



**Your last name may not be Obama, but if you're a CEO, you may want to consider hiring a chief of staff.**

# Do You Need a Chief of Staff?

The CEOs we work with tell us they need to do three things:

1. Make good decisions
2. Integrate the actions of different business functions
3. Make sure that his or her own time is used to the best effect

In a big organization, these goals are by no means easy to achieve. Most CEOs do not have much of an infrastructure to help them systematically manage these challenges. This is tough on them and on the management team that needs to interact with them.

We have worked with several companies that have set up a specialized infrastructure to support the CEO and the company. It's a small team they call the CEO Office and is led by a chief of staff. In this article, we look at how a CEO can benefit from a CEO Office.

## Easing decisionmaking

The decisions the CEO has to make are those that the company can't make itself. They are the issues that are so sensitive, are so complex, or have such large and uncertain consequences that no one else can touch them. The CEO must tackle these tough issues even while understanding that the information he or she is basing the decision on is incomplete or even incorrect.

However, this job can be made easier if staffers in the CEO Office act as a kind of early warning system where weak signals are picked up from the environment, assessed, and passed on to the CEO. This gives the CEO a chance to anticipate which

issues s/he may be facing. It's a simple matter of forewarned is forearmed.

It's not only a matter of channelling in signals from the external environment. The briefings of the CEO Office by the chief of staff also provide a reliable channel for the company to get signals through to the CEO so that s/he can focus his or her efforts, or the company's efforts, on them.

Ideally, the staff of the CEO Office will start work on the options and possible consequences of various decisions so that when an issue hits the CEO's desk, the spadework has been done.

The CEO Office also provides a reliable and solid second opinion on the issues. This means the staff must be bright, have some experience, and be confident in voicing their own opinions. This is the place where the CEO can have safe debates, meaning the conversation won't leak out, and where s/he'll get good feedback and even pushback. This is where the CEO can try ideas out on people without initiating a whole string of consequences.

Having this small team working each week to identify, analyze, and act as a sounding board on issues is a major aid to CEO decisionmaking.

## Aiding integration

There is a lot of talk about teams at the top, but, frankly, that is often hot air. In many ways, the CEO is the chief integration officer; he or she is the only one with a vested interest in full integration of the company.

Thus, the second area where the CEO Office plays a role is helping ensure the decisions the CEO makes and the decisions of the company fit together and are aligned and integrated. Companies have a host of processes for integration and alignment: board meetings, strategic planning sessions, business review meetings, and so on. The CEO Office isn't usually in charge of these, but it makes sure that all these processes work smoothly.

One way the CEO Office makes sure things run smoothly is to set up a corporate calendar of important events that lets everyone in the company know what will happen and when to prepare for them. It's not just a matter of putting dates on a calendar; this includes mapping out the processes and timelines needed to prepare for the events. This creates much smoother flow of events and much less scrambling at the end. In the absence of this, managers may not know what is happening, can't prepare for events, and may not know what the processes are or what signoffs are needed.

The CEO Office should also make sure the CEO's decisions get implemented. They don't control things in the organization, but they should track them and facilitate them. Their role is to draw people's attention to things that aren't working and do so in a diplomatic way. They should be able to facilitate and resolve some things. They oil the machine and alert the CEO if things are not going well.

In a sense, the chief of staff is managing the interfaces between the CEO and the company, working in the background with his/her staff to make sure all preparations are made so each meeting is as productive as possible.

### Establishing a rhythm

Making sure that a CEO's time is used well means making sure activities are aligned with strategic intent, stakeholder needs, and his/her personal needs. More than just setting up someone's appointments, this takes considerable skill and thought, and most personal assistants are overwhelmed by the task. You need someone knowledgeable about the issues the company is facing so he/she can help the CEO balance time commitments in the best possible way. The CEO Office also ensures the CEO is managing his/her energy and has time to recharge.

The CEO Office establishes a daily or weekly working rhythm around the CEO. This is important not just for the CEO but for the people around him or her—they need to know when they can get their issues in front of the CEO. For example, if there is a staff meeting every Monday morning with the main



corporate functions, then people know that is the time they can get a point right to the CEO.

A sophisticated CEO Office for a large global organization might have 10 or more staff reporting to the chief of staff, but even a staff of three to five people can be a major aid to the CEO and the company.

We see the people working in the CEO Office as tough diplomats. They must be accepted and respected by the company and (if possible) liked so they don't need to muscle their way in. Most importantly, they need to be seen as an asset by the company, a group of people that makes things run more smoothly and aids communication, not as a barrier blocking people from the CEO.

As we work with companies building this infrastructure to support the CEO, we wonder why CEO Offices are not more common. They fill in a critical gap in the organizational structure. +

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