

# Time to perform

DANIELA BEYROUTI talks to Susanne Mueller Zantop, founder of CEO Positions, about getting the best performance from CEOs

**Daniela:** CEO Positions is a firm specialising in Reputation Management projects, which includes CEO Positioning, Stakeholder Management and Video Messaging. You are the founder, the Chairwoman and major shareholder of the firm. Tell us about your background and what led you to create CEO Positions.

**Susanne:** It all started when someone asked me if I knew someone at a particular company. I apologised and said: "I only know the CEO." I realised that my network was mostly CEOs. Then I thought: "Wow,

that's probably not so bad. Why don't I do something with it?" It all came together: my previous work as a journalist and as an analyst, always asking questions and then, when I switched sides, my role in a large corporation where I helped the CEOs prepare to talk to analysts and journalists. All this led to deep insights: how different CEOs performed on stage and in different environments. One may perform well in the boardroom but fail on a stage – or vice versa – and it was quite unpredictable. I watched CEOs in different environments and

tried to understand what the reasons were – which then led to the creation of CEO Positions in 2006.

**Daniela:** It's a familiar story: candidates often behave very differently when they meet with us to how they are in an interview setting with a client. You offer a combination of highly analytical technology tools and an advisory service, either on a one-to-one basis, in a group or in workshops. How do these two approaches fit?

**Susanne:** The analytical technology plays an important role in finding out how we →

## Communication

can make a CEO shine. How can we understand what kind of individual communicative identity this person has? What are the best communication tools? We don't want to mould someone, just understand what communication style fits their personality best.

The questionnaire covers everything: from childhood – whether you liked to play theatrical plays in your childhood, if you hated your parents fighting at home – until your very last performance as a CEO and how you felt about it: did you have a sore throat afterwards or were your eyes dry?

**Daniela:** And what do you do with these analytical results?

**Susanne:** We come up with an individual profile of this particular person on where he or she performs best, and then we suggest how he/she can create this environment more often. This reduces training and preparation time and minimises nervousness and anxiety. It also helps to focus on the message and the content.

**Daniela:** So, is it really about identifying and recreating the stage on which the person performs best, and using that to train the person?

**Susanne:** Yes. For example, we have one CEO who really doesn't like to talk. He is a person who has so much on his mind; he is such a brilliant thinker that when he writes a book it has ten pages; he is so condensed and precise. If he is asked to give a 30-minute presentation, he gives a brilliant ten-minute talk and then he doesn't know what to do. So, you have to find the best possible solution for him and you create a choreography: this might include presenting a video or doing a Q&A. But it would be awful to make him speak for the entire 30 minutes.

**Daniela:** Are you looking at communication from both sides:

**Daniela:** In your mind, what is Best Practice CEO Communication?

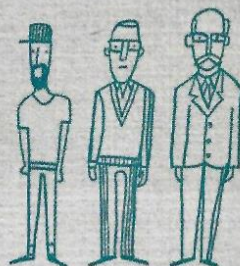
**Susanne:**



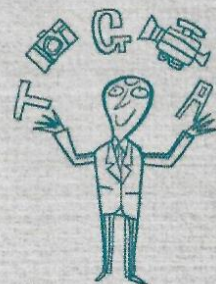
**1** Combine your strategic marketing, your communications and your digital communications departments into one



**2** Equip them with the latest technology



**3** Have a mix of young and old people – two to three generations in one department



**4** Make sure that they work with text, image and video and that this becomes totally normal

the external communication – which is extremely important – but also the internal communication?

**Susanne:** We don't differentiate. Everything internal is external these days. Everything should be said and presented as if it is public.

**Daniela:** In this digitalised and global media world, things move so fast, so CEOs have to move fast too. Something happens in Asia overnight and you are in the US; you find out as you get up and you have to react quickly. What does that mean for the individual CEO?

**Susanne:** It's not as stressful as you might imagine, because they are prepared for that kind of thing. It is more stressful for the organisation because organisations used to have three days to react. Now you only have a couple of hours and that requires a different kind of setup. It is really about how many people are working on it, who is allowed to make decisions and who is not allowed to make decisions. It's all about fast decisions.

