

Watching the boss's back

By Ann-Maree Moodie
MyCareer

Behind every great business leader is a trusted pillar of support, writes Ann-Maree Moodie.

Asked if she knows what her boss is thinking, how his meeting went or whether she can tell if he is tired by the way he looks when he enters the office, "Claudia" answers with a laugh: "I can tell by the way he walks how his day is going," she says.

Such is the magic that exists between a boss and an executive assistant (EA), especially the pairs who have worked together for years. In Claudia's case, she and her boss, who is the chairman of several listed-company, government and non-profit organisation boards, have worked together for more than 20 years.

Claudia has seen massive technological change during her career. When she started, she had a typewriter and a telephone on her desk. Today, she operates knowing that her boss's calls can go straight to him on his mobile phone, rather than through her.

"Sometimes I do have to rely on him to tell me what's going on," she says, "but he does refer people to me for the diary."

A director of the Executive Assistant Network, Jonathan McIlroy, says a chairman or chief executive who has worked with the same EA for a long time would describe the relationship as "the most profound and significant they have outside their families".

"The levels of trust, mutual understanding, shared history and experiences mean that few people truly understand the complex nature of the relationship that can develop over time between an executive and their EA," McIlroy says.

"Once the relationship has deepened to where the EA is trusted implicitly, the chairman or the CEO will feel at ease in asking them to handle certain types of issues, in instructing them to act in their stead at less important meetings or to have faith in how they will interact with other senior executives or with clients."

After a tumultuous five years for business globally, it's unsurprising that chairmen and CEOs have taken a beating. But when a business leader holds a title of authority, showing weakness can be a fatal flaw at work, except to one person: the EA.

"Many executives have their own very human traits that include loneliness, stress and anxiety that many might perceive as weaknesses but are inevitable aspects of being human," McIlroy says.

"Often the EA can see how periods of stress or difficult decisions are affecting the executive psychologically and physiologically before they even realise it themselves. They can act to help support the executive in many subtle ways to help relieve some of the burden.

"But sometimes their support function is far more overt, where the executive sees the EA as the one true ally and confidant with whom they discuss the issues that they may not feel confident discussing with other executives or managers. This is especially so if it relates to decisions that may affect certain staff members or groups within a company on a personal level.

"In these circumstances it is important to realise that the executive typically wouldn't be looking for the assistant to help them make decisions; although their advice and counsel would certainly be heeded, it is more that they are just a person the executive can open up to and confide in."

All top-performing executive assistants share common attributes: they are efficient and organised, loyal, discreet, flexible and they can think in detail as well as in the big picture. The best, though, have something extra.

"This sense of an X-factor probably comes in the form of someone who has all of these attributes but also has incredible business acumen, intuition and awareness," McIlroy says.

“They are capable of understanding everything they and their boss do in the context of the competing priorities of the executive and the business in respect of their overall strategic goals and objectives. This means an EA with an X-factor is someone who is politically astute. They can manage the complexities of being loyal to the executive while at times having to work effectively with those the executive may be having issues with.”

Mergers and acquisitions, boardroom crises and deal-making are all part of an EA's working life when the boss is a chairman or chief executive. The depth and breadth of their knowledge is formidable, but only equalled by their commitment to perhaps their greatest attribute: confidentiality.

“If there is a company about to be taken over or there's other things that are going to happen, you just have to keep whatever you hear to yourself, or forget you've heard it,” Claudia says. “Or you wait to see what happens with what you have heard. There are things that I don't tell my family and then it will be announced and they'll ask, ‘Did you know about that?’ and I'll say, ‘No, not necessarily.’”

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