

A Leader's Life Story

The key to organizational culture.

I MAYBE YOU HAVE NOTICED that leaders have a tendency to create organizations that pattern themselves after the leader's best and worst traits. After consulting with and working for many organizations, I've been fascinated to see the parallels between a leader's life story, traits, character strengths and flaws, and how the organization's culture operates. Often, the life of the leader is mirrored in the culture of the organization he or she leads.

Let's look at three snapshots from real stories I have encountered throughout the years in order to illustrate this point:

1. LEADER'S STORY:

The leader's father died unexpectedly at an early age. As a result, the son is driven to make the most of the short number of days that he may have to make a difference in the world.

Organizational culture: In this organization, people act with extreme urgency.

Upside: The organization has made a worldwide impact and is fueled by the enormous potential of a compelling vision.

Downside: A fair number of employees burn out by attempting to keep pace with the leader.

2. LEADER'S STORY:

The leader of this organization lacked positive feedback from his father and only received correction.

Organizational culture: The leader reflects his experience with his father in his management style by speaking to employees primarily for purposes of correction and seldom for any other reason.

People lacked confidence to take initiative, make decisions, and act on them. They reported feeling as if they didn't measure up or know where they stood. When I asked the leader if he thought his employees knew if they were measuring up, he told me, "They should know they are doing okay. They still have their jobs, don't they?"

Upside: I couldn't find an upside.

Downside: This organization is characterized by a lack of innovation, high turnover rates, and slow movement on decisions due to second-guessing and fearing what the leader would criticize.

3. LEADER'S STORY:

The leader grew up during the depression and experienced poverty firsthand.

Organizational culture: Although he led an organization with more than 100 locations, he kept close tabs on the revenue and expenditures of each store. If he noticed a line item that was even slightly out of the ordinary, he would call the manager and demand an explanation. For example, a store manager had a leaky roof fixed and received an angry phone call from the leader. The leader explained, "I want to make people think twice about every penny they spend."

Upside: The organization is very conscious of its finances.

Downside: Managers feel they are not trusted and make decisions based on short-term profitability, even if it costs the company more to fix a problem later.

Leadership is a courageous act because of who we are; the impact of our life stories gets projected on the big screen for the entire organization to see. The ripple effects of the best, the worst, and the in-between of our character will likely be displayed for all to view—with or without the back story to provide insight.

The spiritual practice of reviewing one's life story can invite God to do a transforming work, as it helps a person become more self-aware, heal past hurts, redirect motives, and provide openness to God's wisdom for everyday decisions. God can bring past experiences to the surface that may positively or negatively, yet unconsciously, affect how a leader works, how he or she relates to others, what the motive is for striving, and how one thinks he or she must behave to succeed.

Most leaders have influence far beyond what they may realize. A self-aware leader has the potential to pass on his or her great qualities and minimize the effects of brokenness or inadequacies. But a leader's life, left unexamined, has the potential to frustrate his or her best laid plans for an organization and weaken its positive potential in the world.

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