

# “Presidential Advisory Councils” Offer CEOs Support, Counsel and New Ideas

By Michael Brown

Does the common perception of today’s CEO match the reality? Are today’s top corporate executives truly burdened with the weight of the world, engaged in a round-the-clock game of cut-throat ploys and tactics, surrounded by sycophants, never able to relax or confide in like-minded people?

Is it really that lonely at the top?

Perhaps for some CEOs it is but for members of Presidential Advisory Councils (PACs) at the CEO Club of Boston, nothing could be further from the truth. Meeting six times a year, these small gatherings of 8-12 members, all CEOs of companies with at least \$2 million in annual revenue, provide each member with the opportunity to seek counsel and support from CEO colleagues. In the process, they develop relationships that endure long after their corporate tenures have subsided. Discussing public relations strategies, the effectiveness of business development efforts, HR and personnel issues, earnings and stock

performances, relations with their Boards of Directors—virtually anything is up for discussion, no problem too large or too small, or too complex or dicey or personal. Helping each other with problems is the raison d’etre of these PAC sessions in the first place.

Fred Green, Chair of the CEO Club of Boston, keeps just such a goal in mind. Once appointed the youngest CEO, at 38, in the 125-year history of Abington Mutual Fire Insurance, Fred steered that firm through hard times to success, then moved after 11 years to found his own consulting firm as well as serve on the Boards of over 30 organizations, including the vice chair, chair or president of 17 of them. As current president of F. W. Green Associates—a firm that offers advice and counseling to CEOs—Fred’s insights into the pressures of leading a major business organization are at this point in his career second to none.

“Stories of failure as well as success can teach great lessons in business



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management and leadership skills,” says Green who for many years taught leadership part-time at Stonehill College. “Whether the issues involve employees or board members, CEOs involved in these groups say it’s great to know there’s an upcoming meeting on their calendar. They look forward to potentially useful feedback from smart colleagues who can look at their problem from a similar perspective.”

While virtually any topic of discussion is fair game, these PAC sessions remain nonetheless a somewhat structured environment. During the course of the year, each member is assigned to host a meeting, provide literature and, after some initial casual conversation, raise a few pressing issues that face today’s business leaders. The host then addresses questions and responds to feedback, while the

dialogue is recorded for their own reflection. This simulates “Power of the Mastermind” tactics developed by Napoleon Hill in his classic book *Think and Grow Rich*. There is also ample time for going around the table and letting each team member explain his or her current vexing dilemma, then opening the floor for suggestions from the others.

And while the venue changes from meeting to meeting, each host’s company environment typically distinctively different from any of the others, the goal always remains the same: to provide top business leaders with an invaluable network of support and feedback so that they can get on with making their organizations a continuing success.

On a particular recent morning, for example, nine CEOs, all informally dressed, squeezed themselves into a small conference room in a wiring company’s facility in Norwood Massachusetts. Sandwiches, chips and plastic cups could be seen scattered around the table with framed motivational posters decorating the walls. Chit-chat ranged from how to deal with lawyers and to first quarter earnings to (most everyone’s favorite) golf. Eventually, “Jack,” CEO of a toy manufacturing concern begins the session by sharing feelings of “emptiness” in spite of a stellar financial year for his firm. “I know I should be happy,” he says, citing how his company was able to pay large bonuses this year, donate to

charity and spearhead several new initiatives. “But I get the feeling of wanting something more, missing something. Yet I don’t know what it is, I can’t imagine what it is. I’m just feeling down for no obvious reason.”

Others chime in. One colleague recalls a time when he had similar feelings and dealt with them by branching off and starting a new company. The ramifications of taking such a bold step were discussed, until a few members began offering such day-to-day practical advice as the need for daily assessments of tasks and milestones, time management and the ever-present need to take time off, despite pressure not to do so. Finally, one member sums things up with: “There really is a black cloud over us CEOs sometimes.”

By the time this meeting wraps up, each CEO present has been given the chance to help solve another’s problem, and in doing so, offered some enlightenment to themselves as well. After briefly noting the time, date and locale of the next meeting, they exchange final pleasantries and then head off into the lonely calm or chaos of their own slice of the corporate world. Many are eager to try to implement today’s advice.

Explains Charlie Nault, Chair/Founder of Atrion Networking Corporation, about the effect of a typical PAC session: “The great thing about a PAC is that you meet with the same group of CEOs, all of whom have no vested interest in your company. You get great advice,

suggestions, and support, yet you’re not obligated to use all or any of it. This makes the PAC meetings an experience that is both useful and serious but that can also be fun. I always end up with at least one valuable nugget that positively impacts my company.”

So while life for the average CEO may appear on the surface like a high-living, splendiferous career lifestyle, the top of the heap, the proverbial guy (or gal) in total command, the reality says otherwise. But by letting their guard down several times a year with their fellow CEOs, PAC CEOs gain the kind of insightful feedback and honest, knowing advice to enable them to navigate the pitfalls and hurdles of their very challenging, frustrating and often bewildering business role. PACs serve as a constant reminder that they are not alone. Even way up at the top.