

Leadership Thorns

How To Avoid Getting Pricked, Cut Or Stabbed

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The ancient text reminds us that the Apostle Paul was beleaguered by a “thorn” in his flesh. For millennia, scholars have debated what the actual thorn was, but it’s understood that the thorn was an ever-present irritation. Such is my plight when it comes to finding ways to enhance the general understanding of the (sometime ethereal) concept of leadership.

Over the years, I’ve encountered countless team members and associates who’ve said that their leaders tend to be a thorn in the . . . “fleshy parts.” Of course, it would be unreasonable to believe you can keep all people happy at all times, but at least the people should have as full an understanding of situations and circumstances contributing to their unhappiness as possible. The first and perhaps the most irritating thorn of leadership is the absence of timely, honest, and accurate information.

Manipulation of information is perhaps the key under-miners of leadership effectiveness. It can yield short-term results, while creating long-term chaos. It is hard to build effective (genuine) alliances by keeping the allies in the dark.

The thorn of miscommunication and disinformation will tear a team or an organization apart. In the real world, Wall Street may be big on forgiveness, but front line workers and supervisors are not. The resentment cultivated by poor judgment, half-truths, and strategic silence will live much longer than the rationale used to justify that course of action.

The second of the leadership thorns is the abuse of a “hands-off” approach to conflict management. In behavior analogous to putting two kids into a room and letting them fight it out, this approach (non-approach) is far too prevalent and mournfully destructive and unproductive. Adult team members know they should resolve differences of opinion on their own, but many are unskilled in how to do so or unmotivated to explore viable alternatives. There are times (most times) when combatants would benefit from a leader stepping in (and up) to facilitate an end to these distractions in the workplace. Many workers complain of the angst and discomfort of ongoing issues, which ultimately lead to increased absenteeism, turnover, and presenteeism.

The final thorn is more of an amalgamation of the gamut of interpersonal skills. Specifically, this thorn centers on the skills to initiate conversation about an individual’s experiences as a member of the team, department or organization. The old adage, no news is good news, might be more accurately stated - no news is the quiet before the storm.

Leaders who wait for problems, situations, or issues to “surface” are only robbing their teams of productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness. While the issues fester, the team is distracted and performing at a suboptimal level. There’s a reason we keep an eye and ear on Mt. St. Helens!

The Actualizing Leader steps out of the comfort zone of reactivity and adopts a proactive approach to team health and dynamics. Whether we are leading in a small family-owned shop or in a multi-national global concern, to expand one’s comfort zone is the surest way to enhance one’s effectiveness. Get comfortable asking the questions that can preempt a major catastrophe.

The next time you see a beautiful rose in full bloom, let it remind you of your full potential as a leader, and let those thorns be a poignant reminder of these common and ineffective leadership behaviors:

- Thorn #1** Manipulation of Information
- Thorn #2** Abuse of the "Hands Off" Approach to Conflict Management
- Thorn #3** Procrastination In Exploratory Conversations

While leaders are quick to point an accusing finger toward the followers, maybe a mirror would serve us better. How well you manage the thorns dictates your organizations effectiveness, efficiency, and profitability. Enjoy the roses.

Leadership Lesson: If you want to really enjoy your personal bouquet of roses, remember to be mindful of the thorns. Your accomplishments will smell sweeter and look more beautiful without the painful pricks and ugly scars that result from attempting to manipulate information, becoming a prisoner of conflict avoidance, or assuming that all is well as long as there aren't any loud rumblings.

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