Failure: The Impartial Executioner of Leaders, Followers, and Their Organizations

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The following analysis illustrates that organizational failures occur as a combination of leadership, followership, and cultural problems by contrasting the positive and negative examples of each. None alone is usually the sole culprit. The organization’s front person is not always running the ruse. Having examined relevant literature, pride and sloth emerged as the prevalent root causes of most leadership and followership failures. Because organizational failures have vast global and cultural ramifications, this topic is of immediate importance for globalization, which, in this period of economic recession, will likely result in further market consolidation, and so the question will become: Will the acquisitions succeed or fail to merge? Thus, in the following sketches of what makes leaders, followers, and organizational cultures great or prone to fail, consultants, becoming better equipped to assess organizational risks and leadership needs, should recognize that failure is more complex than the usual caricatures reveal. Well-known management models are shown for their usefulness in helping bridge the gaps.

The Blame Game

A constant often unmentioned in discussions of death and taxes is the failure of the organization. What causes such failure is a question strategy consultants ought to be familiar with and have an answer to, because failure seems to knock on the doors of all organizations at some point, and knowing how to bid him adieu is wisdom of great value. As executioner of the perpetual cycle of creation and destruction in the global marketplace, organizational failure is an equal opportunist. What follows, therefore, is an examination of reasons why leaders, followers, and their organizations succeed or fail. Comprehensive examinations of successful leadership, followership, and organizational culture are beyond the scope of this article; but, the following couplets will get consultants started by describing positive characteristics which should suffice in providing a backdrop against which the stark attitudes and actions aligned with failure will be readily visible.
Great Leaders

The word “leader” has powerful undertones. Leaders are often identified with strength, and even when leaders fail, they are bemoaned for the magnitude of their failures. In examining what causes leadership failure, therefore, it helps to understand what leaders ought to be like. Throughout history, memorable leaders have been singled out and honored for their boldness and sense of conviction (Sonnenfeld, 1997, p. 34). Great leaders assess and avoid risk when possible without incurring negative repercussions. Additionally, they understand the communication required to tie multiple parties’ motivations to their efforts and link strategy and functions across their organizations, ensuring engagement in accord with the leadership plan and schedule (Caffrey & Medina, 2011, p. 45). They balance the paradoxes of exercising power with being the primary organizational servant and of casting unique visions with feedback solicitation to build unity and drive change (Sonnenfeld, 1997, p. 38). Simply put, great leaders tend to be more: 1) perceptive to the present organizational realities, 2) capable of forecasting the approximate future, 3) persuasive in communicating for change, and 4) adept in executing change strategy (Thornton, 2011, p. 17). They are inquisitive, asking questions and listening to gain knowledge. To them, the maxim “knowledge is power” is almost sacred, because new information helps them mitigate present or potential risks, closing gaps that could halt organizational progress (p. 18). For such leaders, the future is promising, and the present is only disciplined dedication and improvement away from that preferable future (p. 20). Carefully describing their vision with a clear message, tactful and illustrative, so as to convey it in a manner that unites and inspires broadly, through a valuable combination of urgency-inducing examples, these leaders deftly exercise the power of communication (p. 19). They can function with managerial prowess, “planning, organizing, measuring, controlling, and motivating” employee activity (p. 20). And, they usually exhibit incredible patience and fortitude as their vision unfolds – though this can also be a pitfall as explained in the next section. These leaders do not leave followers confused. They, “train, educate, and keep people informed,” just as they would desire their leaders to do unto them, and they promote an air of celebration for achievement from the start (p. 20).

