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Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness

LEADING WITH A LIMP



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LEADING WITH A LIMP

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A CASE STUDY IN SUCCESSFUL FAILED LEADERSHIP

The Isakson Construction Company

Most real learning comes through stories. That's why I think *Leading Minds*, by Howard Gardner, is one of the finest books out there on leadership. It is a thoughtful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of twelve different leaders, and the author's premise is this: a leader leads by the stories he tells and the myths he creates on behalf of his people. Gardner also argues that the best way to gain access to the nature of how leaders lead is to observe how their personal stories intersect with their professional myth making.

So I want to look at how personal stories shape the way we interact in the professional world. To do this, we'll consider a man who came to lead the family business after a long struggle over the transfer of power. Leaders inevitably face conflict, and observing the relational struggles involved in such conflict reveals a person's character. This story illuminates in particular how events in the business world reveal matters of the heart.

The story of the Isakson Construction Company has been studied in many journals. But I want to consider this well-tracked narrative in the light of family conflict. In business, the passing of the mantle of leadership from one generation to the next is often fraught with complexity. And in a family

business, that process can ruin both the family and the business. In the case of the Isakson family, the business plan was clear as to which son was to take over leadership, but the implications of that choice were never addressed in the family.

One consultant on family transfers of power offers this insight:

Founding fathers are more often than not conflicted about their successor sons. (It's too soon to know yet if this syndrome will carry over to daughters.) On one level Dad wants his son to succeed and make him proud and rich, but on another level he may see the son as a threat to his manhood and dominance.¹

THE ISAKSON CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

Johan Isakson created the second-largest construction firm in the world. His company designed and constructed huge dams, road systems in several countries, and three of the world's ten tallest buildings at that time. A conglomerate, Isakson Construction Company (ICC) handled all facets of its projects: financing, designing, building, and managing both the site and all aspects of the construction process.

Johan announced on his seventy-second birthday that he intended to pass the mantle to a new CEO before he turned seventy-five. He had several sons and many grandsons, and all but the youngest grandsons were possible successors. But the oldest son, Herman, was the heir apparent. He had worked his way up from an entry-level position to senior management. He had successfully managed several of the company's largest projects. He was aggressive, street smart, and resilient. His father favored him and turned to him for both wisdom and companionship.

The second son, Jake, was a computer wiz with an undergraduate degree from MIT and an MBA from Harvard. Brilliant and resourceful, he functioned as his brother's constant and fierce competitor. Herman, if named the company's next CEO, would naturally take the company forward in the same

trajectory as his father had done. If Jake, however, were handed the reins, he would divest the company of certain subsidiaries and steer it toward being a shrewder player in international markets. Jake had the backing of his mother.

The most complex and powerful player in this transition of corporate and family power was Johan's wife, Becky Isakson. She did not have an official position in the company, but her ability to influence decisions was widely acknowledged. Those who wanted Johan's business knew that they must court Becky.

She openly criticized her older son, Herman, because he had married a woman whom Becky considered unsophisticated. Furthermore, Becky saw in Herman a proclivity to impulsive behavior, and she feared that ICC would eventually be buried under his lack of foresight and patience. She knew that Jake, with his shrewdness and technological savvy, would take the company into realms that neither Herman nor Johan could ever dream of.

Jake could credit his mother for much of his success. Becky had steered him to technology and had helped him hone his skill for making the best deal possible. She had trained him at an early age to bargain with store clerks, and he had perfected the art of getting a better deal even on items marked with a fixed price. As he grew older, he learned how to arrange discounted financing that no one else could obtain. In many ways it is Becky's machinations that are the pivot point in this case study.

At age seventy-three Johan had a stroke, and the company splintered as the two factions scrambled to claim and control territory. Most of the analysts who have drawn conclusions based on studies of ICC follow the interplay of the sons and the failure of the father to set up a succession plan. But, again, Becky was the real player in the eventual dismantling of the corporation after health issues forced Johan to step down.

FAILED RESPONSES TO THE BIGGEST LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

A careful look at ICC reveals all five of the biggest challenges that you and every other leader face. And, sadly, the case study of the Isakson family and

their construction company illustrates failed responses to each of the challenges. Betrayal was responded to with narcissism; crises were met with cowardice and fear; complexity was shunned in favor of rigidity; loneliness was medicated with manipulation; and weariness was allowed to produce fatalism. A leading international corporation was fractured when the founder's health crisis precipitated a series of common leadership challenges—each of which was addressed by a fatally flawed response.

