

The position of a CEO (or Director, Manager, Co-ordinator or any other job title that may be given to the senior member of staff) in the community and voluntary sector can certainly be a tough one and a lonely one at times. There can be no doubt that the role of a CEO in any sector is a highly pressurised one. In the community and voluntary sector there are some unique problems: the complex needs of clients or members, accountability to a plethora of stakeholders, hard to measure results, attracting and retaining skilled staff particularly when salaries aren't high and of course, funding, funding, funding. And as the CEO, you are the meat in the sandwich between the board and the staff, often finding yourself on your own in facing these challenges but still under pressure from your board to deliver while trying to coax the best out of the staff.

So, what is the answer? Are loneliness and burn-out the inevitable consequences of taking on this role? Yes its tough, but there are things that you can do alleviate some of the pressure. There are a number of hygiene factors that need to be considered – putting these in place will not necessarily solve all of the problems, but not attending to them will certainly create problems. As we look at these hygiene factors we will focus on the three most important elements of the equation: you, the staff and the board.

1. You

Are you the right person for the job?

It is important to reflect on yourself as CEO and even to ask what might seem an odd question – are you the right person for the job? Do you have to be a particular type of person to be a successful leader? And are you that type of person?

One of the difficulties with leadership is that we have certain images in our heads when we hear the word – someone who is charismatic, forceful, dynamic, persuasive, strong. These are all positive characteristics, but they can also have connotations that don't sit so well within the community and voluntary sector where inclusivity and empowering others is highly valued. This image of leadership can also create a belief that if I don't conform to that image I'm not the right type of person to be a CEO. But this is a very one dimensional view of leadership. There are different styles of leadership – to use another stereotype, leadership can be gentle, quiet and unassuming – and therefore, people with lots of different types of personalities can be leaders.

Do you want it?

So, in fact, lots of different types of people can be the right person for the job so the question should be – do you really want the job? Some time ago my then line manager asked me where I saw myself in 5 years time – did I want to be running my own organisation or did I want to be a specialist or expert in an area and act as a consultant to others. It took me a long time to figure out the answer to that question. But it was when I realised that I don't like chaos and I don't like being pulled in many different directions at once that I found my answer. For me, the life of the CEO is too unpredictable but I know many people who thrive on the uncertainty and the fact that no two days are the same, or even as you planned them.

So, I think it is important for anyone in the position of CEO to ask themselves if they are sure that they want to be a CEO. In the community and voluntary sector people can find themselves in CEO-type positions for all sorts of reasons. Some people can be very uncomfortable in the role and I think that anyone who is finding it really tough at the top needs to ask themselves if they truly want it. If the answer is no, start working on your exit strategy. If the answer is yes, even though you might complain at times, rejoice in that fact.

Grow your confidence

If you know that you actually want to be CEO, then you need to believe that you can do it. Having confidence is not very Irish and not very community and voluntary sector, but it is an essential requirement for a successful CEO in sustaining themselves within that 'tough at the top' position. Luckily, confidence is not a magical gift given to some and not others, although it can sometimes seem that way. Confidence is something that can be developed and nurtured. Visualisation is a powerful tool in helping us to grow the confidence to tackle challenging situations and one regularly used in the world of sport. A professional golfer will take time before each shot, studying the angles and practising the swing that he or she wants to take. There is substantial evidence that picturing ourselves succeeding in a given situation increases our chances of success.

Build your personal capacity

But confidence alone is not enough. You also need to build your personal capacity to be a leader and this can be done in a number of ways. You can stimulate your own development through reading and self-reflection. Attending well-chosen training courses can build your skills and confidence as well as putting you in touch with others in similar positions. While identifying a suitable mentor may be a challenge, it is worth keeping your antennae out for suitable candidates. A mentoring relationship provides a safe space in which to discuss the things that keep you awake at night, and a good mentor will have experience and insights you can draw on. Finally, don't miss any opportunities to network with other CEOs. They are the people who can really understand and share your experience.

2. Staff

It's part of the job

First of all, you have to accept that spending time with staff, either one-to-one or in groups, is an essential part of the job of the CEO and time to do that needs to be allocated. It is not a distraction from the real work, it is part of the real work.

