

“Second In Command – The misunderstood role of the Chief Operating Officer”

Source: Harvard Business Review 2006

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This insightful article published in *Harvard Business Review* considers why the COO role remains so loosely defined. It is based on in-depth interviews with individuals who have held COO roles as well as CEOs who have worked with COOs.

With the increased expectations of CEOs, we feel the article is just as relevant today as when it was written in 2006. You will need a HBR membership* for the luxury of reading the full ten-page article, but for those of you without a membership or for those of you in a hurry, we have digested the key points below:

Our Digest

There is no unique formula for making the relationship between a CEO and COO work effectively given that each situation varies tremendously. The most effective way to draw insights into the role is to understand the *motives* for creating the roles in the first place. Seven core reasons exist:

- **The Executor** – Leads the execution of the strategy developed by the management team
- **The Change Agent** – Leads a specific strategic change e.g turnaround or expansion
- **The Mentor** – Coaches and advises an emerging CEO
- **The Partner** - ‘Co-leads’ where leaders work more effectively in pairs
- **The Heir Apparent** – Development of the likely successor to the CEO
- **The Other Half** – Posses complementary skills to the CEO
- **The MVP (Most Valued Person)** – Promoting a leader who is too valued to risk losing to the competition

Despite significant research, due to the tremendous variation in COO roles and responsibilities there is no standard COO that sets the bar. This presents a challenge for those CEOs looking for their second-in-command (as well as for headhunters trying to find one!) as there is no standard blueprint. However here are some insights to help ensure this role is successful:

- **Trust:** This can only really exist where the COO truly believes in the CEO’s strategic leadership, keeps their ego in check so they lead while serving and maintains an eye on execution.
- **Support:** The CEO must openly communicate with the COO and be clear on the division of responsibilities. This is critical to ensuring the COO is effectively supported. Without this clarity, friction can creep into the relationship. Sharing the spotlight with the COO gives the CEO a voice and demonstrates their contribution and overall support to the Board and the organisation as a whole.
- **Clarity of accountabilities:** For some executive teams, the existence of a COO can mean an additional layer of management that restricts access to the CEO. Clarity of accountabilities and trust between the CEO and COO is needed to ensure this does not result in an exodus of executive talent out of the door.

More companies may benefit from the leadership aspects of the COO role if they take on board these considerations and ensure that confusion doesn’t develop. To read or purchase the full article, please click on the link below:

<http://hbr.org/product/second-in-command-the-misunderstood-role-of-the-ch/an/R0605C-PDF-ENG>

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