Betrayal and Narcissism

Becky Isakson came from a proud, powerful, and well-to-do family. Her heritage was blue blood, and her marriage to Johan was a high-society event. But what made this bond so exceptional, especially among families of social prominence, was the love that existed between Johan and Becky. Those who have commented on their courtship confirm that the level of care and respect was impressive.

Eventually Herman and Jake were born. There is little to note about this period other than a sad event in which Johan was caught in a scandal. Here are the general facts: Isakson Construction Company had achieved incredible success but had not yet expanded into the global market. ICC took on several major construction projects that went far beyond the sphere of the company's past success, and in so doing amassed a debt that threatened to sink the company. A competitor began the process of calling in the debt and threatened to take over the company.

Out of desperation to save ICC, Johan "allowed" his wife to become involved with the owner of the hostile company. The details of what happened never became public, but it's clear that Becky was used as a pawn in Johan's efforts to preserve his company. Incredibly, the CEO of the hostile company—the one who exposed Johan's underhanded maneuver—also blessed ICC by giving it a favorable standing in markets that previously had been closed.

ICC became a larger and stronger company, but Becky could no longer trust her ambitious husband. Being betrayed in such a devastating way begets

self-absorption. The more wounded a person is, the more she will steel herself against ever suffering such harm again. And the longer the wound is left unattended, the emptier her heart becomes. Becky devoted herself to self-serving and futile behaviors designed to gain back what she had lost.

Narcissism is not merely an orientation to life that is self-centered or self-consumed. It is a far more debilitating process that empties a person's inner core as she becomes more suspicious and manipulative. The wound often energizes a demand to prevail at any cost. The longer the betrayal is unaddressed, the more the wound submerges into the subconscious, and yet it serves as the core motivator for a style of leadership that is brutally aggressive and not open to feedback or any hint of disloyalty. And this type of leader regards even minor criticism as disloyalty.

Years earlier Becky had left her powerful family and fallen in love with Johan. But he had betrayed her, leaving behind a deep emptiness that Becky addressed by allying herself with Jake, the younger son who had failed to earn Johan's favor. The unresolved marital issues led to division within the family and the fracturing of the corporation.

Crisis and Cowardice

The crisis had been brewing long before Johan's stroke. The family knew Herman was favored by his father who had begun to turn more and more of the family enterprise over to his older son's control. The crisis for Becky was her loss of control. At Johan's death or inability to function, she was in line to control vast assets but not the direction of the company. And it was more than money that she sought to control. She didn't want the company to be influenced by the uncouth woman Herman had married. Becky abhorred her daughter-in-law, and she was determined to prevent Herman from running the company. She had begun to position her younger son, Jake, to take over long before Johan's stroke presented the immediate leadership crisis.

It is crucial to remember that for a leader, the current crisis is just another incident in a long queue of previous calamities. As those calamities come, we

all develop a style of meeting them. We will respond either out of fear or confidence. Even when a leader looks confident and appears strong, fear may be guiding his operational genius. And the more a leader lets fear be his driving force, the emptier his heart becomes and the more suspicious he is of those with whom he works.

It's a vicious cycle. Fear creates a growing emptiness in the leader, which results in a self-fulfilling loop of paranoia and perceived betrayal. The cycle convinces the leader that she is alone and that the only workable solution is to manipulate the world so she can gain a small degree of safety.

Again, this behavior may appear to be strong and confident, but it is actually cowardly and self-serving. Often it can be masked as a strong commitment to the good of the organization, yet it seldom allows into the process people who challenge the leader's convictions or her way of doing business. Becky's alliance with her younger son was not the care of a loving mother. It was the cowardly control of a woman who had never addressed her wounds or faced the depth of fear that came with suddenly being the wife of a failing husband. The combination of current crises, past wounds, and an uncertain future compelled her to convince Jake to deceive his father and his older brother.

Complexity and Rigidity

Jake's deception was quite simple and even elegant. With him in charge of information technology, the company had made rapid advances in the way business was processed. The more technologically dependent the enterprise became, the less Johan and Herman understood or even cared to know about that area of the company. As long as the operational side of ICC was left in their hands and the systems worked without a hitch, they were happy. What they didn't understand was that the complex operation that Jake had set up controlled much more of the enterprise than they realized.

Jake had created several shell organizations that operated off the radar screen. The big construction projects all came through the doors of ICC, but the technological ability to run the projects, track finances, and hold the

records were siphoned off to companies that were solely owned by Jake. The people hired to run those companies were loyal to Jake—or at least to the vast sums of money he paid them without anyone at ICC knowing.

You may recall a simple premise: remembering your lies is more difficult than knowing the truth. The more complex the scheme, the more one needs an ironclad paradigm to house it. The greater the fear of being caught or found out as a person or an organization, the greater the need for subterfuge. We all know life is complex, and the more fear we live with, the greater our need for control. For Jake and his mother, deception became the way to keep life "simple" for them, even though their efforts actually made details that much more difficult to manage.

