

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leaders Must Never Forget the Wounded

by Dr. Mike Armour

Organizations, like families, experience tragedy. And as with families, tragedy often wounds the corporate psyche, then leaves it scarred. How long the scars endure is determined largely by how leadership responds to the tragedy.

This topic has preoccupied me lately because the year began with a deep, personal loss. New Year's weekend brought word from Ukraine that a dear friend had died suddenly of a brain aneurism. She was 37 and one of the most capable people that I've met in my extensive work in the Slavic-language world.

After being her mentor for several years, I hired her in 2006 to head Ukrainian operations for the international non-profit that I was leading. She was soon more of a daughter to me than an employee.

So when word came of her death, I was on the next available flight to Ukraine. There in bitter cold on a frozen, barren hillside we laid her to rest on January 6. Just eleven months before I had stood in another frozen graveyard not far away, saying farewell to an even younger employee, a promising, enthusiastic twenty-something who was cut down by a runaway bus as she left our office.

You can imagine the psychological and emotional blow these back-to-back deaths have inflicted on the organization. The two young women worked side by side, in the office and in the field. Losing them created a great vacuum.

The Leader's Balancing Act

Not all blows to the corporate psyche are quite this dramatic. Large-scale layoffs can have a similar effect. So can scandals, the wholesale failure of a major product line, or acquisitions that uproot a once-cherished culture.

In situations like this, leaders face a perilous balancing act. If they ignore the loss and simply go on with business as usual, they make a horrific mistake. They leave the damaging impression that they do not have genuine care for what their employees are going through. And nothing kills trust and esprit in an organization faster than for large numbers of people to conclude that their leaders are uncaring.

Moreover, wounds to the corporate psyche, when not allowed to heal properly, do not simply go away with time. Instead, they fester, often long-term. And they do so out of sight, somewhat underground.

Then, at a much later date, these festering feelings seize some totally unrelated incident, latch onto it, and turn a minor controversy into major conflict. I've dealt with organizational conflict that was exacerbated by pent-up emotion erupting from wounds left untreated more than a decade before.

This is particularly common in churches and non-profits, where the pace of turnover is typically slower than in the workplace, which means that collective memories in the group go much farther back. But close-knit businesses and institutions are no less vulnerable.

An Acquisition Gone Awry

Let me give you an example from my own consulting experience. Years ago I was asked to help a company reverse plunging productivity and quality that was driving a once-prosperous business to the brink of financial oblivion. After developing a series of highly profitable products, the company had been acquired three years earlier by a giant in the industry.

As with most acquisitions, the new ownership immediately started looking for ways to cut costs, maximize the bottom line, and obtain an earlier return on their investment. They concluded that the newly-acquired company was overstaffed by 30%. So in one fell swoop they descended on the company's headquarters and laid off a third of the employees.

What the new ownership did not take into account is that this company, started by a husband and wife out of their home, had grown by recruiting employees from the founders' circle of family, friends, and acquaintances at church. Intricate friendships and relationships were interwoven everywhere in the workforce.

The sudden terminations, with no plans to reconfigure the workspace, left empty offices and cubicles all up and down the hallway. The employees who remained walked by these empty desks hour after hour, each time reminded of the friend or relative who had been fired.

Morale began sinking and continued to plunge. One product line after another lost its profitable edge. Within a year the company was hanging on by the slimmest of financial threads.

Coping with the Wounds

In cases like this, wise leadership should have anticipated the psychic wound their action would create. Their failure to do so led them to lose millions of dollars in profit that their new acquisition should have bought them.

In other cases leadership cannot anticipate the looming tragedy that will inflict a psychic wound on their culture. The leaders are as blind-sided by the tragedy as the people around them.

In either case, leadership must truly provide a caring opportunity for the wound to be acknowledged and for healing to occur. Ignoring or minimizing the significance of the

wound only adds to the catastrophe. On the other hand, the organization can ill afford to wallow in the misery of the loss. Leaders do need to press ahead. The challenge, therefore, is to allow the loss to be grieved while still moving forward.

A fitting metaphor might be what happened with families migrating westward in the settling of the American frontier. As wagon trains made the long trek toward the Pacific, loved ones died along the way. There was an appropriate pause to bury the dead, but only a brief pause. The caravan had to continue on its journey if it was to reach its destination before winter.

Those loved ones, buried in often unmarked graves, were hardly forgotten simply because the wagon train moved on. They were remembered nightly in conversations around camp fires. Their lives were recalled in frequent conversations and prayers.

But still the wagon train moved west. People grieved as they moved out. And the very movement itself proved therapeutic. The challenges of the trail demanded enough of their energy that grief had no opportunity to overwhelm them. And attending to their daily duties helped people process their grief.

From a business perspective, one of the best books I've found on this topic is David Noer's *Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Down-sized Organizations*, which has recently been revised and updated. This topic is rarely addressed in management or leadership texts. Yet it's a subject that should never be taken lightly.

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