

From the coach's bench: Growing to C-level

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Published in South China Morning Post, March 8, 2008



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I had been coaching Tom for six months, mostly on developing his leadership skills. At the time, Tom was the head of finance for Greater China of an international logistics company.

For the past two sessions, I sensed a declining level of engagement in Tom and wondered what was going on. "You know, I have been in this position now for more than four years and I think I did a really good job. I understand that both our COO [chief operating officer] and CEO may move back to the global headquarters in Europe, so I was hoping to take over either position after their departure. Now I hear through the grapevine that I may not be considered for any of these positions."

My first thought was: Would I promote him to any of these positions based on my knowledge of him as a person and manager? My immediate response was no, or rather, not yet. We'll get to my reasons later. First, I asked him: "So what do you think about that?"

"Quite honestly, I'm disappointed. I feel that my hard work is not appreciated here," he replied.

Inquiring further, I asked: "Any ideas why the board may not consider promoting you to any of these positions?"

"Don't really know. Maybe they think I'm not up to the job, or it's because I'm Chinese even though I was born and grew up in London."

I could see that Tom was not only disappointed, but he also felt unappreciated for the work he had done. It also seemed that succession had not been handled

professionally; hence the rumours.

At that point I felt it necessary to help him focus on what he could do to improve his chances for a potential promotion rather than to elaborate further on any outside factors that he had little power to influence.

A good point to start was with my own impression. To judge if someone is up to the job of a more senior position, I try to imagine the person being in that position and then see how it feels.

In Tom's case, I felt that although he was hard-working and intelligent, he did not think sufficiently like a C-level executive yet. He appeared to be a rather transactional person - in other words, he got the jobs done. This put him where he is today. But in order to be recognised as potential COO or CEO, he needed to grow beyond that.

So I continued: "What do you think are the key criteria for any board when selecting a new COO or CEO?"

"That the candidate has sufficient experience, intelligence, leadership skills, has delivered good results and perhaps has a vision for the company," Tom answered.

I responded: "Certainly all important criteria. How many people on your level would probably match these criteria?"

"Maybe half of them," he said, to which I inquired: "So why should they choose you over the others who also match these criteria?"

I noticed that this question made Tom think on a deeper level. He started to realise that he was possibly lacking something he was not aware of. I shared my observation and asked him for his opinion on the current COO and CEO. He particularly respected the COO to whom he was reporting. When asked if there was something he appreciated in particular, he said the COO acted very responsibly and seemed to handle the business as if it were his own.

It was then that Tom became aware that he still acted too much with an employee mindset, which occasionally led to bureaucratic responses towards his peers and a perceived lack of seniority among his superiors.

He understood that in order to be considered for a C-level position, doing an excellent job in his current position would not be sufficient. As head of finance, he needed to display a C-level attitude and resulting behaviour.

----- **End of Article as published in SCMP** -----



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/08) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community.