

What leaders can do if they feel lonely at the top

February 27, 2005 (11:00:00 PM)

By: [Ian Palmer](#)

Faced with the unenviable task of assigning some employees to different teams, physically moving some workers, and demoting a personal friend of the boss' family, one executive turned to Dr. Judith Davis, psychologist, coach, and president of a consulting firm in Long Island, N.Y.

Dr. Davis, who avoided getting too specific about the aforementioned real-life situation, said the executive in question felt there was no one in the company -- whether her boss, employees, or peers -- with whom she could discuss the issues.

"In the situation described above, the executive and I used coaching sessions to anticipate some of the reactions her employees might have to being transferred," said Dr. Davis, who heads [Performance Development Associates](#). "We also talked about some of the factors motivating key employees. The executive considered how she could help her people understand that the new conditions would ultimately benefit them personally as well as the company."

Like the troubled executive worrying over how to execute change, many leaders in similar circumstances sometimes feel the pressure and, to make matters worse, feel they have no trusted peers with whom they can discuss these and other critical business issues, said Dr. Davis, adding that leaders who don't get help may end up becoming less effective executives.

Lena West, founder and CEO of [xynoMedia Technology](#) in Yonkers, N.Y., agreed with Dr. Davis' contention that leaders sometimes do feel there aren't enough trusted confidants to turn to when important business issues need to be talked about.

"As a C-level executive you do [sometimes] feel you have no one to rely on, and it's like you're on an island by yourself," said West, who learned the ins and outs of computers and networking while consulting for Fortune 500 companies such as IBM, Pitney Bowes, Philips Magnavox, Hyperion Software, and MasterCard International.

She has since surrounded herself with trustworthy advisors whom she can bounce ideas off of. Because the mentor-mentee relationship is one where the former is usually at least a couple steps ahead of the latter, the mentee often doesn't have to worry too much about the mentor stealing ideas, said West, stressing she listens to her inner voice and considers her gut instincts.

According to Paul Chen, president and CEO of Toronto, Ont.-based [Fortiva](#), which helps organizations to manage their electronic message archiving, leaders simply have to ask for help sometimes. Previously, Chen founded FloNetwork, serving as CEO and CTO. After raising over \$30 million from high-profile venture capital firms, he was instrumental in ultimately selling the business in 2001 to DoubleClick for \$80 million. Finding mentors and rubbing shoulders with other leaders, he said, helped him to handle some of the challenges that come with the territory.

"Being a leader is not all romantic," said Chen. "With the territory come loneliness, headaches, and responsibilities. At the same time, I'm very passionate about what I'm trying to do. It's great to lead a team into the battlefield and to come out alive."

[Sherri Olsen](#), a business coach based in Calgary, Alta., insisted that it's crucial for executives feeling under the weather to consult a coach who can help them through the process.

"A coach has the ability to get to the bottom of the issue and customize a solution for that person," said Olsen. "If I'm the president of a company, I may not want to admit fear. But I can say, 'It's lonely at the top,' because that's safe. A good coach gets to the real sore spot."

Dr. Davis recently developed a Business Coaching Forum that will give leaders from non-competing industries opportunities to meet and discuss business concerns in small groups.

As for the aforementioned executive who needed help in dealing with several personnel issues, she ultimately did follow through on the advice Dr. Davis provided.

"One of the people my client was concerned about was a man who was moving from a position where he had a bit of autonomy to a new job as a team member," said Dr. Davis. "The executive presented the change as an opportunity for him to learn important skills. This made the worker much more positive about the transition. Even the woman who had to be demoted was actually relieved at no longer having to try to function in a position for which she was poorly qualified. Her pay remained the same, and her new responsibilities were more enjoyable for her."

Ian Palmer is an IT business writer based near Toronto and a regular ITMJ contributor.