

Your Turn

by Greg Harris

I Was Born To Be a CEO

I always knew I was born to be a CEO. At an early age I was sure that I had all the right stuff. I was creative, I was organized, I could speak well, and I was good at motivating a team. Most important, I liked to lead people. I envisioned myself in that fancy corner office sitting on my CEO throne and wearing my diamond-encrusted CEO crown. With this vision in mind, I vowed to get on the fast track to become a CEO before I reached the age of 30.

As it turned out, my “fast track” to the CEO’s office took a little longer than I expected. I was promoted to CEO a few weeks before my 40th birthday; but the job isn’t at all what I’d expected when I was younger. In fact, I wonder how many young business school students share the same misconceptions I once had.

After I headed off to college and earned a bachelor’s degree in the early ’80s, I scoured the want ads looking for the right position. I was stunned to find that not a single company was advertising for CEOs. I couldn’t even find a position for a “CEO-in-training”!

So, I came to a solution: Get an MBA. That would surely put me on a fast track to that executive suite, company car, corporate jet, and golf club membership. It seemed quite simple. I would build credibility by getting a job with the biggest, most reputable company I could find. From there, I would move to slightly smaller companies and take on increasing responsibility. Then “poof!” I’d become a CEO.

Before the ink was even dry on

my MBA diploma, I accepted a job with HP in the Silicon Valley. It had everything I was looking for in a first “real” job—prestige, responsibility, and the potential for promotion. But after four long years, I began to get impatient, feeling as if my career was moving in slow motion. I was still just a lowly product manager in a huge company. I was unsure whether anyone even noticed my contributions, and I wondered just how long it would take the board to ask me to run the company.

When that invitation wasn’t forthcoming, I moved to a number of smaller companies, accepting more responsibility with each move. Finally, after three years in my current position, I got the promotion I’d always wanted. And guess what? The view from the CEO’s office looks nothing like I thought it would. In fact, it’s hard for me to believe that I once craved this title. There’s no throne, no car, and no golf. Frankly, it’s not much fun either. While I knew what the job entailed on a large scale when I accepted the job, I must admit I wasn’t prepared for the reality of it.

I’ve discovered that a CEO has three primary responsibilities: One, create the vision for the company; two, sell the logic of the vision to others inside and outside the organization; and three, solve problems that impede the vision. One and two are lots of fun. In fact, when I dreamed of being a CEO, directing a team of people to help them realize my “vision” was what I had in mind.

Unfortunately, I spend 85 percent of my time on responsibility No. 3. The problems are relentless, unexpected, and come from all corners of the organization. I know now that while the CEO can create the map

that guides the organization, he or she is not the one actually steering the ship. A team of people is responsible for running the business on a daily basis, but the CEO must solve most of the problems. In good times, the CEO has very little to do; but in bad times, the CEO has to be all over the boat. In today’s economy, a company thrives based on its ability—and the ability of its CEO—to execute efficiently and react quickly to unforeseen threats.

Really, a CEO’s job has never been tougher, especially in the shadow of the Enrons of the world. As a CEO, I’m immediately looked on with suspicion. When I told my friends about my promotion, almost every one of them told me, “You’d better brush up on your creative accounting!” At the same time, I’m expected to have an opinion about corporate ethics, something business is treating like the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court ruling defining pornography. That is, we’re not exactly sure how to define “unethical corporate behavior,” but we’ll know it when we see it.

I also get the sense that many believe it’s unethical for CEOs to be greedy. But in my opinion, “greed” is a good thing. In fact, it’s a requirement for business success. If CEOs didn’t have a greedy streak, most businesses simply wouldn’t succeed. As a new CEO, I want nothing less than total market domination. How can I approach the job any other way?

And, as a CEO, I’m expected to be doing stuff, all the time. The office is a place for action, and CEOs run the risk of looking like slackers if they do too much thinking in the office. Thinking, after all, often involves sitting with a blank

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CEO by business school alone. Instead, I think it's something you become as you slowly develop common sense—make that common *business* sense. It happens only after a steep, time-consuming learning curve and the realization that you just can't know everything.

Now that I've accomplished everything I set out to do, I have to ask myself, could it be that I've spent the last 20 years of my life working toward a goal that wasn't right for me? To be honest, I'm only a few months into the job, so it's really too early to tell. Any new job can be overwhelming at first, and a CEO's job can seem even more so. While I'm not having fun yet, I admit that being a CEO gets

stare on your face. My solution is to do my thinking in the car. Recently, traffic in the Silicon Valley has improved as the economy has worsened. I've actually found myself craving more traffic to give me time to think with abandon.

I now realize that the MBA was not the magic bullet to CEO-dom. The MBA degree exposed me to a wide range of disciplines and business programs, but it didn't teach me how to solve problems or how to get the most out of people. I don't think MBA students realize just how many identities they will have to assume—and just as quickly discard—on their way to the top. Much of what they learn in one position will be irrelevant to the next.

For instance, as my classmates and I settled into our entry-level positions and began to specialize, we soon were typecast as “marketers” or


“finance experts” or “IT persons.”

As we moved up, we had to learn to shake off those identities with each new promotion and become comfortable taking on positions in which we had absolutely no experience. I clearly remember my first senior management position when I realized I couldn't do the jobs of those I supervised. That realization was frightening.

It's important that today's business students realize that the path to the top isn't just about seeking added responsibilities or even working hard, though those things surely help. It's really about learning to adjust to the unfamiliar and being able to act without all the answers. Learning to act despite that uncertainty is what teaches you to lead. I've come to think that no one is really “born to be a CEO.” And, surprisingly, no one can learn to be a

easier as every week goes by.

Students who dream of sitting in the “big chair” must realize that the view is much different than it may seem from the other side of the desk. They must be able to look beyond the moniker of “management” and learn what a CEO *really* has to do—take risks, hope for the best, and clean up the mess when things go wrong.

As for me, time will tell whether or not I'll be a good CEO. So bring on those messy problems, bring on those sticky issues. I'm ready to meet them head-on. In the meantime, however, I've added “diamond-encrusted crown” to my new budget. After all, I *am* the CEO. 

Greg Harris earned an MBA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and is president and CEO of MonitorsDirect.com.