Failing Leaders

Obviously, some leaders fail because they are “toxic” (Chaleff, 2009, p. 182). Like the scandalous bankers of recent years, they care little for the consequences of their actions when the resulting injury only affects others with little recourse (A guide, 2002; Chaleff, 2009, p. 183; Patsuris, 2002; Slater, 2012). Thus, the following reasons for failure will most always be witnessed in situations with toxic leaders. With that noted, numerous reasons for failure exist, and they primarily stem from individual pride. For instance, egos that blind leaders to helpful, competitive ideas, filtering information so only that which coalesces with the leaders’ positions is retained, arise from pride, which receives no challenge out of audacity as well as fear (Thornton, 2011, p. 18). The leader who will not question himself is dangerous and unfair to his organization and its future. And, the leader who is too fearful to address necessary problems is like a man who denies proper treatment to a wound. Such failing leaders, “jump to inaccurate conclusions,” as they are unwilling to explore new avenues of thought, tuning out important but disagreeable information; and therefore, they cling to an illusion rather than reality (p. 18).
Moreover, this position keeps them from receiving vital feedback and limits their involvement with followers and peers, whom they alienate with their arrogant denials of criticism. Without these opportunities to serve alongside others of similar life position, leaders block themselves from exposure to the insights of those whose own leadership positions offer what would seem to be a more palatable context (read: less humiliating) for receiving counsel. Other problematic symptoms of arrogance include: declining social and political involvement, an unwillingness to acknowledge the implications of a changing environment and break with the past, and an increasing fear of failure as the former symptom compounds any penalties for not changing (Sonnenfeld, 1997, p. 37; Thornton, 2011, p. 19).

Regarding communication, such leaders give a convoluted message and are visibly devoid of passion. It may be that they do not have a clear vision about which they can get excited. They do not understand the importance of simplification and make difficult any follower’s task of understanding and engaging the vision – as well as not building an argument as to why it would benefit the follower (Thornton, 2011, p. 20). Illogically, these leaders seem to believe that their organizations can forever rest on past achievements as well as employ conventional methods to attain unconventional goals (Jennings, 2012, p. 14). Also, as Komai and Stegeman (2010) point out, leadership failure can also result from too many unsuccessfully initiated projects or leading change efforts with too much enthusiasm, not demonstrating empathy toward those followers most drastically affected (pp. 57-58). Additionally, an organization’s reliance on any leader is proportional to the damage that leader can cause through failure (p. 57). Sometimes said leaders are incompetent, or they act too slowly and superficially, which is exacerbated and quickened by this reliance (Ready, 2005, p. 22).

For Consulting Considerations

Given the failures described, in contrast with the characteristics of great leaders, consultants should consider most seriously the kinds of models, tools, and assessments which will drive leaders in self-awareness. The two models below will be familiar for their general use in organization and negotiation strategy, and so leaders will likely readily accept their validity. Furthermore, they are easily repurposed for the object under review: the leader.

**SWOT Analysis**

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis can be used to draw the leader into accepting that s/he does have weaknesses that can be listed (ask mentors, subordinates, and family members), which, by themselves actually pose a threat to him or herself as well as their followers and organization.
Johari Window

The Johari Window is a great tool for showing a leader that s/he evaluates him or herself using a different data set than his or her followers. Aligning their perceptions comes at the cost of greater openness. Revealing information can be positive or negative, depending on the motivations and tenor of the audience to forgive, appreciate, and believe.

Great Followers

The makeup of a good follower is an important contrast to those followers found in organizational failure scenarios. Followers who require minimum supervision and are competent in their work equate to reduced demands on leadership and an increased ability among leaders to move forward in trust that such followers will accomplish the tasks they have been assigned (Allen, 1965, p. 83). These followers view themselves and their work as valuable to the organization and take responsibility to “[put] the objectives and requirements of the group as a whole ahead of [their] own personal interests” (p. 83). Nevertheless, these men and women...
recognize that such responsibility implies they will speak out against bad policy formation while not participating in sabotaging policies once decided upon (Chaleff, 2009, p. 98). Valuable followers are strategic sources of information who keep communication open with their leadership, aligning with what helps the organization and against what harms it, whether that be the leader or the organization itself (p. 99). With regard to leaders, they oppose arrogance, explosive anger and intimidation tactics, and destructive personal behaviors (pp. 102-106).

Organizationally, “if the process for input into decision making is...credible and open,” they are willing to help leaders, “challenge individuals who are disregarding it or challenge the organizational culture itself to value it more” (p. 99). Their actions are inherently moral, conscious decisions, guiding the organization by the behaviors it is supposed to value and which “govern decent organizational behavior while preserving the capacity of the organization to fulfill its purpose” (pp. 149-150). Followers have to set the example for others in unstructured leadership positions when questionable leadership arises in their organizations by deciding between leaving, publically opposing, or becoming internal change agents (p. 150).

