



BEING THE CEO

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Introduction

The job of CEO is almost impossible to define. It is the most powerful and influential position in any organisation – yet very little literature exists which attempts to provide a formula for doing the job, never mind doing it well. In many respects, that is to be expected. Every organisation is different, and every leader is different, and what works for one person in one context, may not work for another elsewhere. The role, and the reasons why people succeed or fail at it, remains, to a certain extent, an enigma.

It would seem to some that succeeding in the CEO role is as much about luck as it is about skill or judgement. There's certainly a degree of luck involved, but in reality much depends on a leader's ability to focus on the right things ('the business they are in' and areas where they have influence), on their contextual wisdom in response to the environment in which they find themselves, and their ability to accrue, mobilise and unleash resource (be it people, money or technology) in line with that conceived wisdom.

What is possible is an attempt to provide some principles for those embarking on the CEO role. This book is intended to be like a clear night sky, guiding a CEO (or aspirant CEO) with reference to a series of major stars and constellations, rather than doing the impossible task of providing a detailed map for navigating the distinct mountains, forests and streams of a specific environment. This book will reflect on the mindsets, the nature of the relationships, and the approaches of those who at the top of thriving organisations.

A CEO's work is, of course, rarely done; and as different contexts and people provide unique challenges and approaches, so too do different moments in time. The role can evolve, and what applies to a new CEO or a CEO of a struggling organisation may not apply to the established CEO whose organisation is currently at the top of its game.

This book is written with a new breed of CEO in mind. In England, over a period of just six or seven years, we have seen the role of academy trust CEO proliferate as groups of schools working in collaboration have formalised their relationships and become 'trusts' – working under a single trust board and operating within the same legal entity. These organisations have developed shared senior leadership through their accounting officer (the CEO) and their central functions, bringing a whole new dimension to how schools and their closely related support functions – including school improvement services – are run. Some, mainly headteachers, have either stepped up to become CEO of these groups or, in some cases, taken a half-step to the role of 'Executive Headteacher'. This book is not about Executive Headteachers, as it is unlikely that this role will remain the one synonymous with the accounting officer role as these trusts grow in size and scale. It is impossible for someone to play a 'headteacher' role – executive or otherwise – across more than four or five schools, and it is certainly impossible at this level for them to balance the role of corporate leader with lead practitioner.

The transition from Executive headteacher (lead practitioner) to CEO (corporate leader) is far more challenging and perilous than some anticipated. It has been demonstrated time and again that being an accomplished headteacher or even Executive Headteacher, is no guarantee of becoming a great CEO. There is a huge transition to be made. The leader must again become chief learner rather than the chief expert. Some have flourished as CEOs, whilst others – mainly through their inability to reinvent themselves as chief learners – have ended up a case study in how not to do it.

So where do we begin? This book will consider – at its centre - Forum Strategy's six dimensions of the CEO role, reflecting on examples from within and beyond the academy trust world. It will reference the policy environment trusts are operating in (the 'weather' as I like to call it), it will consider examples of those CEOs who have made grave mistakes and those who have turned around generational failures within their organisations; and, it will consider the societal and economic challenges that will define the tenures of so many of this generation of CEOs. It will also draw on my conversations with many dozens of CEOs through our nationwide CEO leadership development networks, and apply my own experience of taking a start-up organisation to one with national reach as one of the academy trust sector's leading 'voices'.

Most of all, this is a book intended to help CEOs navigate their own path, based on their own values and the context they face in the best interests of those they serve. After all, that is the ultimate role of all leaders.

Michael Pain

1. Forum Strategy's **framework for the CEO role** to inform training, coaching & performance management

