BY E. L. KERSTEN

# THE CRUCIBLES OF FOLLOWERSHIP

## What your workers are learning from your mistakes.

Times of trial and testing often have a transformational impact on leaders. When Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas characterized such moments as "crucibles of leadership," they moved beyond the rather stale discussions of leadership traits and styles, helping to explain how the vicissitudes of a leader's life experiences forge individual qualities and variations. But do such crucibles also affect a leader's followers?

Yes, and in so doing, they highlight the way in which important follower qualities such as engagement, commitment, initiative, and drive are shaped by organizational turbulence and tribulation. The crucibles of followership are different than those of leadership: The latter are forged when leaders confront their *own* weaknesses and limitations, whereas the former often stem from the failures of the leaders whom they follow. As a result, the employees who are closest to their managers—those who are the most committed and engaged—are often the most susceptible to the crucibles created by their leaders' weaknesses.

E. L. KERSTEN is co-founder and COO of Despair Inc. and author of *The Art of Demotivation: A Visionary Guide for Transforming Your Company's Least Valuable Asset—Your Employees.*

Here are three examples of crucibles of followership that dramatically altered the way employees learned to see their roles in relation to their bosses.

**The failed-leader fallout.** Failure is tough on a leader; it may be even tougher on committed followers. When a project or business fails, followers must reckon with the fact that they have bet on the wrong horse. They've invested their time and energy in something that appears to have produced little more than an array of sunk costs, which can yield a whole host of negative responses, including regret, recrimination, and discouragement.

This was vividly illustrated in the experience of Ted. He was part of a team responsible for implementing a new enterprisewide initiative, and when he started the project, he was excited to be on the team. It was a highly visible initiative, and he was eager to earn recognition from the organization's senior leadership. He remained upbeat and optimistic for many months, even after the team missed its first deadline. But as the months went on, he changed his outlook. The team missed several other deadlines and at one point was spending over $2 million per month on outside consultants to help finish the project. As the delays multiplied, the task and the team were becoming the brunt of jokes. As Ted put it, his boss had not only oversold the value of the project—she was unwilling to tell certain constituencies that the features they wanted would have to wait until a later revision.

Eventually, the company pulled the plug and completely abandoned the project. After investing nearly two years working on it, Ted felt as though the undertaking had been a waste. To make matters worse, the endeavor's visibility—and its failure—had stigmatized everyone involved. Bitter and resentful of his boss, he felt like a marked man. There was talk of a new project, but he had pretty much disengaged and was uninterested in doing any more than was minimally necessary to keep his job. As a result, he stayed until the company went through a period of downsizing and gladly accepted a severance package.

**The catch-22.** Some leaders are weak. They have very little political clout relative to others in an organization and therefore have a difficult time defending and promoting the interests of their group. Weak executives pose a dilemma for followers who conclude that being too closely associated with weakness can produce long-term negative consequences. To mitigate potential damage to one's career, an employee can try to assume an informal role of leader, but others, most notably his own boss, may interpret that as an attempt at usurpation. Meanwhile, an effort to transfer to another group or department may not be possible, and even if it is it, both the old and the new managers could see that as a sign of disloyalty.

A former colleague, Terry, was stuck

in this type of catch-22. There were many things about his boss that he liked and respected, but Terry's manager had a hard time defending his department's interests. He tended to accept a disproportionate amount of blame for interdepartmental problems and often acquiesced to suggestions that his department take on more responsibilities. This frustrated Terry. Not only was he the person primarily responsible for implementing changes foisted upon his division—he felt as though the department was unjustly becoming the organizational whipping boy for other divisions' less scrupulous leaders. Though Terry disagreed with many of his boss's decisions, he chose not to air his disagreements publicly. He did not want to be seen as backstabbing his boss, and he believed doing so would further weaken his boss's—and even Terry's own—standing within the corporation.

Eventually, the company went through a major reorganization and put Terry's manager in charge of a completely different function. So what happened to Terry? He was fired—he was too closely associated with the old regime. The only reason his boss escaped a similar fate: cronyism. In retrospect, Terry concluded, it would have been better for him to take a more Machiavellian approach by aligning himself with his supervisor's critics. The way he sees it, a loyalty to a weak boss was a disloyalty to himself.

**The backstabbing.** Most leaders want their workers to take initiative to get things done, but that can be risky for followers, especially if the bosses lack the courage to defend them. Followers need to know that if they stick their necks out, their leaders will support them. If not, they'll quickly learn that taking initiative isn't worth the risk.

Richard learned this lesson the hard way when he took a job in a sales department. When he realized that the organization had little in the way of marketing collateral to support his efforts, he put together several Web pages that spelled out the tech specs and advantages of the company's products. Richard eventually rose to be the leading salesman and remained at or near the top for over two years. During that time, the organization developed the necessary marketing materials, which Richard began to use instead of his Web pages.

Nevertheless, Richard's boss, who joined the company about a year after he did, called him into his office one day to ask about the Web pages. The marketing department had stumbled upon them and complained that Richard had developed unauthorized marketing materials and had therefore violated company policy. Richard explained that they were old pages that he no longer used, that he had no idea that he was violating any policies, and that he would be happy to delete them (which he did). That didn't put the issue to rest. A few weeks later, the company fired Richard.

In his attempt to make sense of what seemed like an irrational series of events, Richard says the real problem was that his boss was too much of a coward to fight for him and decided to stab him in the back instead. Had his boss defended and supported him, Richard would have remained committed and loyal to the organization. Instead, he ended up taking a job at a competitor and is determined to steal market share from his former employer. He has become decidedly more circumspect and has concluded that you really can't depend on anyone in business.

In each of these cases, the employees learned to be warier and less trusting of their leaders. They became less willing to commit themselves to individuals and institutions. Ultimately, these experiences may serve them well. By recognizing the effect that their bosses had on them, they may be able to transform such negative crucibles of followership into their own positive crucibles of leadership when they become senior executives themselves. In doing so, they just may become the types of leaders they wish that they'd had. ■

**THE EMPLOYEES WHO ARE CLOSEST TO THEIR MANAGERS—THOSE WHO ARE THE MOST COMMITTED AND ENGAGED—ARE OFTEN THE MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE CRUCIBLES CREATED BY THEIR LEADERS' WEAKNESSES.**