Leaders’ relationships with followers ought not be rife with contention. They ought not be adversarial in nature. Followers are not Social Darwinism’s failures who were dominated by victorious leaders now in control (Kelley, 1992, p. 35). In fact, followers sometimes hold equal or more power in directing organizations than their positional leaders. All the more important then, because of their sheer number in comparison to positional leaders, is that followers exercise what Robert Kelley (1992) labeled the “courageous conscience” (p. 168). As Kelley’s research revealed, followers think about and talk about, “the moral component of their role more often than their leaders do” (p. 167). Thus, the follower needs to be able to, “judge right from wrong and [have] the fortitude to take affirmative steps toward what one believes is right,” as well as abstain from disagreeable actions with, “conviction…in the face of strong societal pressures” (p. 168). Kelley identified two key components to great followership: “independent critical thinking and active engagement,” which prove crucial to effective moral decision making (p. 173).

Finally, as with great leaders, great followers are discerning when making decisions that could result in failure and question themselves thoroughly regarding potential approaches’ costs and benefits in dubious situations (pp. 176-182).

**Failing Followers**

Kelley (1992) categorizes poor followers with labels such as “conformist,” “passive,” and “pragmatic,” all emphasizing problems stemming from varying degrees of intellectual laziness as opposed to the critical thinking characteristic of great followers (p. 173). The first allow their leaders to decide for them (abdication of personal responsibility); the second will only make the moral decision when pressured; the third will try sidestepping suspicious situations with rationalizations instead of, “disturb[ing] the status quo to do something worthwhile that needs being done” (p. 173). Furthermore, lazy followers are more prone to egotism, tend to be impatient and leave organizations when they are frustrated with leadership rather than working through conflict and resistance issues (Allen, 1965, p. 83; Kelley, 1992, pp. 173-174). Criticism becomes intolerable, and their self-adulation hinders their ability to supply insight and foresight to their organization. Pertaining especially to the “pragmatic follower,” such self-centeredness appears much like the poor leader addressed above, “believ[ing] it is okay for the larger group to...
be inconvenienced or suffer in order for them to get what they want” (Kelley, 1992, p. 174). Additionally, poor followers are often hindered by psychological fears such as, “personal impotence vis-à-vis a toxic leader” and “ostracism, isolation, and social death,” as well as psychological needs including, “security and certainty,” feeling “chosen” and being included in “human community,” being at the center of attention for increased self-esteem, and feeling significant by, “commit[ting] to a noble vision” (p. 184).

For Consulting Considerations

As noted above, the followers who drive the organizational cart rather than weigh it down are the ones who are actively involved and who think critically on their own. They might frustrate leaders from time to time, because they think with the organization’s best interest in mind. For example, if they think the leader is not checking the facts well enough or remembering organizational history clearly, then such followers will point those inconvenient facts out or remember the sullied history for everyone. In the end, however, they are the best allies for their quality of work and their care. Consultants can use the following models to encourage teams of key organizational members to decide promptly, with and without information, and also to think with a variety of priorities in mind so as to strengthen their analytical skills to complement decision-makers.

The Consequences Model

The Consequences Model looks at the extent of consequences given the length of time spent gathering information pertaining to any matter for decision. It illustrates that as time increases, the knowledge gathered for the decision increases, presumably and inversely making the decision less risky and removing doubts (consequences decrease). Teams can use this tool once they know what information they need to make decisions. It will keep those decisions in front of them, disallowing them the silence of indecision without visible consequences by asking: How long have we been at work on this, and what do we know now that was previously unknown? If that necessary information is known, riskiness is at an acceptable level and a decision needs to be made. Further delay is unwarranted.
The Role Playing Model (Edward de Bono’s “six thinking hats”)

With the Role Playing Model, people are led in facilitated thinking exercises, where they are asked to dialogue from a shared frame of mind – emphasized by wearing hats of the same color. De Bono offered six mindsets represented by six colors (see below). Hats, wristbands or anything highly visible may be used, but they must be the same color at the same time to emphasize the point that we are each stronger in some ways of thinking than others, and that divergent thinking is good for highlighting how we generally prioritize decisions according to different values based on our experience with a particular “color.” Additionally, by seeing each other’s strengths, we can leverage them for leading in particular tasks. We can also be made aware of weaknesses which accompany those strengths in order to understand:

1. **White**: Facts-only objective thinking
2. **Red**: Opinions and emotional thinking
3. **Black**: Critique and assessment, problem-finding thinking
4. **Yellow**: Pie-in-the-sky, optimist thinking
5. **Green**: Creative, connector-of-ideas thinking
6. **Blue**: Outline-the-process, cartography-thinking

