

LEAD

## **What Do Voters Want?** BY JAY GALLAGHER

Analysis of whether or not CEOs would make successful politicians.

**Before the growing club of politically ambitious CEOs can run the government better, they have to get elected. And getting elected isn't as straightforward a process as they expect**

When Tom Golisano's private jet touched down at the Albany airport last October, he and his small entourage searched the tarmac expectantly for a car to take them to the state capitol. Golisano, a third-party candidate for governor of New York, was in town for a press conference. "We told them to have a sedan for us," Golisano says. But instead, a different vehicle arrived.

About 20 minutes later Golisano pulled up to the capitol -- ready to present his plan to reduce welfare benefits and tighten eligibility requirements -- in, of all things, a white stretch limousine.

The picture of his arrival appeared in many newspapers the next day. The implied symbolism was obvious, if unfair. Throughout his campaign, similar issues of style obscured Golisano's substance. He may or may not have been a credible candidate for governor, but the vagaries of politics probably never let that question even be addressed.

The rationale for Golisano's third-party effort was that he wanted to govern "like a CEO." On the face of it, that should have been a powerful message, especially when he was running against GOP candidate George Pataki, an obscure first-term state senator who said he'd reverse the state's economic fortunes on a dime, and incumbent Mario Cuomo, a three-term liberal Democrat whose soaring rhetoric and mediocre performance were wearing thin on heavily taxed New Yorkers.

But the experience of Golisano, the Paychex Inc. founder who spent \$6.6 million of his own money on his independent campaign but got only 4.2% of the vote, is sobering. John Zogby, a pollster who took the pulse of the New York electorate during most of Golisano's campaign, questions whether Golisano's basic premise -- that voters want government to be run like a business -- was sound.

"Voters realize that a governor has to deal with a legislature and a public that scrutinizes every step he takes," Zogby says. "But a CEO can make quick decisions and not worry about the public." Golisano doesn't buy that, and neither would any other CEO who has to deal daily with constituencies -- employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and even the government.

"I deal with politics all day long," says Golisano. And he sees it as a more demanding kind of politics, with instantaneous consequences. "Politicians have four years before they have to face the voters again."

The notion that public leaders are, or should be, called upon to demonstrate a sizable dose of CEO-type skills is a seemingly logical, even seductive idea. Indeed, some, like Daniel B. Walsh, president of the Business Council of New York State and a former member of the state assembly, would suggest that the skills required to run a business today and those required to be a successful governor are merging.

Walsh points to today's business leaders' increasing emphasis on consensus building and delegation and rejection of top-down management. On the other side, successful contemporary politicians, like Governors William Weld of Massachusetts, John Engler of Michigan, and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, are necessarily sounding and acting more than ever like business executives, with their emphasis on efficiency, cost cutting, and fiscal accountability.

But if neither Golisano nor Walsh sees the difference between Golisano's kind of politics and the professional kind, voters apparently do. The idea of making government businesslike "never resonated among voters, either in polls or in focus groups we've done," Zogby says.

"I think one problem is that businesspeople running for office aren't prepared to be in the fishbowl before the fact of being elected," says Walsh.

Another problem is that businesspeople who have achieved a measure of business success have done so by not allowing themselves the luxury of promising -- or taking credit for -- mutually exclusive outcomes. That's usually less of a problem for professional politicians. A recent example is the Republican "Contract with America," pledging to pass a balanced-budget amendment but not touch entitlements. Any chief executive making such claims to his or her board of directors or stockholders would be laughed out of the room. But it seems the electorate, despite its claims to the contrary, has gotten used to, and now even requires from its political leaders, something very different from clear-eyed analysis.

Golisano's candidacy was in many ways modeled on the presidential bid of Ross Perot, who endorsed the Paychex founder the last weekend before the election. At a rally on a blustery

day in New York City, Perot praised Golisano as a fellow successful entrepreneur who could shake up the political establishment. But at the rally the differences between the two as politicians were more stark than their similarities.

"Golisano's not charismatic like Perot is," Alex Rodriguez, a former Perot supporter who backed Republican George Pataki for governor, told the *New York Times*. "He doesn't fire people up. People are looking for someone who's going to save them, and he doesn't fit the bill." It was Perot's ability to understand and deliver on that, not his status as a businessman, that led to his modest success in 1992.

Most successful CEOs who turn an eye toward politics are used to dealing with bottom-line realities. It's not that such problems are not complex and infused with unquantifiable considerations. But all such considerations in business must come within the context of making the enterprise successful -- and success in business is a measurable thing. Those in public life have a far muddier mandate. Governments are not easily categorized as successes or failures, not measured in the final analysis by their balance sheets. That subjects those who govern and those who would govern to equally indeterminate standards of efficacy.

What it really seems to come down to is that voters want a person to stand before them, ask for their support, and explain why they should have it. They want leaders who inspire and console. Those are skills quite apart from, though not unrelated to, pure management skills.

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