

## The Myths That Can Harm You and Your Business

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In a recent discussion about a complex organizational situation, it struck me how sometimes it's not the literal, factual reality that creates harm in an organization. It's the myths we believe as leaders that drive us to make unwise choices that ultimately cause harm. I have yet to meet the leader who intentionally causes harm, and yet leaders cause harm every day. I invited Chris to share the situation (all names hidden to protect the innocent!) and his sage advice for our readers. Enjoy!

We were invited by a successful multi-national company to coach two VP's who had been brought in to "shake things up," and bring a bit more "aggression" into the culture.

This had been the view of the hiring SVP, but since it was not part of a larger culture change effort, these two people were instead isolating and disempowering themselves with disruptive behavior that was totally out of step with the strong people-centered nature of the company in which they worked.

The SVP agreed something needed to be done, but he delayed meeting with us, and further delayed talking with the two VP's to make clear that there was a problem.

The delay lasted only a few weeks. This was a tiny window of time relative to how long the issues had been rumbling around, but long enough for the dominos to topple one after another:

1. Two well-respected mid-tier people were recruited away from the company.
2. A director who reported to one of the VP's resigned and also went to a competing company. This director had been widely respected and had the eye of other executives all the way up to the CEO.
3. What had, just a week before, been an issue that merited coaching for top talent had turned into a situation in which the offending VP was under consideration for termination.
4. The executive who had hired the two VP's was now seen as a flawed leader, and had lost considerable stature in his company.

Ouch. What happened here? The CEO's and SVP's lack of urgency in addressing a seemingly modest and focused challenge actually disguised the extent of the real challenge of change throughout the organization – and led to a crisis which seemed to come out of nowhere.

They let themselves believe the myth that you can change company performance just by bringing in outsiders below the C-suite who behave differently from how the rest of their peers behave.

Then they piled onto the problem impact: They didn't act with urgency as soon as they saw evidence that there was a problem. Somewhere in their unconscious minds, they believed the myth that a "people problem" didn't demand the same urgency as a "business problem," such as a cash flow issue, problems with sales volume, customer complaints, or challenges hitting a quarterly number.

There is a tiny window of time between when you recognize that the behavior of one of your people is causing a big enough issue to warrant action on your part, and the sheer momentum of that behavior taking that person to a level from which he or she simply cannot recover. This is exactly what happened.

Her interaction style was a misfit with the culture, and, since the CEO and SVP had not also made significant changes in their expectations for the culture, she was set up to fail. It was inevitable, because a company's culture is stronger than the interaction style of any one leader.

It's essential to also step back and look at the long term pattern over many years: her interaction style had been amply rewarded during her entire career. And that reward was producing an exaggeration (more is better).

As an individual contributor, her drive probably set her apart as a leading example for others and led to promotion.

Her drive as a manager led to higher performance by the team she managed, perhaps because those that didn't work well with that management style left or were pushed out.

Then she was promoted again and poached to be a VP at this company, and suddenly the behaviors that had been positively reinforced and rewarded all this time became a liability. What started as just one of many characteristics had become her dominating style. She had lost any ease she may have once had in switching styles to suit a different situation.

Indeed, just when she needed to lead people using more sophisticated methods than command and control, that style had become the only tool in her toolbox.

At last, her boss decided there was one complaint and one resignation too many, and it was time to take action.

Unfortunately, the real time to take action was five weeks earlier, before the dominos fell. Now it's a case of damage control and stabilizing the organization – necessary activities that detract from the real job of creating and selling products that meet customers' needs.

The good news: if you act quickly when there are signs of a leadership style issue, you can salvage the situation and gain the full advantage of the talent you've hired. Through coaching and hard work, we've seen many talented people achieve their true potential as leaders.

The moral of this story? Don't wait. Look around you. See if there are leaders who could benefit from coaching, and if there are, get to it.

Don't wait until their next choice of words or action creates a situation in which they have to leave the organization, you lose your investment in them, and have to spend time, money and reputation to find their replacement and stabilize the organization all over again.

Act with urgency.

