

CEO TO CEO

Assisting business leaders as they navigate critical passages

February 25th, 2009



Everyone keeps thinking that I must be busy with turnaround work, helping all my clients survive. While its true that many of my clients are not accelerating as fast as in years past, most of them are running solid, healthy businesses. All of my clients have plans and are working hard on their own. The mindset that everyone is starving and the end is near is defeatist. I just can't think that way. My work continues to be interesting and brisk, and here are a few examples of where my clients are taking me.

The INSOMNIA Factor

What keeps CEOs **AWAKE AT NIGHT**
—and what to do about it.

Getting Un-Stuck

By Robert Sher

My clients are all very bright. Sometimes too bright. Which means that sometimes they over-think issues, and hesitate to act because all the pros and cons are rattling around in their head, often in the middle of the night when they are supposed to be sleeping. This leaves them stuck.

I started thinking about this all because one of my clients seems to have become fond of saying, "Rob, let's get together next week because I'm stuck on a certain issue, and you can draw content out of my brain in record time, then help me put a process around it so my team can jump in effectively. In truth, I do this often with many of

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When Clients aren't Paranoid enough

Two clients were just too optimistic. They kept thinking they would sell their way out of losses. And they will, but not before they cut away enough to stop the losses. Each month I would rain on their parade emboldening them to cut harder and faster, and helping them find the way. And they have.

More marketing!

Now is NOT the time to stop marketing and selling. But it *is* the time to target really well, minimize waste, and intensify your efforts on the ideal prospects. I jumped in hands-on with one client, showing them the way forward.

Handoffs

When the chief executive hands off tasks and functions to others, it gets tricky. I helped one owner shift his personal focus back to sales while a trusted manager became the general manager. I assisted another under-

my clients. They need someone to listen very carefully and objectively, to add in experience and fresh perspectives, then debate the alternatives until a winning strategy emerges. It gets their business moving again, and helps them better leverage their teams. In the process, I'm learning—in this case about direct marketing on the internet—and I get to share what I learn with other, non-competing clients.

Knowledge flows both ways: From my clients to me, and from me to my clients. One of my early clients uses me less and less for business planning because he watched and emulated my process, modified it to fit him and his company, and now does most of it on his own with his top team. I still facilitate the team meetings, and this client has me involved in other hot spots within the company. A second client is running planning all on his own in year two. I'm proud of this, and this is the outcome I seek in most of my clients.

All this got me thinking about ***why businesses, or projects, or business leaders get stuck from time to time.*** I'm often brought in help get things un-stuck, and part of the job is to understand why they are stuck in the first place.

I've observed that they are stuck because:

1. They don't know quite where they want to go. Many firms have trouble debating and completing their strategic planning before they start to execute. So the priorities aren't clear, and get changed often. Effort is dissipated.
2. They don't have money or time to get

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stand subordinates' needs for process and structure to hit the quality standards that the client had achieved when he used to do it himself.

Is the re-organization working?

The CEO mandated shifting to cross-functional teams so that the customers would have a better experience. Two pilot teams were kicked off, but the organization was showing signs of being apprehensive about the full roll out. I interviewed 16 people to draw out the concerns and successes and wrote up my findings and suggested actions. Now things are moving forward at a more aggressive pace.

All Hell broke loose

Tough times bring out the worst in people. My client sold his business, but the buyer wasn't doing what he was supposed to do. As things started to unwind, I was there, a phone call away, helping add perspective in several dicey situations. The sun is now peeking out from the clouds in this situation.

Recent and Upcoming Presentations

- ◆ 2/14/09: Guest Speaker at St. Mary's Capstone Strategy course for executive MBA
- ◆ 5/5/09: Teach at UCSC Extension MILE program; Business Planning in Action.
- ◆ March 09: The Alliance of Chief Executives is launching a quarterly group for chief executives running emerging businesses and I've been asked to lead it. If you know someone that might be interested, please let me know and I'll connect them to the right people at the Alliance.

Honor Roll of Referrers

Thank you to those that have referred me to

there. This is the case for nearly everybody, but some think they have to throw big bucks at everything to move the ball forward. Often careful prioritizing and ruthless focus can collect enough resources to move the needle.

3. They don't have experience in making this journey and can't get started in earnest. Often this is a confidence issue in leadership, or a lack of certain competencies. I've nagged and chased after a number of clients on certain issues, but they never got started. Then, I jumped in and did it with them, and saw the big "aha!" on their face. Then they were unstuck, and ran the ball forward thereafter just fine.

4. Leadership thinks they have tried everything (without luck) and can't believe that there is any other way to do better. These leaders rarely hire someone like me because they figure an outsider could never help. Trust me, there almost always is a way to do it better. If you've been in your saddle too long, get some outside influence in, and take some measured risks. Or you'll be condemned to repeat last year. Again and again. (I've been there!)
5. It's impossible to get there, but they don't realize it. Hey, not every business can satisfy the ambitions of its owner. Some businesses are MUCH harder than others, and even if you're a genius, you'll only make meager returns. Sometimes you need to move on. Are you sure this particular business is your DESTINY?

an opportunity!

- ◆ Carl Santa Maria, President, Santa Maria Risk and Insurance, www.santamariarisk.com
- ◆ Scott Smith, Esq., Partner, Hanson Bridgett, www.hansonbridgett.com
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- ◆ Bob Karr, CEO; LinkSV, www.linkSV.com
- ◆ Dave Seldon, Alliance Director (3x)
- ◆ Laura Roden, Founder and Managing Principal, VC Prive, www.VCPrive.com

Please call, e-mail or let's get together.

Do you see yourself in one of these five "stuck" patterns—or know someone who is? You could:

- A. Stay up all night thinking about it.
- B. Ask your peer group —like your Alliance of Chief Executives group to be candid and tell you if they think you are stuck, and what to do about it.
- C. Ask your business mentors or trusted advisors if you are stuck, and what to do about it.
- D. Call me. I routinely spend an hour or two with CEOs or business owners to get to know them and bang around their issues. No charge. If you like what I say, you might ask me back....
- E. All of the above, or better yet, B thru D.

2008 may go down in the record books as the year many businesses got stuck, or worse, blown backwards. Let's make 2009 the year where we all re-gain our momentum. Good luck!