We all tend to gravitate toward a one-cure-for-all-diseases approach to life. We want answers that work, and whatever works becomes the primary grid through which we see the world. In the case of the Isakson family, the only approach that seemed to work was deceit. The family members never considered gathering all the major players for a heart-to-heart discussion. They never brought in a consultant or a trusted peer. Neither did they submit to their board the process of decision making. Not that the latter would have helped. The board was made up of family members who would not challenge the views of those in power.

When a leader advocates a single way of being, that rigid approach captures all his ways of thinking, squelches spirited debate, silences questions, and forces the way forward along one narrow course. Such rigidity is a form of dogmatism, a narrowing of options that embraces only one way of operating as right and all other ways as dangerous or divisive. Dogmatism is less the nature of what we believe and far more how strongly we hold to our beliefs. A true dogmatist views with suspicion any other approach to a problem because his tried-and-true way is being challenged. Tradition is valued over innovation, and "truth" is used to silence "heresy." What is never asked is how innovation might help him better understand his tradition or how so-called heresy can help him come to a greater understanding of truth. Those answers—those

sources of information—are closed to the leader who adopts a rigid stance in an attempt to simplify a complex reality. Such a leader sees all views outside his own as the enemy.

Evidence points to the fact that Becky and Jake fell into this pattern by narrowing their options to just one: the path of deception.

Loneliness and Hiding

If a leader gives in to fear and narcissism and then sets up hierarchies that distance him from staff and colleagues, he will end up with an executive team that is populated by yes-men and -women who are not committed to the good of the organization. The more a leader hides, the more isolated he becomes, and the less information, feedback, wisdom, and true participation he will gain for the best possible decision making. Further, the more a leader hides—the more he is cut off from others in the organization—the more he will need to manipulate others to maintain control.

When isolated leaders attempt to control their destinies, most give themselves over to some process, substance, or person who eases their pain and props up their illusion that they are in control. (This is why many isolated leaders stray into addictions.) Jake and Becky, as an isolated team of two, chose to rely on deception. Jake controlled the lion's share of ICC assets. His subtle act of deception—giving his father only the information he wanted to hear—allowed Jake to consolidate his control over the movement of assets, the storage and retrieval of data, and the processes and procedures that made the business run.

Herman discovered the plot when he wasn't able to move forward with an overseas public works project due to Jake's control of ICC assets. Rumors swirled in the corporate world that Herman threatened Jake's life over it. In the media, however, the threats were reported merely as lawsuits. Herman was known to have underworld contacts, so Jake fled the country. He set up an overseas operation in association with members of his mother's family.

Jake became even wealthier and more powerful, but he lived in exile. In his isolation he also became reclusive, driven, and addicted to work. Eventu-

ally he was used and exploited by the relatives with whom he had joined forces. He ended up a mere shell of a man.

Weariness and Fatalism

A requirement of leadership is that we operate at high levels of intensity for lengthy periods of time. The battering waves of crises don't stop, and often the structures that are designed to move us forward break down under constant friction. One breakdown usually exposes the weakness in processes, people, and systems. And new crises are birthed in the face of the precipitating crisis. It's no secret why leaders are exhausted.

In the case of the Isakson family and ICC, the initial crisis precipitated by Johan's stroke spawned additional crises and led eventually to the family's complete ruin. Jake lost his position and his family. Herman lived with rage and a hunger for vengeance. And we know almost nothing about what happened to Becky and Johan. They suddenly disappeared from the public eye. We can only assume that they lived out their years in disgrace after ICC was fractured.

The intensity of leadership produces weariness, and prolonged weariness can easily prompt a sense of fatalism. Ineffective responses to any of the biggest challenges of leadership—betrayal, crisis, complexity, loneliness, or weariness—result in failures that eventually come home to roost. When faced with the consequences of their failure, most leaders sense defeat and become fatalistic. Many who are fired move on to other organizations or ministries, where sadly they repeat the process all over again.

As we draw conclusions from the case study of ICC, we find that we know quite a bit more about Jake than the other principals. But to tell the next part of the story, I must add a level of specificity and detail that makes full disclosure necessary. Jake's name is really Jacob. There is no Johan; his name is Isaac. His wife's name is Rebecca, and Herman is Esau. The story is found in Genesis 25 through 35.

The climax of the story is found in Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with God and gains a new name as well as a leader's limp. Prior to the limp, scheming and deceit marked his life. But after wrestling all night with God and

gaining a limp that was obvious to all, Jacob in many ways became a different person. His story shows that God intends to wrestle with each of us in order to both bless us and cause us to walk and lead with a distinctive frailty.

