able to prescribe a cure. 'There's something I've heard said about people as they get older,' he replies. 'One does not have fewer demons; one simply becomes better friends with the ones that were there before. I hope I'm in a position to help that process along.' ■