

The Six Essential Roles of the CEO  
By Marissa Levin, CEO, Information Experts

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending the Vistage All-City 2010 event in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Hundreds of CEOs gathered for networking and education. The speaker was Lawrence King, CEO of King Strategic Development, and the topic was “Building an Entrepreneurial Team for Strategic Success.” I remember thinking how fortuitous the timing was for me, because as Information Experts sits on the threshold of another growth spurt, I constantly think about how important it is to have the right leadership team in place.

The information presented was so immensely helpful, and I made a mental note to share it with my readers because regardless of where you are in your business lifecycle, all entrepreneurs can benefit from these valuable concepts.

Vistage surveyed **10,000 CEOs across 6 continents over 4 years** and learned how to define the Role of the CEO.

### **The Role of the CEO**

How should the CEO of an organization invest his or her time so that it best meets the needs of the organization? I've been struggling with the question since I put in place a solid executive leadership team to handle day-to-day operations. What's left for me to do? How can I be the most useful, and get out of the way of everyone else in my firm so that they can succeed? Here are the 6 roles that King identified, and I can substantiate these through my own experiences.

1. **Strategist.** My role is to set the future direction of the company, and determine where our future profit margins are coming from. What customer problems will I solve? As Strategist, I need to always be working to answer these questions.

2. **Ambassador.** As CEO, I need to visit with our most important customers/clients. Not making sales calls; simply visiting with them. As Ambassador, I need to provide a continuous stream of value and build their trust levels. I should work to be seen as a “trusted advisor” and help them solve their most challenging problems.

3. **Inventor.** As CEO, I should be the Chief Innovator. What new products and services should we consider based on our customer needs? This doesn't mean that I have to come up with these solutions. Instead, it means that I must create a culture that facilitates creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and innovation. In addition, I should establish processes to evaluate new ideas, and for those that are viable, enable a path to development or implementation.

4. **Coach.** I should be evaluating and creating avenues to develop my people. I need to be out there closely interacting with my team and functioning as the internal Chief Education Officer. I need to get out of the day-to-day operations, and focus on the development of those supporting me. I should be providing informative sessions on topics such as “Where is our industry going?” “The financial model of our company: how we make money and what you can do about it,” “The role of the CEO,” “Why urgency matters – the link between urgency and economic security,” and other topics that reflect the CEO's responsibilities.

5. **Investor.** All CEOs should be good balance sheet managers, and should spend more time understanding the balance sheet – even if they have a financial team.

6. **Student.** CEOs must engage in continuous professional development to learn best practices to bring back to the workplace. In addition, I must develop expectations for my key leaders so that they too have a commitment to professional development. I need to ask them, “What are you going to learn that will help you become a better leader?” And then I need to help them engage in the learning opportunities to achieve this.

As businesses evolve, one of the biggest transitions that occur is the shift from sole practitioner to manager, and then to hands-off CEO. This will be an in-depth topic of a future column. It is a transition that, again speaking from experience, many new business owners don’t think about when launching their own firm.

They launch a company because they have a passion for a specific skill-set and unique talent that they want to bring to market, and the idea of not performing the work really doesn’t surface until it’s time add employees to manage the workload. So subtly and gradually, as a business grows, the owner shifts from hands-on responsibilities to administrative and management responsibilities.

If the business continues to grow, there will be yet another shift, and that is one from management to leadership – which is much more strategic but moves the owner even further away from the day-to-day operations.

These crossroads raise questions and dilemmas. Questions such as these often surface:

- “What should my day look like?”
- “What are my responsibilities?”
- “Where do I fit in?”
- “What value do I bring to the organization?”
- “How do I build/maintain the culture I want through the organization’s growth?”
- “How do I keep my finger on the pulse of the company without micro-managing?”
- “Is this really what I want to be doing?”

Clearly defined responsibilities like those that King identified are immensely helpful for CEOs that are on the cusp of growth, and are questioning what their role is in the larger picture. It is often difficult to realize when and how we need to get out of our own way to continue on the path of success and growth.

While I naturally fill almost all of the roles, I had not clearly labeled the roles prior to this point. Clear definition of the various roles provides a strategic roadmap, which ultimately benefits me personally, and also benefits my company.

At the end of the day, the success and failures that occur in an organization fall on the shoulders of the CEO. These roles are truly clear-cut strategies to maximize the talent, capabilities, and infrastructure that CEOs have built over the years, can minimize growing pains, and will continue to pave the way for future growth.

I welcome your comments on how you see the role of the CEO in your organization.