A Word about Culture

Culture is easy to notice, but difficult to capture. Culture can be used to mean the shared experiences of a people, and it relates to all of the group’s varying needs. It permeates society and directs its discourse. According to the classic definition given by Sir Edward Taylor, culture is, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any
other capabilities and habits acquired by (individuals as members) of society” (Cellich & Jain, 2004, p. 24). Organizational culture includes, “the set of values, norms, guiding beliefs, and understandings...shared by members of an organization...taught to new members as the correct way to think, feel, and behave” (Daft, 2013, p. 390). Of the three aspects of culture readily recognized, that cultures are learned, interrelated in public and private life, and that they must be shared, the first is most pertinent to this discussion, for it assumes that culture can be taught (Cellich & Jain, 2004, pp. 24-25).

Hypothesizing that leaders can affect organizations through awareness and management of organizational culture, Ray and Goppelt (2011) conducted research on communication networks, “propos[ing] methods that both enhance practitioners’ ability to influence organizational culture change through individual transformation in a leadership development [program] and aid researchers in understanding if and how a leadership development program creates organizational culture change” (p. 61). That the workforce is changing through both the influx of millennials and recession-driven acquire-to-merge environment, is obvious. Coupled with the radical pace of technological and social change occurring since the late 1990s, Balda and Mora (2011) conclude in their recent article that “future organizational paradigms will have to develop a multigenerational collaborative culture,” and that servant leadership is the best approach, “contribut[ing] to these new networked and collaborative organizations to help Millennials flourish and prepare them for leadership positions as well” (p. 13). Their position also assumes leaders’ capability of constructing culture. Thus, all roads to culture affecting leadership – and vice versa – point to heavy investment needed in modeling/training and communication efforts. Such needs should be an area of proficiency for consultants. Conducting workshops and crafting implementation plans to develop younger leaders and change culture is bullet-wound, Band-Aid thinking. Organizations need to think like you think, otherwise, how can they legitimately value what you offer? This means consultants should place greater emphases on facilitation of in-house leadership development programs and culture change initiatives. The added value the organization gains from acquiring these skills far exceeds the cost of time it takes for this thinking to mature, because the organization change is not stopping. The environment is not standing still for their programs. Knowing how to build and develop the organizational architecture, therefore, is crucial to sustainable competitive advantage through leadership development and culture-crafting.

**Great Organizations**

Strong organizations are marked by a combination of both good leadership and followership where there is interdependency among leaders and followers, and cooperation supersedes self-interest (Allen, 1965, p. 84). Such organizations value the up-and-coming generation of workers in their midst and have senior leaders who “own the talent and leadership development agenda” by taking an inventory of the workforce and building opportunities and bridges for future success into the current organizational structure (Ready, 2005, p. 21). For instance, these organizations have cultures which support cross-department experience and training rather than favoring only those who excel in a particular business unit, handle a certain business function, or work out of a specific office to the effect of penalizing workers who would train broadly and have a diverse career with vast organizational exposure (p. 25). These organizations are forward-acting, a trait
bolstered by inquisitive leadership and creative followership. Furthermore, followers in these organizations are aware of expected and valued behaviors and ethics. Such clear expectations establish an atmosphere where questionable activities are unlikely to persist, morally and statutorily prohibited or allowed by policies and procedures already instituted. This means leaders and followers should encounter fewer situations where they must rely solely on personal courage in order for the organization to exit the matter properly (though good leaders and followers have that courage when necessary) (p. 25).

**Failing Organizations**

Failing organizations experience countless problems. Vague communication to workers about the mission and vision makes measuring work against strategic objectives difficult (Caffrey & Medina, 2011, p. 43). Perhaps most egregious is the “climate of distrust” which plagues these organizations, further obstructing singleness of motivation (Sonnenfeld, 1997, p. 35). Organizational learning and training programs to develop various levels of talent are viewed as unimportant or as all cost and of doubtful benefit; and, if any exist, they are usually hostages of organizational politics, rarely advancing true managerial growth (Ready, 2005, p. 25; Sonnenfeld, 1997, p. 37).