**Daniela:** Are CEOs aware of that?

**Susanne:** That I'm not sure about. I find that many CEOs aren't informed about slow reaction times of organisations when it comes to external events. The assumption is that your organisation should react within three hours, but, in reality, it may be one day and three hours.

Reorganisation of communication departments is well under way.

**Daniela:** What is the best advice that you could give any executive?

**Susanne:** Listen to yourself. Listen to your body. This means changing circumstances to what you need, whether that means sending people out of a room or changing the lighting.

Sleep more. We have found that most CEOs are jetlagged and suffer from lack of sleep. That's a real, real problem. When your mind isn't recovered, you fall

back into standard types of communication: you talk in clichés and you don't have access to your reservoir of examples; you forget numbers, you forget people's names – and that's really bad. With this tunnel view you can't find those solutions that you need to deliver a clever answer. How often does it happen that you leave a conversation and think: 'I should have said this, I should have said that'?

**Daniela:** Do you observe your clients when they are on stage?

**Susanne:** All the time. We also take pictures and video them. I can show them everything: when they're tired, where they are losing their line of thought. It's all there.

**Daniela:** Why do you like video?

**Susanne:** Video is probably the most important data type. There is a huge demand for video – a lot of communication is already going on with this data type. I think 60-80% of journalists use it as a research tool. They don't look you up on Google just for textual information, they watch videos of you to get an understanding of who this person is.

**Daniela:** Any other advice?

**Susanne:** Invest in training. You can even train with your kids. Kids are absolutely fantastic as sounding boards.

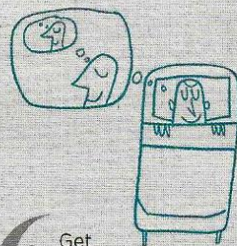
**Daniela:** Typically, how does training with you work?

**Susanne:** I have one CEO who comes to us before he goes on world tour. He does that once a year, visiting all his offices and presenting an update to their strategy. He starts his tour here in this office and we work through his slides. The slides have been compiled by all the departments so it's a huge mess and takes him three hours to present. When he leaves he has ten slides left and a power speech with a cool start and a wonderful ending.

There is another CEO whom I visit



**5** Get training for yourself. Look at how good people such as Apple's Tim Cook and Microsoft's Satya Nadella are at speaking. Take those as examples – this can only be done with training.



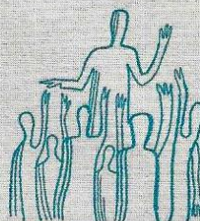
**6** Get enough sleep, and take time to think



**7** Very important: say goodbye to the idea of control. In a global and digitalised world there is no more control



**8** Go online, get social, find your medium. It is important that you understand what is going on there, and be a part of it



**9** Make sure you get fans. You will need them

the night before the AGM so we can run through in the same room he'll be presenting in. We do a blind walk on the stage because I want them to be completely familiar with the stage: where are chairs? Where is the Head of the Supervisory Board sitting? The height of the chairs, the light in his eyes. We check everything.

**Daniela:** Who are your most admired CEOs for communication and stage presence?

**Susanne:** Ren Zhengfei, CEO of Huawei. He is a humble poet who works with stories, symbols and allegories to inspire his thousands of employees and customers. He talks about both mistakes and aspirations in the same open way.

Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, because he has fought more than one battle for the benefit of business at large – not just Netflix. He went to court to have Twitter accepted by the SEC as a channel for stock-relevant ad-hoc news.

Harriet Green, CEO of Thomas Cook Group. Harriet is the role model for perfect preparation. She demonstrates how preparation relaxes you and creates brilliant improvisation in your performance. She is outspoken and good-humoured at the same time.

In a media-saturated world, it is clear that CEOs need to be more than strategic visionaries, they need to be able orators: clear and engaging communicators of complex and big ideas. It's not about vanity, it's simply based on the needs of the audience: shareholders, staff, the public and, of course, potential employers.

CEO Positions doesn't create rock stars or raconteurs, it simply helps leaders externalise what is internal, in the best and most effective way. ■

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