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Hail to the chief, as executive

By Ronald Hoff

EXECUTIVE ANXIETY is a growing contagion. More and more corporate chiefs are getting fired, often within the first year of their tenure in office. How does an executive survive in these volatile times?

Well, help may be at hand. "Teacher" lives in the White House. His name is Ronald Reagan. And while his record on foreign policy may not provide a source of inspiration for most students of management, his performance on the domestic front has been a triumph. His tax program, in particular, represents a dazzling victory.

If President Reagan were to sit you down in the Oval Office and give you his guidelines for successful management, what might he say? His behavior, speeches, and even his ad libs provide a lot of clues:

1. For heaven's sake, smile a little. Don't always look like somebody just stepped on your foot. Most pictures of corporate presidents look like the executives were stuffed, powdered, and propped up in a high-backed chair under a painting of the company founder. People reflect the attitude of their leader. If you smile and look confident about what you're doing, people will smile back at you—and assume things are going well. Remember—you are perceived as a mirror image of "how the company is doing."

2. Let your people know what you stand for—but keep it simple. Too many companies expand in 19 different directions and then try to figure out what they've become. Figure out what you stand for—a "corporate positioning" it's called these days—then plan your growth. Write it out, in nice, simple language everybody can understand. The resulting "white paper" should be your manifesto describing exactly what kind of company you want to run. Even if you've been chief executive officer for 20 years, a corporate positioning will clarify your intent. Once you've decided on what you want your company to be, stick with it. Preach it from the house-tops.

Note: Reagan's "corporate position" has changed little since 1964 when he defined his philosophy in a speech supporting Barry Goldwater. His rallying cry: "Let's reduce taxes, strengthen our defense, and get the government out of your hair."

3. Don't discard your old timers. Many business executives have found that by the time they've really learned how to do it, they're too old to put it into practice. Don't throw away the wisdom that only experience can provide. If an ex-actor can run the country at 70, an able executive can run a company at 65.

Note: Reagan became governor of California at 55.

4. When you get a new job, get a fast start. Show people you know precisely where you're going. Employees expect change

when a new executive arrives. The longer you wait to implement your program, the less decisive you seem. Write your action plan so you can make assignments the first hour of the first day on the job.

Note: On his first working day in the Oval Office, Reagan ordered the replacement of almost 1,000 federal executives, reduced government agency travel allowances by 15 percent, and slashed the budget for outside consultants. They were not historic actions, but thoroughly decisive and symbolic ones.

5. Never underestimate the power of a speech. One superb speech can cap a career of save one. Choose your speaking invitations strategically, and when you have an influential audience, be certain you have an important speech (remember, your employees are a very influential audience).

Note: Reagan has literally ridden his voice to the White House, starting in 1964 when he addressed the Republican National Convention and ignited the cause of conservatism. In 1976, as the Republicans were nominating Gerald Ford, Reagan captured their emotions with another eloquent call to conservative arms. In 1980, he beat Jimmy Carter by talking about the future, using many of the same thoughts he used in 1964. His television address on July 27 produced a flood of public support for his tax package and gave him the "grass roots" vote. After that, congressional opposition faded.



THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN THE OVAL OFFICE

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6. Use simple words that will stir the emotions. Too many executive sound like they were born in a computer.

Ten-dollar words may make you sound like a brain, but nobody's going to know what you're talking about. *Synergism, Colloquy, Parameters, Dichotomies, Interpersonal Relationship, Viable Alternatives*. Ordinary people simply don't talk like that. Keep in mind that most stockholders are ordinary people.

Note: In his final debate with Jimmy Carter, Reagan summed up by asking: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago?" Some experts believe those highly personal lines gave Reagan the election.

7. Never apologize for what you are. If you got fired from your previous presidency, forget it. Lot of other presidents did, too.

Note: In every political race that Reagan has entered, his opponents have tried to undercut his candidacy by called him an extractor. It has never had the slightest perceptible effect when the votes were counted.

8. Never hesitate to pick up the phone and sell somebody your program. People like to be called by their leader—even if the leader is going to promote something. Don't confuse them with a slew of adjectives. It's an old business adage—more than two objectives is no objective. Keep it simple-minded, and keep repeating it.

Surprise your prospects and customers with an occasional call, too. One of the most successful advertising agency presidents I ever knew would call up a prospective client and say, "Charlie, what do we have to do to get some business out of your company? We've been pounding on your door for five years—making presentations, giving you ideas—isn't it about time you unlocked the door and gave us one product to handle?" It didn't work all the time, but it worked often enough.

Note: Reagan has brought personal salesmanship into the White House, and given it out in huge doses.

The President's sweeping victory for his tax program represented a stunning testimony to his skills as presidential salesman. Even Tip O'Neil calls him "a supersalesman."

9. Pour on the praise. "Praise from the boss" may be the strongest motivating force in the civilized world. A congratulatory note or call will take 30 seconds of your time. The employee who receives it will never forget it.

Note: Reagan uses praise almost instinctively. When his package of tax cuts passed the Senate Finance Committee by 19 to 1, he called Bob Dole, the committee chairman and praised him for steering the package through. "A tremendous job," he told the Senator. Praise solidifies loyalties.

10. Delegate responsibility to those you trust and don't stew about their decisions. The most effective executives reserve their energies for the critical issues and walk away from the details. The less effective executives preach "delegation" and never leave the office.

Note: Reagan practices delegation to a degree that the White House has not seen in years. He keeps regular office hours. He takes extended vacations. When American planes shot down two Libyan jet fighters earlier this month, the President's aides—confident in their roles and responsibilities—didn't even bother to notify him until the following morning.

11. Be more of what you are, not less. There's nothing wrong with saying, "For gosh sake's." if that's what you feel like saying. Don't think you have to come on like a silver-tongued orator. Come on like a human being.

Note: One of the great campaign stories about Reagan goes like this: At the end of one of his countless campaign speeches, a woman of about 80 spoke up from somewhere in the audience. "Reagan, everything you've said sounds just fine. But what about the old folks? Haven't you forgotten about us?" Reagan looked down at her, smiled and said, "Forget you? Heavens, how could I ever forget you? I am one of you."