When organizational policies are indefinite, followers and leaders operate according to their own habits and moral codes, some being stricter and more culturally-bound than others. Depending on the organization’s worker diversity, such a setting is ripe for producing conflict (Allen, 1965, p. 81). Much organizational failure can be accounted for if one considers leaders’ lack of knowledge for leading change processes, the failure of applying such knowledge in follower relationships, the blindness such leaders exhibit toward hidden organizational conflicts, and the indifference such leaders demonstrate toward poisonous organizational cultures (Mauer, 2010, p. 37; Mauer, 2011, p. 34). This will remain unchallenged without proper training and modeling.

Company responses to Ready’s (2005) study showed that organizational cultures, systems and processes, and cognitive misfires were responsible for most failures (p. 24). Regarding the first, respondents saw the silo effect, useful in establishing stronger individual performances among divisions and sometimes reducing bureaucratic processes, resulted in disunity and harmed the cohesion and progress of organizational vision. Such divisions discouraged leaders’ and followers’ exploration and partnership beyond their silo’s walls, resulting in reduced resource sharing, collaborative ventures and developments, and, “opportunities to develop talent across the enterprise” (p. 24). Per the second, respondents pointed out that “systems and processes for identifying and developing leadership” were in place, but they did not work. Thus, said companies lacked the leaders-in-training to, “achieve their companies’ [present and forthcoming] strategic priorities” (p. 24). This deficiency was partially blamed upon entrenched ethnocentrism, which limits broader identification and assessment processes (p. 24). And, the third reason was a criticism of organizational development being “a cost item rather than a critical strategic investment” (p. 25).

**For Consulting Considerations**

*An Appreciative Inquire (AI) Model*
AI, according to Moore (2008), “is based on valuing and recognizing the best in people or the world around us. And it means asking questions and being open to seeing new potentials and possibilities in people and organizations” (p. 216). For organizational culture to develop positively, members have to dialogue positively. This can be difficult in decision-making meetings when everyone has something to gain or lose by being heard and influential. The following model illustrates the kind of language helpful for positively dialoguing while also generating ideas (top right quadrant). Some may claim this is just verbal foolery, but think of it like this: if conflicting ideas are presented, the better idea can influence the other ideas through this technique. Without AI, the focus will remain on the lesser ideas, and the dialogue may become adversarial. Energy for growth accompanies creativity and positive elements. Frame your responses in this manner and you will force yourself to appreciate the positive aspects of others’ ideas and think creatively before critiquing another’s idea.

A Conflict Resolution Model

Only one ideal outcome emerges from conflict, the one which brings the parties together, a solution developing of their “one mind.” That is also known as a win-win resolution. It is only win-win if neither avoids the matter, harms the other party, quits prematurely, has a third-party decide for them, or compromises. Some might think negotiation is winning the most away from the other party, or that compromising is the way to build relationships that last, but both are not resolutions. They leave the relational tension unresolved. Compromise and its subset, arbitration, are both rational tactics, unlike the others, but neither brings the parties together. When working with organizational culture, there are subcultures which may need to be addressed. They will especially surface amid budget discussions and anytime silo-thinking puts different organization functions, product/service lines, and geographies at odds. It is then when a meeting of the minds is needed to mend rifts. Use your knowledge of the ideal and several non-ideal tactics to frame a workshop regarding current approaches to inter-departmental decisions and external partnerships which are handled in an irresolvable manner. And, as a consultant, realize the implications for your conflict negotiation work: You cannot facilitate resolution without having the right stakeholders present.
Conclusion

So, why do organizations fail? They can fail because of any number of combinations of problems with the leaders, followers, and organizational cultures, for it goes without saying: “It takes two to tango” (Block, 2000, p. 202). Sometimes unconvincing, arrogant leaders may be guilty, and sometimes wishy-washy, irresponsible followers are to blame. Sometimes the organization’s unwritten rules seem to be at fault, opposing change-agent followers and dynamic leaders who would guide positive organizational change. Regardless, it is the consultant’s responsibility to recognize that accusations rarely offer the full picture, and multiple parties are often partially responsible. Consultants, therefore, need to help organizations face and own their fault honestly by conveying realistic expectations of stakeholder responsibility. Using tools such as the models presented should help organizations lift the fog and bid foreseeable and preventable failure “Begone!”

About the Author

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References


Information about models such as those described and displayed in this article can be found at:
