Many faces of the CEO – a mini survey

One day you might wake up noticing you have been given something a younger you once yearned for: you have been “let in” to what Americans call the C-Suite, that is the close circle surrounding a CEO. In my case this is not in a big way in a top job or in a company whose turnover exceeds the national economy – but as trusted advisor to a number of medium sized national and international organisations.

These can tell us something about the character of CEOs and how we can work with them. I chose five companies I am currently working with running across sectors (government, charity, corporate-private, mixed public/private, trust).

What’s interesting here is in the words of one of the CEOs is: “Everyone wants a piece of you”, in other words few people are just indifferent to CEOs. But people have widely differing views of what you are there for, and how you are contributing.

Talking with the surrounding circle including the COOs, others in the top team and the wider organisation, I can confirm they vary widely in their opinions of their CEO on questions such as: Is the CEO inspiring you, and in what sort of way? How emotionally intelligent? Does the CEO care and support you in your efforts? Do they seem to notice you or know who you are?

So each CEO has many faces. You can see them change for example when someone interrupts our discussion, or when they work with their top team and speaking to a visitor, or to the public. This does not depend on their gender or background, or the sector or type of company. A question for the CEO is how best to play their role while turning to advantage the full-on demands arriving from all directions. A question for the trusted advisor is how to speak to and guide the CEO.

All five CEOs have something in common: they are ambitious, verging at times on impatience. They are eager to scale up to deliver more impact to the world. Towards this they want to engage top team and the wider organisation. They are interested in feedback from a trusted advisor who can see what they cannot.

As trusted advisor our position can feel strange. Through proximity to power you pick up some of the CEOs feelings, ranging from frustration to over-confidence. Also you notice that others, before they meet you will know that you have been “let in” and this shows in how they are dealing with you but is often not mentioned directly. They agree to meet you, they listen and seem to be sending messages or testing something out, trying how best to present an idea or proposal they have.

I recommend the CEO

I recommend the trusted advisor

There is a moment sometimes

The CEO includes being a sort of figurehead for investors, main/supervisory board, government, important customers and staff.