

As We Live and Work

Riding the tiger: Preventing company leaders from failing

Barrie Sanford Greiff and Richard J. Levin

"He who rides the tiger cannot dismount." -- Chinese proverb

A number of leaders who have been in the news during the past year obviously have not paid much attention to this proverb. Senior executives at Tyco, Global Crossing, Enron, Adelphi, and some mutual funds appear to share the same myopic mission: to enhance their personal wealth at the expense of their shareholders. They become distracted by the trappings, prestige and notoriety of leadership. With no apparent need or respect for checks and balances, and no firm structure in place to challenge their greed and hubris, they believe themselves to be bulletproof, impervious to the scrutiny of others. They see no need to capitalize on the input and expertise of people who might challenge them.

When leaders become infatuated with their own self-worth, they stop listening. They eliminate dissenting voices. And they cocoon themselves into believing they have all the answers. That's a road map to disaster. And it inevitably fails.

To minimize failure -- to keep control of the tiger and have both the power and choice to dismount -- leaders should adhere to some important fundamentals. These include the following:

- Never lose sight of the organization's mission. Nor of the steps necessary to achieve that mission.
- Continue to think big, even while others around you insist on thinking small. Don't micromanage and let short-term, narrow problems take precedence over long-term strategic issues.
- Hone your ability to communicate. Learn to tell your story in a clear, crisp, concise way. Don't manipulate the data. Tell it straight. And don't assume colleagues will catch your meaning or intent.
- Don't disappear when things get tough. Be on the front lines. Offer advice and support.
- Never stop listening, and not just to your direct reports. Capitalize on the wisdom of people inside and outside your business. This will stretch your mind, serve as a great way to find out what's really going on and help handle the flood of information that needs to be learned and processed.

- Hold on tight to the two highest principles of leadership: courage and integrity.
- Understand that your company is not an extension of yourself. Leaders are temporary caretakers. They need to set things up for others that follow.
- Develop, and provide leadership to, a culture that encourages people to recruit, hire and retain the right talent.
- Your customers pay your bills. Never lose sight of that. Remember to thank them.
- Don't get clobbered with a surprising left hook that knocks you flat. Take care of your physical, mental and spiritual being.

Tigers exude power. Power can be used to improve or destroy a company. The job of a leader is to channel and control the energy at his or her disposal so that those who work and invest in the company, as well as the community, will be the beneficiaries.

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