

Carla: Why did you decide to write a book on EA/PA specifically for CEOs?

Jan: My book is called “The CEO’s Secret Weapon How Great Leaders and their Assistants Maximize Productivity and Effectiveness”. I decided to target my book to executives because they are the ones who need to learn the value an exceptional assistant can bring to their lives. Assistants know the significant role they play, but many executives and business owners have no idea how to work effectively with an assistant. They don’t know what an outstanding resource a top assistant can be to them, to help relieve them of day-to-day matters that are not a good use of their time. Executives need to learn to delegate, they need to learn how to work effectively with an assistant, but most important, they need to know what a top-quality assistant looks like, meaning what qualities and characteristics an assistant must have in order to best serve the executive, whether it is a junior, mid-level, or senior role. I dedicate a significant amount of space in the book to the chapters that discuss “the tangible and intangible characteristics” of an exceptional EA and I explain why they should matter to an executive.

Something else that executives and business owners often don’t realize is that their assistant is their “face” to the world. Through the assistant, people can get a favorable or unfavorable impression of an executive and the organization. Since executives should always be putting their best foot forward, it is crucial that they engage an assistant who is at all times conveying an air of professionalism, competence a willingness to be of service and enthusiasm for the job. They need an assistant who is fully invested in the job, who is committed to getting things done and to showcasing their executive in the best possible light.

Carla: Who are the global CEO you have taken as example and then interviewed?

Jan: In addition to world-class executive assistants, I was fortunate to interview some of the world’s top business icons for my book, including Sir Richard Branson, Donald Trump, Steve Forbes, management gurus Marshall Goldsmith, Ken Blanchard, Simon Sinek, as well as Cisco Systems’ CEO, John Chambers, who wrote the Foreword to my book with such clarity and understanding of the role his long-time, wonderful assistant Debbie Gross has played in his life. In fact, if executives only read the Foreword to my book, that in itself is an eye-opening lesson on what an assistant can do for an executive if the executive is smart enough to find someone who is capable of working with them in partnership, not just in a hierarchical way. There are interviews with many successful CEOs who might not be

world-famous, but who have managed to create a wonderful partnership with their assistants.

Carla: Could you tell us how these iconic men can manage to get so much done thru the smart use of their assistants and how their assistants can benefit and are eventually rewarded by this relationship?

Jan: One of my favorite examples is from the best-selling author, Joseph Michelli, who told me his assistant, Lynn, made him richer because she increased his portfolio and keeps him on track with their business plan. When he gets enthusiastic about some new opportunity, she says to him, “let’s see how this fits our business plan and our goals for this year.” The great thing about Joseph is he listens to his assistant. He doesn’t say, “well, I’m the boss and this is what I want to do so we are going to do it.” He respects Lynn and her advice and he rewards her well. How many executives can say that their assistant has made them richer? Joseph was extremely smart when he was choosing Lynn and understanding the value she could bring to him.

Donald Trump had the best assistant I have ever had the privilege to meet and I have met assistants of famous celebrities, famous executives, government officials from all over the world. She was truly in a class all by herself. She retired after working for Mr. Trump for almost 30 years. Mr. Trump told me he admired the fact that she was able to assess situations and take independent action. Because he is so busy, he appreciated her ability to handle things without having to interrupt him. She had a lot of courage and “was a straight shooter – someone who will tell it like it is. Norma would never take the easy way out and she always had my best interests in mind.” Good advice for assistants from Mr. Trump: “If you need to ask the boss something, ask yourself the question first. A lot of times you’ll know the answer already and save your boss time.”

Steve Forbes, the publisher of Forbes Magazine told me, “My assistant has a good head on her shoulders and can make judgment calls that come from experience. When she is away, something that seemed smooth is anything but smooth if she’s not there to make sure it happens.”

Simon Sinek, the popular TED speaker and author told me that he views his relationship with his assistant “as an essential partnership. I don’t see my work as more important or less important than hers. I see our work as mutually beneficial.”

John Chambers said “I wanted a business partner who could help me to run my business and manage my day-to-day activities, who I can trust and who literally runs my life.” He interviewed 17 assistants before choosing Debbie Gross. She has been with him 24 years.

The assistants who work for these executives have a fierce passion for excellence and mirror their high-functioning bosses. They reflect the boss’ high energy, confidence and decision-making skills. They are an extension of the boss and enjoy the exhilaration of achievement and a job well done. Desire to succeed and be their best is everything. They understand whom they represent and never let their standards fall. Exceptionalism is everything to them. It’s in their blood. You have to embody this level of excellence and commitment. This is what it takes to support an executive at the highest levels.

Carla: Do you have any suggestions for Italian CEOs and their assistants to do the same in their business?

Jan: For my book, I interviewed 3 Italian assistants, Carla Stefanut, Michela Luoni and one assistant to a well-known businessperson, who did not want to be identified. Carla and Michela had very different experiences from each other and Carla’s experience was similar to the unidentified assistant. Just like everywhere in the world, there are many different types of executives, so I offer the same advice to Italian CEOs as I would to executives anywhere in the world.

Take time to find the assistant who is the best fit for your needs. To do this, follow the advice I lay out in my book about how to find the right person, how to work with that person and how to nurture the relationship so the assistant will stay and grow with the business. Analyze your work style. The executives I interviewed in my book were not afraid to say “this is what I need in an assistant, because this is how I am, this is how I work”. Be honest about your personality and work habits so you can find someone who will suit you. Make a list of what is not negotiable for you in an assistant. These are your “must haves”, whether it is technical skills or personality traits. Try to keep the job interesting and challenging by delegating to your assistant and including your assistant in your decision-making. Understand that if an executive chooses an assistant with talent and skill, the assistant can add massive value by managing the executive’s day-to-day business activities.

Particularly, the assistant can handle many matters that are not a good use of the

executive's time. When I was interviewing Steve Forbes, he said, "part of being an effective leader is knowing what your value add is, focusing your time on that and figuring how you delegate other things. Even if you believe you can do a task better than someone else, it might not be a good use of your time. Good leadership demands that you put together an effective team." For a busy executive that teambuilding should start with an exceptional assistant.

While my book is geared to executives, I want assistants to understand that they have to strive to be exceptional at their job. We all have different capabilities, but everyone should make certain that they are dedicated, professional and always looking for ways to improve, learn and make their boss look good. The best assistants are cheerleaders for the boss and for the company. Other employees feel motivated and inspired by them. They have a reputation for excellence, discretion, reliability, honesty and getting the job done. They make their boss and the team feel secure. I am inspired by this quote from noted Sicilian chef Giuseppe Carollo. For me it sums up the passion an assistant must feel about their job: Solo chi ha veramente tanta passione può fare bene questo lavoro.