

Regression in Senior Leaders: Positional Power as a Last Resort

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It had to be described as a tantrum. He was red in the face, pounded the table, yelled “bad” words, and pointed his finger. “This is not OK!” was the mildest line from his outburst. Later, when we talked about that communication that took place in his team meeting, he explained that he was frustrated that such senior executives could be satisfied with the “half-assed results” reported. I asked if he had used such strong language and such impassioned speech when he was a more junior leader. “Never.”

As his coach, I asked, “Why now?” and he couldn’t actually tell why. Although some in the executive ranks have simply had poor self-control throughout their careers, we have repeatedly seen leaders regress when they get the promotions they seek. Not all throw loud fits, but many behave in ways that would be more typically expected from a small child. Why do so many senior leaders behave so badly when they are frustrated or disappointed?

Sometimes it represents a working pattern that has never been challenged. Steve Jobs, when asked about his habit of leaving employees in tears with insults and derogatory comments told his biographer, Walter Isaacson, “That’s just the way I am.” Surgeons who move into healthcare administrative roles can sometimes carry over the culture and expectations of the operating room into the executive suite. Absolute clarity and perfectionism are necessary in the surgical suite and most surgeons have never really faced the impact on their teams. In fact, like Steve Jobs, many have found that their teams are more loy-

al when they’ve had a little praise and work extra hard to experience that again. They don’t always resent the demanding and critical environment when it leads to the absence of errors and high percentages of successful outcomes.

In other cases, senior leaders can make use of explosive moments because they use them deliberately and selectively. Sometimes a tantrum is useful if people doubt your seriousness. But the costs are high so we need to make sure it is the right response. For those leaders who are generally calm and tend to focus on what’s working and affirming the efforts of those they lead, a measured passionate reaction can provide the right frame for their typical geniality. I realize that *measured* and *passionate* probably don’t belong in the same sentence, but the point is that there is an important distance between an energetic and deeply felt communication, full of fire for some important theme on the one hand, and an explosion driven purely by unexamined emotional fury on the other. Emotion can be a powerful tool unless it has taken over and is

itself the only driver of our behavior. This is particularly difficult for executives who are unused to expressing more moderate emotion or who have difficulty knowing how they feel except when they're angry or disgusted.

In recent years, I've seen some cases that seem different to me. Like the CEO described earlier, angry outbursts that weren't seen earlier in a career emerge with promotion to very senior positions. Is promotion necessarily a regression-inducing experience? Probably not, but there are some interesting dynamics that affect the ways we adapt to a new position. Of course, there are the usual suspects: multiple changes, new responsibilities, new reporting relationships, and so on. The sheer number of surprising changes can throw a person out of kilter. We are so often excited at the prospects in a new job, we forget the demands of the learning curve. Michael Watkins and others have presented these demands whether or not we give them the attention they deserve.

There's another dimension of the changes that accompany promotions that is not as well documented and seldom discussed. It is the changing way power operates as one moves up the ladder in most western organizations, including healthcare. There is a paradoxical quality to the nature of power associated with promotion. Early in our careers, we have little positional power and rely on the influence built on technical expertise and relationships. For those who want to make a differ-

ence (or are simply ambitious), the prospects of wielding the power of high positions has a glittery appeal. We all know how we will accomplish much without forgetting where we've come from. Unlike the senior leaders under whom we serve, we think we will not be remote and distant and apparently indifferent to the impact our decisions have on the regular people of the organization.

The reality is that no one is a technical expert in senior leadership before getting there and every relationship (except possibly with one's coach) is different when you've become everyone's boss. One of the unhappy consequences is that some number of senior leaders over-rely on the power of their positions when they've become unmoored from their familiars. The most astute senior leaders recognize this problem and acknowledge that the constraints on their actions have become more restrictive. They have more stakeholders with more conflicting demands than ever before. They have few places to explore alternatives and it is very difficult to determine who is legitimately in agreement with one among all the people lined up to be rewarded for agreement. This leads unprepared leaders to try out all the power associated with their position, issuing orders, second-guessing associates, correcting subordinates or reducing the authority ceded to those who report to them.

Naturally, this undermines morale, stimulates opposition, and invites information-filtering by subordi-

nates. Such a climate can instigate a downward spiral of bossiness and consequent conflict. The gathering sense of helplessness on the part of everyone makes tantrums more likely because they are usually expressions of perceived powerlessness.

Healthcare leaders who move up through the ranks would do well to remember that positional power is best left latent and not actually used. Positional power is best implied, not stated. If you ever find yourself tempted to respond, "because I'm the boss" be aware that you are about to give up your authority, or at least its effective use. It may be useful to remember that the scrutiny increases as you advance and so does the consequent amplification of what you say and do. Even subtle communication of disappointment or a sense of urgency tends to come across loud and clear to all but a few. Don't overestimate the need for shouting. Take the time necessary to understand the levers at your disposal and avoid over-reliance on overt power. We need leaders who are also grown-ups.

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