

Darth Vader in the Boardroom

“[Hank] is the right guy for the job. He’s got a toughness about him.”

- Financial analyst after Hank McKinnell was appointed CEO of Pfizer

In 2001, Hank McKinnell became the CEO of pharmaceutical giant Pfizer. McKinnell was widely seen as a tough, no-nonsense leader who took no prisoners. He was not afraid to be aggressive or even abrasive if it got the job done. Analysts so gushed over McKinnell that a Texas oilman might have been forgiven for putting a derrick over some of them.

In 2006, after five disappointing years, Pfizer’s board forced McKinnell into retirement. Far from being the strong, powerful, successful leader they were expecting, he turned out to be, at best, merely strong and powerful. While two out of three isn’t always bad, in this case the missing ingredient, “success,” was something of a sore point.

As pointed out in the Harvard Business Review article, “Why Fair Bosses Fall Behind,” McKinnell wasn’t the only candidate for CEO in 2001. Karen Katen was another successful Pfizer executive, but one known for treating people with respect and dignity. Her track record was as good as, or better than, McKinnell’s. However, she wasn’t rude or nasty to people. The board perceived her as a weak leader. In fact, as events demonstrated, for all his demonstrations of power, it turns out that McKinnell was the weak leader.

Here we have a conundrum. One might reasonably expect that the board of directors of a company like Pfizer would be able to tell the difference between a real leader and someone who merely projects the illusion of leadership. Apparently, though, that’s not the case. Indeed, Pfizer’s board is merely one example out of a great many similar mistakes in distinguishing between real and imaginary leadership. Unfortunately, while imaginary leadership may look like real leadership, the results it gets you are somewhat less than ideal. Just ask Pfizer.

So what is happening here?

Fundamentally, leadership is really about only one thing: the ability to get people to follow you. A leader without followers is merely some guy taking a walk. In the end, nothing else really matters. However, there are a great many ways to convince people to follow you. Despite superficial similarities, each of them produces very different results.

Some leaders choose to recruit their followers through fear: fear of failure, fear of losing, and fear of the leader. Leaders like McKinnell lead by scaring people into following them. While this can produce some very impressive short-term results, it also destroys teamwork, trust, and initiative. Scared people do not cooperate with one another, they compete. Nothing destroys a team quite as rapidly as competition between the members. People who are afraid also do not take initiative; rather, they become extremely

skilled players at the ancient game of CYA. However, such fear based leadership is very visible and often extremely photogenic. One might dub this approach “Darth Vader” style leadership.

Other leaders, such as Katen, adopt a different style of leadership. They quietly create a culture of respect and cooperation, a team in which every member feels like part of a family instead of a gang. They build the structure that enables team members to act independently and give them the freedom to do so. Members of such teams are willing to take initiative. They experiment and try different solutions. Instead of being concealed out of fear, mistakes are addressed and corrected. As a result, team members become steadily more skilled, more motivated, and more dedicated to the company. Unfortunately, this style of leadership is not nearly as obvious or photogenic as the Darth Vader style. Indeed, I have worked with teams where the leader did not even realize they were leading! They were so hypnotized by the Darth Vader style of leadership that it kept them from recognizing that they were engaging in the very leadership behaviors necessary to build a strong, successful team! In one case, a very successful manager was fired for not being “sufficiently mean” to his employees. The team was assigned a new, Darth Vader style manager. Productivity plunged even as the SVP boasted about having put a “real manager” in charge of the team.

Darth Vader leadership certainly looks good, and it can pay off nicely for the leader. It certainly did for McKinnell, who ended up with a fat retirement package after trashing Pfizer’s bottom line. If you want results for the entire organization, real leadership may not look as impressive but it gets the job done. Darth Vader, for all his power, in the end failed to deliver the goods.

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