

Do You Have What It Takes To Be A COO?

By Francie Dalton

Let's start with the characteristics predictive of Chief Operation Officer (COO) success. These include a high degree of self assuredness and mental toughness, a collaborative nature with a background reflecting strong team and service orientations, a willingness to confront and to be confronted, the ability to work successfully with other strong egos, resilience in the face of your own errors and a solution orientation toward the errors of others.

Got 'em all? Good for you! But more than having these characteristics is involved in deciding whether the COO position is right for you. Avoid being seduced by money or title. Be alert to the challenges inherent in the job and assess what it will take to be successful. Schedule some time alone to be introspective and ask yourself why you want the position, what makes it appealing, and why you think you're well suited for it.

Consider the following checklist to determine whether becoming the COO is actually a good fit for your skills and temperament:

Assess the organization. Is the organization fraught with problems? If so, this diminishes the likelihood of your success. As COO, your job is to generate significant outcomes - but the COO must also manage people and problems. Be realistic in your assessment of what it will take to succeed in the organization.

Assess the CEO. Start by asking lots of questions about how he or she succeeds, makes decisions, and handles situations. If you encounter resistance to these questions, you'll probably have a tough time building a relationship with this person.

Assess your tinsel strength. Be clear

about what you're facing. This isn't a popularity contest; severe conflicts will be inevitable. You must be willing to stand your ground, even with an exasperated CEO, and confront as needed. For the COO position, being flameproof is a prerequisite.

Assess your ability to build trust.

Your success as COO depends largely on your ability to build trust with the CEO and your direct reports. Your interpersonal skills have to be extremely well honed. If people exasperate you, you're probably not well suited for a COO position.

Assess your energy level. The stronger your subordinates, the more autonomy they'll need, and the greater the chance for friction. Additionally, you'll need to grab any and every initiative the CEO is willing to shed and persuade him or her to shed still others. All this takes a tremendous amount of energy. Be honest with yourself as to whether you have the necessary reserves.

Once you ARE the COO, your next challenge will be to ensure that you become a meaningful, contributing member of the organization as quickly as possible. Here are some valuable tips to help you accelerate the process:

Make understanding the CEO JOB

#1. Observe how your CEO handles tough situations and discern his or her strengths, weaknesses, thresholds, and reactions. It's your job to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of your CEO.

Learn from incumbents. Take the time to get to know the organization before you start criticizing, making changes, or launching new agendas. Rather than trying to impress others with what you



know, actively create opportunities for others to tell you what they know.

Be fluent with past accomplishments. Seek opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge of other's accomplishments to date.

Identify rallying opportunities. What are the most important issues? Engage your direct reports on specific next steps relative to these issues. Instill a sense of urgency around identified next steps and accentuate their contributions in front of your CEO.

Identify key influencers. Rather than trying to neutralize them, get to know them. Not only can they help you overcome resistance, they can also help accelerate the evolution of others' begrudging compliance into real commitment.

Ask for help when you need it. Acknowledge the resident brain trust. Express that you view your role as a helper committed to accelerating their success, easing the process by which they succeed, and where possible, facilitating their success. Be explicit about needing their help. Articulate an awareness that your own success depends upon each of them coming alongside you, sharing their knowledge and experience, and collaborating as colleagues who are all committed to the success of the organization.

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