



By Diana Olsen

Summoning Shakespeare

Editor's Note: This article is Part II of a two-part series. Part I, which focused on the power of executive peer groups, ran in the October issue.

How did 36 CEOs find themselves in a conference room discussing the merits and failures of Hamlet as a leader? The retreat they were attending, an annual event for CEO Roundtables LLC, was designed to take the executives out of their business mindset and get them to think about leadership issues using one of Shakespeare's most famous characters.

The play

At the start of the retreat, two Shakespearean actors presented a significantly shortened version of "Hamlet." Afterward, discussions centered on Prince Hamlet's failure to act swiftly to avenge his father's death. In the play, the former king visits Hamlet as a ghost, telling him who the killer is, but Hamlet still hesitates to take action. His inaction leads to the downfall of his family, and ultimately himself.

However, the conversation in the retreat conference room wasn't limited to kings and princes. The executives examined the role of action and hesitation in their own decision-making process. And they pondered the nature of their own ghosts: Are they real or imaginary? How do they affect business decisions?

When Loren Carlson founded CEO Roundtables in 1996, he wanted to create a forum for CEOs of non-competing companies to share business advice and discuss problems. He now has five groups of CEOs, who meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues such as hiring senior managers, company vision and financial reporting.

The monthly roundtables help executives build a foundation of trust throughout the year. But the annual retreats help executives engage in a different kind of discourse. "If we hadn't already established the trust at the roundtables, I'm not sure we would have the authentic conversations that we have at the retreats," said Carlson. "When we talk about art or literature, those discussions require a tremendous amount of confidence and trust among CEOs."

"Retreats help people get out of the business mode and get into the humanities. I feel that humanities have a lot to offer CEOs," Carlson commented.

The poet

"I have a fundamental belief in the difference between wisdom and knowledge. The arts are a better and surer path to wisdom than a business course. You access wisdom through metaphor and story," said Carlson.

"In today's business world, things are changing so much that the language we use cannot keep up with what is really going on," Carlson added. He brought in poet David White to address that point. "We needed to look for a new language, and when you look for something new, you frequently find it in the old." In fact, one of the oldest surviving Anglo-Saxon poems — "Beowulf" — helped the executives look at the dangers of the business world in a new way.

"Beowulf," an epic poem, tells the tale of a king and his warriors who are terrorized by Grendel, a powerful ogre. Beowulf, a great warrior from abroad, arrives to help the men defeat Grendel. When Beowulf injures Grendel in a fight, the real enemy comes to light.

Grendel's mother, an unknown beast who lives deep in an unexplored swamp, ultimately poses a greater threat to the men.

"The real danger is not Grendel, because we have the weapons and the knowledge needed to defeat Grendel. The real danger is Grendel's mother. We don't have the weapons to fight his mother in a new environment," explained Carlson.

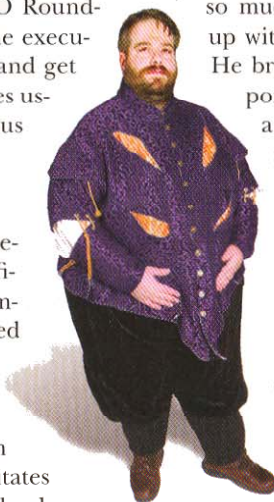
"We came out of the retreat with a common language that we used throughout the next year. One of our most common questions was 'But do you know where Grendel's mother is?' when we talked about going into unknown business circumstances," Carlson noted.

The jazz combo

Carlson said his next retreat will center on a jazz combo. "The old metaphor for a CEO used to be a conductor. I think a more accurate metaphor is a jazz combo. The leader sets the tempo and parameters, but every person in the group is free to improvise within that framework."

Carlson's jazz retreat may take a while to plan, but like any work of art or literature, it's sure to spark the imagination and drive thoughtful discussion. ■

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Using art and literature, executives access a deeper understanding of business challenges.