The Future of the Executive and Assistant Relationship: Are You Up for It?

How the relationship between you and your executive assistant evolves, will depend on where the two of you together decide to take it. What does the future look like? Is it more of the same, or have you realized that in order to move ahead successfully, you have to trust deeply and rely on each other? Guy Munnoch, the former CEO for Zurich Insurance South Africa, told me, “Trust, integrity, commitment are the fundamentals that allow two people to operate in close proximity to each other. Without them there can be no relationship.” Guy said he had “full confidence” in everything his assistant, Shehnaaz Loonat, undertook and that as the relationship developed, “We knew exactly what the other required and could almost finish each other’s sentences.” Shehnaaz added that trust is a vital ingredient in the relationship because it allows the assistant to do their job proudly, giving them confidence. “Trust and integrity allow the relationship to develop into a special bond,” said Shehnaaz.

Reverend John Pellowe of the Canadian Council of Christian Charities is another enlightened CEO who knows that if he’s to maximize his productivity and grow his ministry, he needs to partner with an exceptional assistant who can help him make that leap. Borrowing author Michael Gerber’s business analogy, he told me, “Before I hired Bonnie, two-thirds of my time was spent working in the business, on
non-CEO duties such as writing content for our seminars, magazine, and website, and 5 percent of my time working on the business doing organizational development, strategy, and innovation. In the seven months since Bonnie started, I have a little more than doubled the time spent working on the business to 11 percent. Bonnie and I already have a great partnership that is continuing to grow. This level of partnership doesn’t just happen; it develops over time as the executive assistant grows in understanding of the executive and the executive learns to trust the assistant.”

Executives like Reverend Pellowe understand that to enhance their productivity, they need to hire a top-quality assistant and then get out of their way. Work with your assistant to develop an effective partnership that will give both of you the opportunity to accelerate, flourish, and have a sense of purpose in your specific functions, while supporting each other in your common goals. In such an environment, work is rewarding, joyful, and fun. This has got to be our collective goal for the future of work.

I’m a fan of Jack Welch. I will sit for hours and watch videos of his interviews. Time and again I’ve heard him say, “take swings,” “get in the arena,” “shake things up a little,” “get in the skin of your people.”  You’ll never know what your assistant can do if you don’t give them a chance to take a swing. Not just what they can do, but what you can do too, if you stop allocating time to tasks your assistant can be doing. Aren’t you the least bit curious about where that can lead? If delegating doesn’t come easily to you, then take incremental steps in that direction and enlist your assistant to help you in letting go. A small risk can result in big rewards for you. I’m confident your exceptional assistant is ready and waiting for you to let them unleash their potential, so get out of your imagined comfort zone, and into the maximum performance zone.

Let’s Do This Together

At Salesforce.com, they write their Corporate Objectives and their Personal Objectives annually. Everyone in the company does them.