

## **When a star vanishes, leader must fill the role ...**

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the bottom falls out; that key player who everyone looked up to and was pivotal to the organization's success is gone.

The loss can be a devastating blow to an organization. And if it's to recover, it is a situation that a leader must handle deftly and quickly. On the field or in the workplace where a key player suddenly goes missing, the focus and trust of others left behind will suffer. The key person provided vision that others will have modeled themselves after. Whenever the person goes, for whatever reason, there is a vacuum left behind.

But the one place where there cannot be a vacuum is at the top. People must see the leader stepping into that void and conveying information they need. And that is not only with internal staff, but also with customers and the public. The message has to be "our eye is still on the ball." The team's recovery and the prospects of any organization that suffers the loss of its star begins with reassurances to those who remain. People in crisis will always think about themselves first before how it impacts the team. That means as leader you should meet with every member of the team as an individual and discuss how it impacts them, and what the expectations will be in the new organization.

You want to have the minimal amount of surprises in a crisis. It also means putting the truth on the table. Be honest about the reality of what happened. It is what it is and you have to accept that there has been failure – not a team failure, but one that affects the team. The leader should talk not only about what's behind the star's disappearance but also about the impact on the organization as clearly as possible. But it is important not to dwell on the past; instead, the focus must be on the future.

The inspirational message has to be that we, as a team, and you as individuals, are going to be judged by how we respond to this challenge. And an "organization can really emerge with a win out of this, both internally and externally by showing it can rise above a situation, rather than letting it become an excuse for poor performance." To make that happen, both managers and employees have to look at the uncertainty as an opportunity. From an employee's perspective, it should be looked at as an opportunity to move up into a new role. For the leader, it needs to be looked at as an opportunity to rethink and reshape the organization. And, because there is a change in a key position, it might mean an opportunity to assemble a new team with different strengths and styles.

An upheaval is also an opportunity to remind staff that success requires team play and those who may have felt overshadowed by the star have also played an important role in the organization's success – roles that could grow in the future. If everyone around the star had developed the mentality that they should just give him or her the ball, they may not even realize where they fit into the game. If you think about it, no one becomes a superstar on their own.

At the same time, a leader has to acknowledge the reality of the achievements the star provided to the organization. Even if the person leaves amid a scandal, they shouldn't be swept under the rug. In many business situations, overnight, people go from hero to bum and are never spoken of again. This, invariably, is a drain on staff morale. It sends a signal to the other employees that their achievements might be erased from memory as well. Through the whole recovery process, frequent and open communication with employees and the public is vital. If not, uncertainty can make people shift their focus from their business priorities to personal concerns about what changes are coming and what will happen to them in the new regime. In the absence of information and guidance from above, people will fill in the void with counterproductive things, such as gossiping and not doing their work, because they are unsure what is expected of them. All the talk needs to be a conversation, not a monologue, letting team members express their fears and hopes. But ultimately this should not be a democratic process. The leader can take the input, but to show that the situation is in hand it must be the leader who makes the final calls on what's going to happen next.

### **Some suggestions to rebuild the confidence of the rest of the team members**

- Get in touch with each employee as quickly as possible
- Explain the situation was unexpected, but not the rest of the team's fault
- Remind them that each has something to contribute, and that has not changed
- Avoid getting involved in rehashing the details
- Focus on the future: Tomorrow is a new day and the organization has to move on.

### **Opportunity knocks for understudy ...**

Should someone who has been waiting in the wings grab the chance to take centre stage in the middle of a crisis? It is a prime opportunity that may never come again. If you succeed, you can make a career leap that would ordinarily take much longer to achieve. And, you are no longer under the shadow of the star, who may have limited your visibility with the higher-ups, they acknowledge. But it's no slam - dunk: The challenges of taking on a leadership role are magnified by walking into an uncertain situation, where staff may be demoralized, and you'll be under greater security. And the job is made no easier by having to do it in a short time frame, with no chance to prepare.

It's a golden opportunity, but a crisis can be a nervous time to take on big responsibility. The risks are large on a personal level ... because you are moving into bigger shoes and trying to make confident steps you've never done before at a time when everyone is watching you more closely than usual.

So if you are a number 2 or 3 and tapped to take over the starring role, how do you decide if the time is right? Even if it looks like a good move, you should really be introspective before making the commitment. Sometimes you can be blinded by the title and compensation but you should be honest with yourself about whether it is right for you.

Among the things to weigh: questions you have had about the prospects for the organization or about whether you really fit into the management team. Consider as well whether you are the only one suited for that role, or whether you will face opposition from someone else who also felt entitled, and may try to undercut you in your elevated role.

And when you do commit to the big role, make sure you are prepared to make sure you are prepared to make it your job 24/7 until you've got it humming in the direction you want. Thinking things through is crucial even if your organization is not in crisis. You can't predict a leadership upheaval, so a crisis could be around the corner. If there are any gaps in your experience, you should fill them in long before opportunity knocks. That also goes for keeping your network going and making other moves that groom you for a starring role. The probability of your success isn't going to be because of what you do in the first week or two but because of the relationships you have in the organization and the industry and the acumen and experience you have gained over the years.

Your success with what you've already done will be a good predictor of whether you will be able to successfully fill the star's role.

Excerpt from the Edmonton Journal  
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Executive Coaching is an ideal way to prepare key employees for the inevitability that one day there will be a "star's role" to fill in your organization. Will you be ready?

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