

# Following Prince Charming

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“Don’t worry. I’ve got a solution to that.”

I was sitting across a table from Joe. We had just finished dinner and he was trying to convince me to join his new company. I had some doubts about the feasibility of what he was proposing.

“I really know this area,” he continued. “And I’ve already worked out several possible solutions. It won’t bottleneck the project.”

You couldn’t fault his confidence. He was calm, focused, and intent. He spoke with a definite air of authority. He knew how to start companies and he knew he knew it. A lack of self-esteem was not one of his problems. He was definitely persuasive: by the end of the evening, I had agreed to join his startup.

Over the next two years, some odd events took place.

Although we had regular code reviews, somehow, Joe’s code was never looked at. It’s not that he refused or said, “I’m the CEO, no one looks at my code.” Rather, he confidently reminded us of his expertise, and was always very willing to help others, or at least have the code review time be focused on more junior engineers.

Joe finally decided that writing code was taking away from his ability to do other CEO-like things. When we eventually got a look at his code, it was rather like a software house of horrors. He did things to software that should never be done. We now knew why we were seeing those weird bugs and mysterious problems.

As we came closer and closer to our ship date, we realized that one of the earliest problems had never been solved. Joe was working on that. He was always so calm and so confident. He projected such authority that we never doubted that he’d deliver.

He didn’t.

Why hadn’t we pushed sooner for a solution? In hindsight, it seems like the obvious thing to have done. Yet, it never happened. Joe didn’t share information, especially information that he thought was valuable to him. He simply didn’t share so smoothly and with such charm that no one ever noticed.

The company folded. Joe, however, did extremely well for himself.

Joe looked like a leader. He acted the way leaders are supposed to act: calm, confident, authoritative. He was not, however, a particularly good leader. But he was very good at keeping anyone from realizing that until it was much too late.

Lest you think that this is a phenomenon reserved to small tech startups, let us consider a certain giant pharmaceutical company. In 2001, Pfizer’s board appointed Hank McKinnell CEO. McKinnell was widely perceived to be strong, confident, and charming, if sometimes abrasive. Rather than the last being seen

as a negative, it was seen as strength: He was someone who could get things done. McKinnell had no lack of self-esteem. Karen Katen, the other candidate for CEO, was seen as quiet, but effective. However, she lacked, at least in the board's estimation, the necessary authority and toughness to get things done.

Five years later, McKinnell's confident, strong, charming, occasionally abrasive, style of leadership led Pfizer into serious financial trouble. The board forced McKinnell into retirement. However, don't be too quick to offer Hank a hanky. He did quite well for himself. He did so well for himself, in fact, that Pfizer was hit with several shareholder lawsuits over the size of McKinnell's compensation package.

In another vein, a New Jersey woman once learned that her next door neighbor had been arrested as a spy. She famously commented that, "She couldn't be a spy. Just look what she did with the hydrangeas."

The pretty colors of the hydrangeas are a superb way of distracting people if you're a spy. The moral equivalent of those colors can be a great distraction when you're not exactly the best leader around. If you can look enough like a leader, you can often win the rewards that go with leadership and dodge the consequences of failure. Sometimes, you can dodge the consequences all the way to the top. The company, however, doesn't get to dodge the consequences of that poor leadership: just ask Pfizer. Following Prince Charming can be extremely expensive for the organization.

So how do you tell the difference between a real leader and Prince Charming? It's not enough to just look at results. Joe and Hank had a history of results. It's just that when it really counted, their companies suffered while they profited. So, you really have to ask yourself some important questions:

Are Prince Charming's methods sustainable? What is the burnout or turnover rate in his team, division, or department? The higher they are, the more likely you're dealing with Charming.

What happens to his team, department, or division after he's promoted or moves somewhere else? Does productivity increase? If it does, you should be asking why it wasn't higher when Charming was in charge.

How does information move through Charming's department? Is there a great deal of open discussion, a sharing of information, perspectives, and knowledge? Does the leader seek out input and invite people to challenge his ideas? If so, you have a real leader. If not, Prince Charming is in charge and odds are he's so full of himself that he's not going to listen to anything he doesn't want to hear. Quite simply, a good leader facilitates discussion by asking questions and periodically summarizing the discussion. Prince Charming is too full of himself to do that. He's only interested in what he has to say.

When you follow a real leader, the entire company benefits. When you follow Prince Charming only one person lives happily ever after. What steps do you have in place to make sure you have the real leaders in your company?

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