One-to-one supervision

There is a lot more that could be said about how you lead a staff team and how you build effective relationships with staff but I'm going to restrict myself to one point about how you structure that. I'd really like to make a plea for the regular one-to-one supervision meeting. That's the meeting that takes place between you and the people that you line manage. It happens on a regular basis, its one-to-one, it takes place at a designated time and in a quiet place. It is where they tell you what they have been doing since the last meeting, what they need help with and then you mutually agree targets for the next period. And it seems to happen more often within the pages of management text books than in real-life community and voluntary organisation but I believe it is an essential, must-have tool in the tool-kit of any CEO. Some people say that they operate an open-door management style and staff can come and see them whenever they want but that should never be seen as a substitute for regular supervision.

3. Board

Boards come in many shapes and sizes and can pose a variety of challenges for the CEO. Some are semi-detached and it may be a struggle to engage them meaningfully as they are more than happy to let you get on with it, with the occasional despatch from the front-line. Other people may envy you, as their board members sit on their shoulder and constantly micro-manage. Other people may

dread board meetings as they more resemble going before a firing squad than anything associated with the caring community and voluntary sector. So, what's to be done? The following is a list of board hygiene factors. Their presence does not guarantee success but their absence will almost certainly guarantee problems.

Mutually agreed plan

You need a mutually agreed plan with targets. It can be an operational annual work plan, a strategic plan or a business plan. It might be something that you drafted over an afternoon and presented to the board or the product of an intensive consultation process facilitated by a consultant. But it must be mutually agreed. In other words, whatever their involvement in its production, your board members understand it and its implications in terms of priorities for action and resources needed and are prepared to stand over it. In addition, it must contain meaningful targets that you can report against on a regular basis and this should be the focus of your report to the board.

One-to-one line management

The CEO needs a one-to-one line management relationship with a member of the board, probably but not necessarily the chair. And you need to meet with them periodically to have the type of conversation that you have with the people you line manage. This one-to-one setting is the place to talk about what you have been doing since the last meeting and it gives you the space to raise concerns in a way that is unlikely to happen at a board meeting. Meetings of this kind should have a number of positive outcomes for you as the CEO. You get the chance to talk about your work at some depth and the relief of knowing that somebody on the board knows and endorses what you are doing. The chair, or other board member, should go in to bat for you at board meetings if you are receiving flak for a decision that you took together.

There should also be a positive impact on board meetings. Your report to the board can focus on the targets in the plan and get away from the lengthy, 'everything I did since the last meeting' report which you submit because it's your only channel of communication with the board. The downside of that report is that it can be very time-consuming at board meetings and it can actually encourage the board into a level of detail that is unhelpful. I believe that putting this one-to-one system in place is the one most important thing you can do to alleviate the 'tough at the top' feeling.

Mutually agreed reporting

You need to explicitly discuss with the board what level of reporting they want and how much detailed information they want to see. You need to be clear with them how much of your time that takes to produce and, in the light of that knowledge, mutually agree the level of reporting and amount of information you will supply.

Accept its your job

You need to accept that supporting the governance within your organisation and reporting to the board will take a chunk of your time and you need to make that investment. Some CEOs resent the time it takes to prepare for board meetings when they could be doing 'more important' work. But, just like spending time with staff, it is part of the job and needs to be apportioned the necessary time.

Board development

Don't be afraid to initiate board development but do it in conjunction with the chair if at all possible. It's just possible that your board are a little unclear as to their role and do not operate effectively in

meetings. They may need some external input whether that's an article to read, a training session or a board away day and you may need to take a lead in making that happen. Some CEOs are reluctant to do this as the board are their employers but it is better to take some initiative if the development need is there. But try and work with the chair or individual board members in making it happen.

Back to you

Before I finish I wanted to return to the first part of the equation, which is you. We started with the title – it's tough at the top and I think that part of what you have to do unfortunately is accept that it is tough and it can be lonely at the top. You may be lucky and form supportive relationships inside the organisation but in most cases neither your staff nor your board are likely to be the people you can or even should lean on when you need support. Make it a priority to look after yourself and your mental health. I have a nightmare scenario in my head, of the CEO who works all the hours that God sends, to detriment of family life and has no social life to speak of. What happens when the board are up in arms or the staff decide to take a collective grievance? Take time to build your own support networks outside the organisation so you know where to go when the going gets tough. And link up with and make friends with other people in your position.

(Originally published by Sheila Cahill on behalf of Carmichael, August 2014)