

# Secrets of a CEO: 10 things HR needs to know

Ever wonder what your CEO is thinking and what he or she wants from you?

Sue Meisinger, a consultant and former CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), has sat on both sides of the CEO/HR fence. At this summer's SHRM conference in Las Vegas, Meisinger cited 10 things your CEO will likely never say to you, but you need to understand:

- 1. CEOs want concrete info before making decisions.** They don't care that a new computer system will make life easier for you or your staff; they want to know the ROI and the effect on staffing. Plus, remember to circle back and say, "Remember that decision we made. Here's the ROI from it."
- 2. How legitimately hard the CEO job is.** "Be willing to step up and have the courage to make tough decisions," says Meisinger. Instead of just explaining a problem to the CEO, "Help them. Tell them 'This is what I think the right answer is.'"
- 3. They're desperate for ideas and any competitive information.** "HR needs to bring ideas to the table, and don't just limit yourself to HR stuff," she says. "Know the business. Bring your curiosity to the meeting and share your knowledge." *Tip:* Read the same trade publications as your CEO.
- 4. CEOs don't understand what you do and don't care.** Most CEOs wonder if HR people understand the business side. Brush up on your business acumen. Leave the HR speak at the door and "stay focused on what keeps the CEO up at night."
- 5. They think of you as a cost center.** Never lose sight that salaries and benefits are the biggest expense of a business. "Be able to articulate what you do as it relates to the bottom line, not how happy it makes the employees," she says. CEOs care about productivity so look for organizational efficiencies.
- 6. CEOs want to know what's going on in the business, but they don't have enough time** (or the skills). Help them stay connected. Give them insights into major life changes of employees (marriages, births). Bring them important conflicts that could affect the company—important stuff, not gossip.
- 7. They may not tell you who is on their "A" team** or which employees they're watching more closely. That's why it's important for you to simply be a useful, honest source of information on employees and execs. Don't try to interpret which employees the CEO is high or low on currently.
- 8. They don't feel they should have to give performance reviews.** "Pick your battles," she advises. "Recognize that all talent is not equal and that the CEO, in some respects, is right." So encourage the big boss to give feedback, but "don't get wrapped around what the CEO will perceive as the 'administrivia' of HR," says Meisinger.
- 9. They love and hate the board.** Understand that before the board meeting, the CEO needs a laser focus on that meeting and will push everything else aside. Make sure all information you provide for the meeting is

accurate so “your work doesn’t become the source of criticism of the CEO.”

**10. They won’t tell you what’s going on at home—or when they’re planning to leave.** And often new CEOs like to bring in their own HR person. Meisinger says, “Since you probably won’t know their plans, be sure you have your own plan. So network!”