

The Four Horsemen of Business Failure

The ghosts of voices fill the halls. The susurrant of the air conditioning only makes the emptiness more intense. Walking through the deserted building, it's easy to mistake the little sounds, the sudden squeaks, the unexpected hums, for signs of life. But there is no one. The building is empty, the employees gone. In the distance, at the edge of hearing, perhaps the fading echo of hoof beats.

A year before, the building was bursting at the seams. Every office was filled. Cubicles were springing up like mushrooms in the hallways. The company was considering a move to a larger building. The signs, though were there, had anyone known, or cared, to look: faintly, the sound of hoof beats approaching.

Six months before, the bustle and hum of business continued non-stop. It was Silicon Valley at the peak of the high tech boom. People were there all hours of the day and night. The sour smell of sweat, the snores of those who had collapsed on a couch after being up all night, testified to long hours engineers were putting in.

The signs were there too. Four horses, closer now. Listen...

"Are you man enough to solve this?"

"You don't have what it takes to work here."

"You just wrecked this release!"

"This isn't my fault. If you'd listened to me, we wouldn't be having trouble!"

"Who came up with *that* brilliant idea?"

"Don't bother me, I'll fix it myself."

See the closed doors, the ear buds in every ear. Hear the lack of conversation over lunch, a room full of people, each one alone.

Hear the hoof beats, growing louder, coming closer.

The end came swiftly. The product release did not go quite so well as hoped. The blaming, the finger-pointing, the denials, followed quickly thereafter. When the first few people quit, managers just shrugged and said, "Good riddance to those trouble makers. They didn't care anyway."

In one sense, the managers were correct: by then, those who quit did not care. Not any more. They had stopped caring long since, as had the managers. That's the problem.

Sharp words were spoken, sharper words returned. People left.

"What's wrong with you? Can't you handle criticism?"

"Hey, don't be so thin skinned!"

The building emptied, the company died.

The hoof beats are outside. Do you recognize those four riders?

No, not War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death. Nothing so melodramatic. These four horsemen are smaller, more mundane, but no less dangerous. They are the four who shatter teams and destroy businesses. First identified by psychologist John Gottman, they can show up wherever people are working together. Their names are personal criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal. Look at each one, remember him.

- Personal criticism – when criticism is personal rather than objective, that is, it attacks the person and not the idea, it undermines trust and creates anger. The natural response to feeling attacked is to attack back. Internal combat destroys team cohesion and leads to defensiveness. Be wary of the person who makes everything a personal attack: “I’m not sure if this will work” is met by, “Are you questioning my competence?” or something similar. Transforming objective criticism into personal criticism prevents discussion, analysis, and effective problem solving. As a dominance game, it can be quite rewarding to the individual, but highly destructive to the group.
- Contempt – contempt, scorn, disdain, call it what you will, destroys trust and cooperation. As soon as one member of the team treats another as worthless, it closes the team off to their ideas, and makes it clear to them that their input is no longer welcome. Once that happens, the team steadily reduces the resources it has available to solve problems and accomplish its goals. Once the habit of contempt is established, it is very hard to break.
- Defensiveness – when people feel they have to defend, problems don’t get solved. Fingers may be pointed, blame may be assigned, but the actual problem? That gets forgotten or hidden. Defensiveness causes mistakes to compound on mistakes. Defensiveness and personal criticism feed off one another, destroying constructive communication.
- Withdrawal – working at home is one thing. Withdrawing is another. When your employees won’t even engage with one another that tells you that they don’t care. Once they no longer care about the team, the product, or one another, they’re not going to try. About all you can hope for is that they’ll work hard enough to keep getting a paycheck. Once a better opportunity comes along, they won’t even do that. Employees who care don’t look for better opportunities, and it takes an amazing opportunity to lure away employees who care. Quitting is the ultimate form of withdrawal and contempt for the company.

Argument, debate, questioning, these all need to be part of the life of your team. The best teams are those that know how to fight well. But when the four horsemen join your team, the arguments are personal, the debate endless, the questioning ineffective or non-existent.

The building will not long remain empty. Soon enough the halls will once again fill with voices engaged in argument, debate, discussion. Will you hear the hoof beats coming? What will you do to turn them away?

Stephen Balzac is an expert on leadership and organizational development. A consultant, author, and professional speaker, he is president of 7 Steps Ahead, an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses get unstuck. Steve is the author of "The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development," published by McGraw-Hill, and a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play." For more information, or to sign up for Steve's monthly newsletter, visit www.7stepsahead.com. You can also contact Steve at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.