

THE WRECKING



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# THE WRECKING BALL EFFECT

**“But I’ve always been this way!”, complained Paul as I looked him in the eye and, for the third time, suggested that he needed to tone down his criticism of people in his team. “Why should I change now?”, he continued.**

**H**e then went on to explain how, over the course of his career, his combative style had gotten him through many crises, and had helped him advance rapidly inside the company. The trouble was, recently his career had begun to stall. He was already Managing Director of the Hong Kong branch of an international finance firm, but it was beginning to seem like he wouldn’t go much further. There were even doubts about how long he might be able to keep the current position.

He had, over a short period of just a few years, built the Hong Kong business to a significant size. However, as competition increased and the market changed, further prospects for growth just were not materializing. The business was flat, and didn’t look like changing for a while.

More importantly, Paul didn’t seem able to energize his management team, or his employees, to do what was needed to break out of the rut. Sadly, he hadn’t realized that he had become victim to his own success. He was suffering from “the wrecking ball effect.”

The first time I defined the wrecking ball effect as a very real, and important, phenomenon was when I saw Paul “perform” in a credit committee meeting. The Credit committee was at the core of his company’s business. Every week, senior staff brought projects they wanted to invest in to present to the credit committee. Paul was the chairman of the committee.

The meetings were long, and consisted of senior executives presenting their proposals and arguing for the company to support those proposals. While there were holes in some of these proposals that needed to be addressed, Paul’s reaction was fascinating to watch.

He would sit, listening, like a tiger waiting to pounce. Then, suddenly, he would attack. Not physically, but with words. Words designed to cut strips off someone, and leave them bleeding, naked in front of their peers. Paul would often be correct about the issue



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he had identified, but the way he communicated created such shock that the other person would be incapacitated for a week, if not longer. On one occasion, after one executive had presented a relatively solid proposal Paul turned, looked at her for a few seconds, then said “we’re not pawn brokers, you know”. Then he turned away.

Anne was, for a moment, stunned. She didn’t know how to take it. Then, after a few moments she turned and left the room. She didn’t want Paul to see the tears welling in her eyes. For the next four or five days, Anne didn’t get any more work done. She sat behind her desk, mind blanked out, trying to understand why she had been attacked by Paul that way. Trying to understand why the wrecking ball had come after her that day.

## The Wrecking Ball Effect Defined

You may be wondering why this was such a big issue. On the surface, Paul’s words don’t seem to be that destructive. They are sharp but probably something you might even say in order to make a point about your view on something. A metaphor to communicate a more abstract idea. So, why did they have such a destructive impact?

The problem was not the words themselves, but the combination of the words and Paul’s seniority in the company. Whether we like it or not, position power in an organization means that our words and actions carry extra weight. People read so much more into the words, gestures, mannerisms of a senior leader than they ever do into the words of a peer, or of a more junior person. And this is

how the wrecking ball comes into play.

When you are more junior in an organization, in order to get things done sometimes you need to be pushy, brash even. Because you are junior to others, harsh words from you are unlikely to be damaging, especially to more senior people. To seniors your comments are more likely to be perceived only as slight annoyances coming from an upstart mosquito. You get forgiven or ignored. Why? Because, in the scheme of things, you are not that relevant. In any case, the more senior person probably also feels that they have a duty to cut you some slack. Afterall, you are just speaking from immaturity. You will learn.

Then, things change. You get promoted and YOU become the senior person. The rules for you become very different. People who report to you hang on your every word. They expect you to be wiser than wise. To always make the right decisions. To always measure your words carefully. And, because they expect you to measure your words carefully, when you throw some words carelessly in someone else’s direction you can unwittingly create problems.

In Anne’s case, she truly believed that she had been badly scolded, and that her job was in danger. What had been intended, of course, was simply to get her to think about how she was positioning her project.

This process happens whether you like it or not. You say something that you think is slightly cynical, just to make a point. It gets heard as a major attack. You have, unwittingly, become a wrecking ball. You frown, because you are puzzled, and it gets received as “this



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is too dangerous. The boss doesn't like it".  
You have become a wrecking ball.

The reason why the wrecking ball effect is so insidious, and so destructive, is that you HAVEN'T changed. Not really. However, because of your position in the organization the power that you wield has changed dramatically. You move just a little, imperceptibly maybe, but the furniture starts flying out the windows and the walls start cracking. Not intentional but you are wrecking everything around you. How is this possible? Through layers of experience you have, in fact, become much stronger over the years.

You are, actually, more powerful and more confident than was true in the past. From the inside it maybe doesn't feel that way, but people around you notice it.

Then, you add the position power.

The whole mix is like giving a robotic arm to a two-year-old child, along with a fully matured athlete's body. Very powerful, and very destructive if not channelled properly. A tantrum could be a major event! And, to

those on the receiving end, a frown can sometimes be seen as a tantrum.

