

# CEO Survey: Lacking the Human Touch

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When given a list of a dozen words to describe their CEO, only one in five employees picked “caring” or “warm.” (Small wonder that these words were picked twice as often by the CEOs asked to describe their own attributes.) In addition, nearly half of all employees surveyed gave the top boss a grade of C, D, or F for both compassion and communication. In terms of people skills, BNET’s survey suggests that bosses are falling well short of the mark.

## Top Likes and Dislikes

**Managers appreciate CEOs’ vision. Communication style? Not so much.**

“This is a real problem,” says Rafael Pastor, CEO of Vistage International, a networking organization for CEOs. “CEOs do not do a good enough job of inspiring their employees and making them feel important and valuable. Their soft skills are not as finely honed as their other business skills.”

Bad marks in these categories didn’t surprise Bob Sutton, a professor of management science at Stanford and author of the recent book, [“The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t.”](#) “There is plenty of research in social psychology that indicates that when you give people power, they become more focused on their needs and less on those of people around them,” he says. “Power tends to turn people into jerks.”

There are a variety of ways for a CEO to improve his or her interpersonal skills, but most revolve around this simple advice: If you are the CEO, you need to step out of the corner office and get more face time with the people who work for you. Parsing the results of the BNET survey clearly shows that employees who interact regularly with their CEOs had a significantly higher opinion of their job performance.

“If you’re getting bad evaluations in these soft skills, the first thing I would ask is, how much personal contact are you having with your employees?” management professor William Wallick says. “If you are not a personal presence in the lives of your employees, they are likely to form their impression from the stories they hear at the water cooler. Unfortunately, the grapevine traffics in bad news. People don’t gossip about the moments when the boss was a nice guy. What people talk about are the moments when the CEO messes up or behaves badly.”

Several experts warned that suddenly morphing into a nice guy isn’t likely to pass the smell test with the rank and file. Don’t try to fake a new warmth of character unless that is a true reflection of your personality. “The best advice is not changing your interpersonal behavior but simply having more of it on display,” says David Gliddon, a researcher in business innovation and a faculty member of Colorado Technical University. Management-by-walking-around doesn’t end with handshakes and the pats on the back. If the feedback that the CEO gets from lower level employees doesn’t become part of the decision-making process, employees will come to believe that the glad-handing is a sham.

Others point out, too, that it is very possible for a CEO to become too concerned with his or her popularity among the employees. "It is not a CEO's job to be liked," says author Michael Abrashoff. "The CEO is responsible for results, but you can't get results unless you have the respect of those who work for you. Gaining employees' respect is necessary for doing business, but simply being liked should not be on any CEO's to-do list."

"There are a lot of ineffectual nice guys out there," Pastor agrees. "Being liked is not necessarily going to solve the criticism of your employees. They want to know the CEO is effective and that they are going to do the right thing by the employee."

Indeed, the different perspectives of the CEO and the employee may explain some of the differences of opinions. "There is a strong component of selfishness in the employees' evaluation of their boss," says Pastor. "The employee is likely assessing their boss largely on whether the employee feels valued and properly rewarded. The employee wants to know: Does the CEO spend enough time with me? Do I have a way to move up in the organization?"

Chief executives, on the other hand, must juggle the demands of several constituencies at once. The CEO has to manage employees but also answer to shareholders and board of directors. They have to be an advocate for the customer as well as watch out for competition. These different pulls for attention and resources may mean that one or more of these groups feel ignored at times, all of which is to say that some disconnect between employee and CEO assessment is just part of the job.

There's another justifiable reason why CEOs tend to overestimate their abilities and attributes. All eyes are on the CEO all the time, and a baseline level of self-confidence is a prerequisite for the job. "You should have a leader who errs on the side of optimism about their own abilities," says Sutton. "No one wants a CEO who expresses crippling self-doubt the moment things go wrong. You have to act like you're in charge even when you don't know what is going on. Sometimes you have to fake it until you make it."