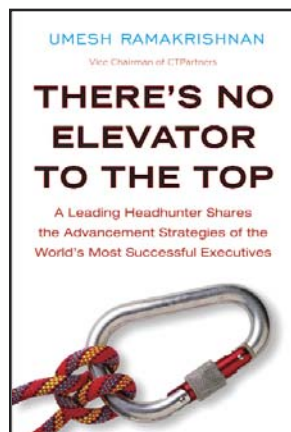


Up the Ladder, Step by Step

Executive talent is more than adopting emergency measures or making desperate requests for loans.

By PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON



Modern business careers are more like climbing a rock face than a flight of stairs, says John Kealey, the former CEO of iDirect and one of the many executives interviewed by Umesh Ramakrishnan for "There's No Elevator to the Top." Instead of plodding one's way upward, the ambitious careerist must now learn to shimmy sideways now and then, and even downward, if he wishes, eventually, to reach the pinnacle. At this dreary moment in economic

history, a few lessons in the versatility and flexibility required of executives are well worth reading.

Mr. Ramakrishnan, a corporate head-hunter, has trolled the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin America asking questions of a wide range of CEOs, all of them heads of large firms but few known well beyond their narrow spheres. He asks them all what it takes to become a CEO and then to do the job effectively. He has certainly done his leg-work. The book is rich in personal anecdotes, which more than make up for the occasional slip into corporate hack-speak. Do we ever need to hear another businessperson compare his work to "drinking from a fire hose"?

In his introduction, Mr. Ramakrishnan makes the excellent point that "when the economy is doing well, you tend to meet leaders who are people-oriented, persuasive, and sensitive. When the economy dips, the leaders in greatest demand are those who are tough, exacting, and able to make the really difficult calls that can affect large numbers of people." We are clearly now in a dipping situation, and the last thing the business world is concerned with is once popular terms like "emotional intelligence" and "corporate social responsibility." It is high season for cost-cutters and job-slashers. But "There's No Elevator to the Top" takes a broader view of executive talent the ability to adopt emergency measures or make desperate requests for loans.

Some of the lessons are straight from Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac." Work hard at what's in front of you. Make sure you succeed at the task you are given rather than waste time plotting

your next move. Play to your strengths and repair your weaknesses. Never stop learning. Look after yourself physically, with lots of sleep and exercise. Treat the acquisition of business skills as if you were an artisan learning a craft. Hard-won skills will always be in demand.

Familiar truisms, yes, but Mr. Ramakrishnan conducts a chorus of seasoned executives to deliver them in a fresh way. In a chapter on the importance of being a team player and not challenging a decision once it has been made, he quotes Terry Marks, the president of Coca-Cola, who compares the process of group decision-making to football players breaking the huddle -- they have agreed on a course of action and had better follow it. "When we break the huddle, when we leave there, everybody runs the play. And the analogy is . . . that if the quarterback thinks you're running a post and you run a curl, well, you're going to have an interception. So, if anybody misses their assignment we've blown it, and you've let everybody else around you down, not just yourself."

One of the most interesting characters in the book is Francois Barrault, the blunt-spoken CEO of British Telecom Global Services. Mr. Barrault is an exercise fanatic who believes in preparing like an athlete for the different seasons of the business year, the periods when he will be on the road and those when he will be in his office. He also trusts in old-fashioned intellectual horsepower and data-driven thinking to uncover unexpected truths. He describes meeting the chairman of Nestle, who complains that his rivals are no longer Mars or Pepsi but telephone companies. "Five years ago seventy percent of the pocket money of kids was to buy chocolates, ice cream; now eighty percent is in telecom," the Nestle boss tells Mr. Barrault. "Can you imagine the impact for my business?"

In a discussion of work-life balance, Mr. Ramakrishnan cites an American executive who prefers to talk about "work-life blend," which he demonstrates by taking his laptop and a stack of papers to work on during his son's baseball games. But then there is also the young, female executive of a Middle Eastern construction firm who has no time for such doubling-up. "I expect people's job to come first . . . over anything else: family, friends, social life, especially because of the stage where the company is now, because we're a young company, there's so much to do, I just expect that, and I'm very clear about it. I say to people, 'Listen, over the next two or three years,

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you know, you have no life. You either accept it or you don't.' " At least you know where you are in such a business.

Mr. Ramakrishnan also finds CEOs stressing the importance of communication in their jobs and the strange truth that, when they arrive at the top, these men and women do not feel like the boss so much as the slave to a slew of constituencies who all demand attention. Among the more concrete pieces of advice these chief executives

offer those on the way up is to take difficult assignments and to gain global experience. Also, they say, pay attention to every corner of your company, down to the person who cleans your offices at night. Few executives bother, but those who do are better equipped to make decisions. Given how little many financial-services executives seemed to know about the guts of their business -- like the risks involved in taking on mortgage-related debt -- this piece of advice may be the most useful of all.