



Riding Shotgun

By Nate Bennett and Stephen A. Miles

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MANY PEOPLE view the COO as the person who toils away in the engine room making sure the ship is running while the CEO is on the bridge plotting the course and reveling in the glory of success. Lately, researchers and authors have dared to ask, “Is the role of the COO situational?” It turns out the answer is a resounding “Yes.”

Most important, the authors discuss the reasons for even considering the COO position.

Management scholars Donald C. Hambrick and A.A. Canella Jr. discussed this “unexplored structural form” in 2004 (“CEOs Who Have COOs: Contingency Analysis of an Unexplored Structural Form,” *Strategic Management Journal*, October 2004). Now from Nate Bennett, a professor of management at Georgia Tech, and Stephen Miles, a partner at Heidrick & Struggles, comes a quick read on the subject called *Riding Shotgun: The Role of the COO*. This book summarizes the authors’ interviews of CEOs and COOs to shed light on the range of expectations for the COO role, as well as responsibilities and relationships.

On the basis of their interviews and observations, the authors conclude that there

are three clear models for the COO, should a CEO and board decide to have one:

- The COO as Mr. Inside;
- The two-in-a-box model (co-leaders); and
- The situational model.

They conclude the situational model is the most prevalent, and then describe some well-known situations in which the role and relationships worked well or did not work so well. They point out that some CEOs prefer operational unit heads as direct reports; that way the CEO does not lose touch with the business, thus minimizing the need for a COO. For CEOs who do choose to work with a COO, the authors point out the (fairly obvious) factors likely to lead to success: delineation of responsibilities, development of a trusting relationship, limited skill set overlap, strong and effective communications, and office proximity.

Most important, the authors discuss the reasons for even considering the COO position. Does the CEO need help with the workload, complementary skills, a potential successor-in-training, or even a more experienced mentor who will not be a succession candidate?

Riding Shotgun concludes



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Excerpt: “The first thing that I did at Sun was to understand what Scott McNealy was going to do and what I was going to do. My job was not to be him.... What a COO does is just what the job says — operations, i.e., execution of the plan. To me, it was very simple. I had to make the quarters, get the products out the door, hire the right people, and organize according to the business plan.”

— Ed Zander, former COO of Sun Microsystems and now chairman and CEO of Motorola.

that the success and impact of the relationship should be thought of as related to fit between the two top executives, the capabilities of the COO in relationship to the reason the position is established, and a match between the COO’s aspirations and the company’s plans for that person.

There is a need for a discussion of the COO subject. The interviews — with Ed Zander of Motorola, Carol Bartz of Autodesk, Maynard Webb of eBay, and Jim Donald of Starbucks, among others — were the best part of the book. I found the authors’ conclusions obvious, but maybe that’s because I’ve been thinking about this since the 1960s, when I would drive my dad’s overpowered ’57 Ford and a number of friends would call, “I’ve got shotgun” as I considered who I would trust in the front seat with me. ■

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