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Dictatorships Are So Yesterday: Why Our Company Has 3 CEOs

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My firm, [Kahler Slater](#), has three CEOs — myself, George Meyer and Jim Rasche. This wasn't something that happened by accident. Having three CEOs — the "3EOs," as we call ourselves — offers the best solution for our \$13 million design firm as a whole, and for us as individuals.



In the two years before the previous CEO, David Kahler, stepped down, we began to ask ourselves which one of us was going to be king. We three had been sharing second-in-command duties, and had been largely responsible for running the firm day-to-day. During those two years, we also checked in with CEOs of other companies, both inside and outside of our industry, to determine how they handled similar situations. We learned that most CEOs no longer do the part of their jobs that got them the position in the first place. They'd had to give up working with clients in order to run the company, and most of them regretted it.

We all enjoyed working with clients and didn't want to give that up for meetings, strategic planning and day-to-day minutia. So we decided to share the position. We'd already been working this way for a good six years, since David started distancing himself from the day-to-day decision making. And we hadn't screwed up too much, so why not keep doing it?

Who's in charge?

When we approached our staff to get their take on having three bosses, some of them were a little surprised at the question. We'd basically been using this model for the past few years, so they wondered why we were questioning it.

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Interestingly enough, the biggest pushback came from clients, who wanted to know who would be making the final decisions about projects and the firm's direction. It took a few years to quiet their concerns fully, but we worked to make it clear that we each brought a different set of skills to the table, and that there would be clear direction from the CEO position.

Among the three of us, we don't disagree a lot. In fact, in the 10 years since we've been running things, I don't think we've ever taken a vote. When we *do* disagree on something, it's because we have such different personalities and are approaching a problem from different angles. I trust these guys, and they trust me.

Communication is essential

It's not like we haven't had a few challenges. We decided to open an office in Singapore in June 2009. It was a project related to a health care client, and because health care is Jim's expertise, he was the one to go overseas. The idea was that he would commute between Singapore and Milwaukee, but after a few weeks it became clear that the constant travel wasn't going to work well.

So he stayed over there for a year and we held our regular meetings via live video conference. It was very challenging for all of us, largely because communication suffered.

During that period, Jim and I disagreed strongly about a major decision. But no matter what time we picked for a call to discuss the issue, someone had either just woken up or was just about to head to bed. We kept butting heads.

Fortunately, we were able to shelve the issue until Jim got back and we could discuss it face to face. Once that happened, the solution we came up with together was better than what I'd originally proposed — and it was also better than what Jim had suggested. We just didn't work as well together when communication suffered — and communication suffers with a 12-hour time difference. Since then, we've worked to avoid having any one of us be out of touch for a prolonged period of time.

Dictatorships are so yesterday

When we first floated the idea of sharing the job, we went through a pretty rigorous self-assessment. We took the [Myers-Briggs assessment](#) and considered how our different personalities could be complementary. We then assessed each other as openly and honestly as we could, listing what we saw as each others' strengths and weakness, as well as areas of expertise. We realized that no one of us had what it took to be the perfect CEO, but collectively, we covered all of the bases. We had more to offer as a team than as individuals.

This is especially true in our creative work environment. Our firm works with clients who want to transform the experiences they offer to their stakeholders, including their buildings, workforces, industries, processes and corporate cultures. That means our 120 employees include some very creative thinkers who function best in a flexible work environment. The old command-and-control style of leadership isn't as effective as it once was. And we've applied that lesson to the rest of the firm — all of the teams in our office follow shared leadership models.

It works for us, which shouldn't be surprising. We know from our

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research that you get the most innovative ideas when you bring diverse minds to the table. So the same thing should apply when instead of a single CEO, you bring three diverse personalities to the table.

Jill Morin earned a varsity letter in wrestling in high school (okay, she admits she was the team manager), and served as president of the student council. Earlier this month, she was thrilled to meet President Barack Obama, and as a proud new author, to put a copy of her book Better Make It Real in his hands.

– As told to Peter McDougall

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