

INSIGHTS OF A REMOTE CEO



I have a client in the health-care services industry whose CEO runs his company out of his remote home-office. I was intrigued by the success of the business given the challenges of managing a company remotely. The following is an excerpt of a conversation I had with him regarding his experience as a remote CEO.

SBC: How did you become a remote CEO? What were the circumstances that led to situating yourself remotely from your employees?

CEO: I became involved in my company as a board member and minority investor. When I saw the opportunity to build the company into a leader in our industry I initiated a leveraged buyout of the other investors. My initial plan was to move my family to where our corporate headquarters is located. At the beginning, I spent a lot of time there, but after putting together a management team that I trusted, I weaned myself off of being on site every day to where I am now, on site about one week of every month, without having uprooted my family.

SBC: The role of the CEO includes setting the culture and personality of the company for employees and outsiders. How has telecommuting impacted your ability to manage this aspect of your company?

CEO: I have a very seasoned leadership team. We have a great working relationship and have developed a communication style that I believe is just as effective remotely as it is in person. We utilize various forms of communication tools including periodic emails on company activities as well as quarterly conference calls with various levels of management. The constant flow of communication is helpful to solidify our message and I don't think my not being present in person has diminished our success.

SBC: How do you communicate with, manage and motivate remotely without the ability to read body language, facial expressions, etc.?

CEO: We utilize video and teleconferencing for a significant amount of our communications. After having gotten to know my team so well it is easy to garner the nuances of individual feelings not only on a video

conference, but I am comfortable that I have the essence of the teams buy-in or hesitations even on regular phone calls. If I hadn't established in-person working relationships in the beginning of my tenure as CEO, it probably would have been difficult to do so solely on a remote basis.

SBC: Do you think that your situation of working remotely puts pressure on you to allow others in your organization to telecommute?

CEO: It does and we encourage it. I believe that allowing a certain level of telecommuting for various positions in the company expands the universe of potential candidates for open positions, and results in longer tenured employees who may have personal commitments to balance that is made easier by telecommuting.

SBC: Are there any benefits that you enjoy being remote?

CEO: Being remote usually means that if someone feels they need to run something by me or want to ask a question, the extra step of dialing a phone, may give them the pause that they need to think if it really is important that they bring the matter to my attention. I feel that I don't get involved in frequent nuisance issues that are easily raised just by walking into my office if I were on site. On the other hand, I am always concerned that being out of sight, out of mind, may result in missing matters that should be brought to my attention. I have accepted this as a reality of the situation and try not to be paranoid about it.

SBC: How much time do you spend in your remote office as compared to out on the road meeting with your team members or others?

CEO: I mentioned that I am on site at corporate about one week per month. But I try not to make that week any different than weeks when I am remote. I don't want to disturb the day-to-day activities and workflow of the management team. So I treat it as any other week, often spending a good deal of the day alone in my office or on the phone with customers or other remote employees.

SBC: Do you have any advice that you would give to another CEO considering locating remotely from their company location?

CEO: You have to trust your management team. I am very comfortable discussing a problem with the team and then allowing them to execute on the plan discussed. I don't feel the need to micro-manage or be involved in every step of the way. If you are a control freak then working remotely definitely will not work for you.

This white paper was written by Steven Bell
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