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Check With My Chief Of Staff

Corporate executives want to sound presidential. In fact, they're tone deaf.

By JON PICOULT

Gone are the days when you could count the number of chiefs on one hand—CEO, CFO, COO, CMO, CIO. These days there's pretty much a chief for everything—Ethics, Risk, Diversity, Technology, Administration, People and more. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I saw a job posting for a "Chief Office Employee."

But now it seems that for every chief, there needs to be a chief of staff. Even people who aren't yet chiefs—vice presidents, managing directors and the like—are appointing chiefs of staff.

The allure is unmistakable. The title is linked in the public consciousness to the American presidency, where the position was created decades ago to help the most prominent chief executive in the world manage his affairs. It exudes presidential significance. Surely, anybody who has one must be incredibly important and busy.

More like tone deaf. The appointment of a chief of staff inserts a wedge between executives and everybody else in an organization. Chiefs of staff are gate keepers, arbiters of an executive's schedule, buffers that insulate the "chief" from all the staffers seeking attention.

The presence of a chief of staff is completely at odds with the image of accessibility and openness that so many executives work to promote. In this reality, an open-door policy means "check with my chief of staff and he'll decide whether to open the door."

With employee satisfaction at historic lows, and workers burdened by the stresses of the Great Recession, executives need to be especially sensitive to the signals they're sending. While they may view the chief of staff role as a legitimate management tool, the rank and file see it very differently. For them, it's just another sign of executives' inflated sense of self-importance, an illustration of their desire to appear—but not really be—accessible.

So if your focus is on looking presidential, then by all means appoint a chief of staff, schedule morning briefings, and request regular intelligence reports. But if your goal is to engage your work force with credible, authentic leadership, then consider putting one less barrier between you and your people.

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