

## Playing “Second Fiddle”: How to be an effective No. 2

*“In a world of increasing interdependence and ceaseless technological change, even the greatest of Men or Women simply can ’ t get the job done alone.”* **Warren Bennis**

How true! Gone are the days of the lone ranger, charismatic CEOs. In fact, sometimes, in the long run, they can become a liability. In this article, I would like to make a case for co-leaders – the making of a No. 2. Why do we need co-leadership?

In his landmark study on co-leadership, Warren Bennis declares that in most corporations, their effectiveness are due to a good No. 2<sup>1</sup>. For example, Bill Gates of Microsoft has a Steve Ballmore. Andy Grove of Intel has Craig Barrett. Robert Guizueta of Coke company has a Douglas Investor. These co-leaders play pivotal roles in their respective corporations and have contributed significantly to their successes.

What makes a good No. 2?

### 1. Making the primary leader more accountable

Courage is a great attribute of a co-leader. Effective chief executives demand honesty from their adjuncts, knowing that good information, no matter how painful and unpleasant, is the basis for good decision-making.

### 2. Keeping confidence

Trusted co-leaders are often privy to confidential information and share their leaders’ agonies as they work alongside their chief executives. They know that such confidential information if shared or made public would seriously undermine the leadership of the chief executive or compromise the organization’s position. As candid as they can be in private, they are discreet in public as long as they are able to do so without compromising their own integrity. This is an important but tough line to maintain.

### 3. Maintaining unusually healthy egos

Co-leaders are prepared to suppress their own egos so that their chiefs can shine and achieve the organization’s goals. They don’t need the number one position even though many people think they should. Especially in a society that pushes us to be number one, it takes extraordinary strength to play second fiddle, which is incidentally the most difficult part to play in the orchestra. No matter how great a contribution the co-leaders make, the accolade often goes to the chief executives. What co-leaders do is more important than merely making headlines.

#### 4. **Having complementary strengths**

Co-leaders compensate for the primary leaders' weaknesses and darker sides. They affirm their leaders' strengths, without undermining their weaknesses but seek to complement them. They may have strengths and competencies that their leaders lack. Hence, co-leaders help to share the burden and lighten the load of leadership.

#### 5. **Building synergistic relationships**

Leaders and co-leaders have healthy mutual respect for each other. They sometimes set themselves up as healthy rivalries but never take criticisms personally. They have the organization's best interests at heart.

#### 6. **Serving as sounding boards for wise decision making**

Two wise heads are better than one when it comes to decision-making. Co-leaders serve as advisors as well as provide the kind of candid, informed counsel that every leader needs. They serve as sounding boards, counselors, 'pressure valve relievers', and 'lightning rods' in bad times. In good times, they are genuine partners, though not necessarily equal ones, sharing responsibilities with the chief according to their individual skills and interests.

Hence, great seconds can serve as an institutional insurance in that they can get up to speed to replace the chief executives if necessary. In fact, true leaders know that the only deputies worth hiring are the ones good enough to replace them. More and more organizations are realizing that willingness to share power is one of the criteria by which great leaders are to be judged.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Heenan, D.A. & Bennis, W. 1999. *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships*. Wiley & Sons. New York. USA.

<sup>ii</sup> Heenan, D.A. & Bennis, W. 1999. *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships*. Wiley & Sons. New York. USA.