THE DECEIVER IS DECEIVED

Jacob, whose name means "he grasps the heel" and figuratively "he deceives," stole his brother's birthright and later his brother's blessing.² Esau vowed violent revenge, so Jacob fled to his Uncle Laban's home. He went to work for his uncle and soon fell in love with Rachel, Laban's younger daughter. After seven years a wedding was arranged, and following the festivities Jacob slept with his new wife. But in the morning Jacob found that he'd been double-crossed. He had consummated the marriage not with Rachel but with Leah, Laban's older and less-attractive daughter.

Not seeing the joke is impossible. The deceiver has been deceived in the darkness of the night. The blessing has gone to the older daughter, not the younger, and Jacob must keep Leah as his wife. Laban then agrees to give Rachel's hand also—in return for another seven years of work. The time frame keeps expanding, but in the meantime Jacob shrewdly manipulates the herds to enhance his power and wealth.

Eventually, Jacob increases in power and prestige to the point that it causes dissension in Laban's family. Laban's sons begin to squabble about Jacob's success, and the deceiver can see that another crisis is looming. God tells Jacob to flee, and he does, taking his family and his wealth with him and not mentioning to Laban that he's leaving. Laban eventually catches up with Jacob and his caravan. At that point he confronts Jacob about departing in secret. Jacob talks his way out of the confrontation and strikes a peace treaty with his angry father-in-law.

It is a bizarre story. God covers Jacob's tracks as he flees from his deceiver father-in-law. God warns Laban not to harm Jacob, and then Jacob is further protected by a lying wife. (Unknown to Jacob, Rachel had stolen Laban's

household gods. Laban searches her tent, but the gods are hidden in a camel's saddle. Rachel uses her menstruation as an excuse not to rise from the saddle in Laban's presence.)³

Trying to figure out who is protecting whom through what kind of deception makes the head spin. But the end result is that Jacob wins. He has defeated his father and brother. He has prevailed against his father-in-law and Laban's sons. But Jacob is about to become a new man. He has been set up by the shrewdest player of all: God.

JACOB GAINS A LIMP

Jacob is the third great patriarch of the Jewish and Christian faiths. He is the one whose new name becomes the name of the people, the nation Israel. Jacob's story marks the identity of an entire nation. If stories are one of the primary ways we achieve self-understanding and one of the central means by which leaders create meaning for their organizations, then it is imperative to listen well to the stories that give us a sense of who we are. In this regard Jacob's story is central.

As mentioned earlier, the name Jacob means "deceiver." At birth he grasps the heel of his twin brother and tries to take Esau's firstborn position as they come out of the womb. As a deceiver he must be quick; he must get ahead of everyone else in his opportunistic hold over life.

After fleeing from Laban, Jacob sets out for his ancestral grounds where he will encounter his brother, Esau. Remember, this is the brother from whom Jacob stole the birthright and the blessing, the same brother who swore to kill Jacob. Jacob camps on the side of the Jabbok River in the company of his family and likely a private army. But before the night is over, he sends everyone else across the river and remains alone on the opposite riverbank. Choosing to abandon a safe camp and spend the night without his soldiers is a highly, if not wildly, unusual decision.

Jacob is immediately jumped by a stranger, and they fight all night. The

passage is written in a way that indicates this fight is to the bone. It's a life-and-death struggle, but oddly it ends in a stalemate. It might have had an ebb and flow, but neither Jacob nor his rival prevails.

As the first light of day breaks, the stranger ceases the struggle and bids to depart. It is only then that Jacob realizes he has not been at war with a mere man. He is in the presence of an angel or, more terrifying, God himself. The "man" touches Jacob's leg, and the deceiver is permanently marked with a limp. Jacob then asks for a blessing and won't let go until he receives it. The man renames him Israel, meaning "you have struggled with God."⁴

Israel, nee Jacob, then names the place of their wrestling Peniel ("face of God"), "because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."⁵ He wrestles with God and comes away broken and renamed. His limp is a reminder that when God renames us, he also makes each one of us a new person through a redemption that requires brokenness.

The process of becoming a person who can lead others with a limp is not what we would have predicted. Do we really have to be that desperate and that deeply exposed to be freed from our narcissism, our fear, our dogmatism, and our tendency to hide? The story of Jacob exalts not the struggle but the goodness of God as he blesses a conniving, undeserving man. No matter how far off the mark we might be, we see in this account the promise that if we open ourselves to meet God, we will not come out of the encounter the same. We will walk a new path—with an unpredictable gait.