## How Do You Know It's Happening?

As with any dynamic of this nature, the most powerful thing you can do is name it for what it is. To do this, it can be helpful to know what to look for.



There are probably three very simple things that that you can use as evidence of a possible "wrecking ball effect" happening on your watch. They are motivation, a drop in feedback, and other people changing.

## Motivation Levels

Motivation can be affected by many things but, above all else, the leader makes a real difference to motivation levels in an organization. If your organization is losing motivation, especially when there has been no meaningful change in the external environment, it's wise to look towards your own leadership as the possible cause. If motivation is dropping it could be that your behaviour as a leader is creating more



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damage than you realize.

The drop in motivation may not be a response to the wrecking ball effect, but it's a real possibility. In any case, a drop in motivation in an organization requires the immediate focus and attention of the leader. And, to get to the root of what is going on, a look in the mirror is always a wise first step.

## Feedback Gap

A drop in the willingness of senior people in the company to give feedback, or speak their minds, is a much clearer indication that the wrecking ball effect is in action. This is especially true if, in the past, they have tended to be quite open. A change towards keeping things inside, and not discussing them, indicates that people do not feel safe to discuss their thinking. This "danger" can be created by the group dynamic as a whole but, in most cases, it comes back to the leader. Because of a lack of awareness, the leader's behaviour has started to damage trust in the group. In this more "dangerous" environment, to be safe, group members decide to keep their thoughts to themselves rather than sharing.

## Other People Are Different

The third sign that the wrecking ball effect may be operating is when the behaviour of other people towards you changes. It might be that people used to joke with you a certain way, but now they seem to be much more careful. Or, it could be that they are now much more deferential than was the case in the past. Instead of arguing with you, they will try to say something, then change their

mind. You notice it because the people just seem quite different to how you knew them to be.

## How Do You Fix It?

The key to resolving the wrecking ball effect is, before you do anything else, recognize it as a signal of your success. It is because you have been successful that you have created the conditions for the "wrecking ball effect" to operate.

However, you also need to realize that "nothing fails like success". The attitudes, skills, behaviours, and knowledge that got you to the top may well be the very things that will prevent you from truly succeeding in the leadership role. You come to the realization that you're not bad, and that you need to learn some new things in order to master a new role. And you realize that the way you've "always done things" is part of the problem. The problem is that you haven't changed, and you need to – even if it's just a little bit.

Once you recognize the problem, of course, you then need to start making changes. Finding someone to observe you in action and give you honest feedback is probably the most effective approach that you can use. An external observer and a coach is an extremely effective way to address this sort of problem for two very important reasons. Firstly, people who report to you are seldom going to give you the necessary feedback because they are, by virtue of their position, intimately connected with the problem. They are often intimidated by you,



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so won't give you the feedback that you need.

Secondly, many of the behaviours that are causing the wrecking ball effect will either be unconscious, or will feel so totally natural to you that, without an outside view, you would never even consider them. You will discover, for instance, that a frown from you is affecting your whole management team. Not only may you not be aware of the link between the frown and the team, you may not even know that you are frowning at all.

Many years ago, when playing a bit part in a movie in China, I was in the makeup room. One of the make-up ladies told me that my left eyebrow was higher than my right. I said that it wasn't my fault, because she was the one making me up. After some time, however, as she tried to fix the problem, we discovered that I had literally lifted the left eyebrow without being conscious of doing so.

An external view can give you insight into these unconscious reactions and behaviours, in ways that will help you to make changes where you think these are needed.

Some of the changes will happen easily, and will simply require some consciousness of what you are doing, and a concerted effort to change some old habits. Others could be a little more complex, requiring you to explore the automatic reactions that you have to certain things. Uncovering these reactions can at times be challenging. At the same time, the rewards make it very worthwhile.

## Why Bother?

While it may seem that a focus on this level of detail is beyond what a leader needs to do, you need to reflect for a moment on athletes who have become legends in their own lifetimes. People playing at the top of their game pay very careful attention to very small differences that can determine whether they win or lose. Something that is irrelevant to an amateur could be, and often is, of critical importance to the professional. And so the professional works on it to make it better.

## The same is true for leaders.

The fine awareness of your own behaviour, thinking, and reactions wasn't needed when you were somewhere down in the organization. You were more focused in learning the job, and doing it to the best of your ability. Now that you have reached the higher regions these small things have begun to matter. To continue on your path of success, you simply have to start paying attention to these finer details.

Will it end there? Probably not. As the Chinese say, "Tian Wai You Tian". Beyond heaven there is another heaven. Whatever level you manage to get to you'll find that, always, there are other levels that you could aspire to. However, until you reach the lower levels you may not even be aware of the higher levels, or of what is required to succeed there.

