

RED FLAGS THAT SIGNAL A LEADER'S VISION IS FLAWED

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Are there signs or signals that might indicate to you in advance that your leader's vision is less than perfect or that a vision that worked in the past has become seriously flawed? Definitely.

RED FLAG #1: THE LEADER'S SOCIAL NETWORK NARROWS

Leaders gather information to help them formulate and refine their visions from interactions they have with others. All leaders have networks, but some are wider than others. The wider the network the better since broad networks are more likely to provide the leader with a breadth of information from which he can develop or revise his vision. Your first clue to a possible problem with the leader's vision is when his social network narrows.

All leaders develop an inner circle of advisors. For example, President John F. Kennedy had his "Irish Mafia"—Bobby Kennedy, Larry O'Brien, and Kenny O'Donnell—and Franklin Roosevelt had his "Kitchen Cabinet." There is nothing wrong with that. It's when only the inner circle has the leader's ear that things start going wrong. Ominously, in the fall of 2005 as the Iraq war continued to go poorly, President George Bush's approval numbers floundered, and the administration came under increasing criticism, there were reports that President Bush had narrowed his group of advisors and, as one reporter put it, "had pretty much hunkered down in a bunker." That's in sharp contrast to other Presidents such as George H. W. Bush who visited the House of Representatives gym once a week to some informal advice from Congressmen or John F. Kennedy who reached out to outside advisors during the Cuban missile crisis or Franklin Roosevelt who deliberately provoked confrontations between his advisors to get different points of view.

RED FLAG #2: BAD NEWS STAGNATES

It's a sure sign of trouble when leaders begin to resist hearing bad news. It's even worse when resistance to bad news permeates the entire company or organization. That is part of what happened at Enron, the giant energy company that collapsed in scandal in the early

2000s. Upper management created a culture in which bad news moved slowly, if at all. In fact, in a 1995 employee survey Enron employees reported being uncomfortable about openly voicing their opinions and, "telling it like it is at Enron." They had reason to be concerned. When Sherron Watkins, the Enron accountant who helped expose the shady dealings, announced that she was going to CEO Ken Lay to report her concerns about dubious accounting practices, she received no support from Enron senior executives. As one senior Enron executive explained, "There was an unwritten rule. . . a rule of 'no bad news.' If I came to them with bad news, it would only hurt my career." Apparently the fear was well founded. Within a few days of hearing the bad news from Watkins, Lay contacted Enron lawyers seeking legal grounds to fire her. See Dennis Tourish and Naheed Vatcha, "Charismatic Leadership and Corporate Cultism at Enron," in *Leadership*, 14, No. 4, (20005): 471 Mimi Swartz with Sherron Watkins Power Failure p. 191.

RED FLAG #3: THE LEADER BECOMES CONVINCED THAT HIS TEAM IS THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST

All leaders pride themselves on building a winning team. They want to surround themselves with the best and brightest. Again, there is nothing wrong with that. We want leaders to have strong teams. Problems arise, however, when the leader and the team begin to believe that they are better and brighter than they are. Consider what happened at Enron. CEO Ken Lay announced from the very beginning that his goal was to get a superstar in every position, and prior to the company's collapse he and the Enron employees themselves were convinced that he had succeed. That was certainly the impression of Sherron Watkins. Here is how Mimi Swartz and Watkins describe how exciting it was to be a part of Enron in its glory days.

Even though she had been at Enron since 1993, she was still amazed by the high-end toys parked in the company garage, the dizzying array of BMW sedans, Porsche convertibles, Ferraris, Mercedes, Range Rovers, and customized SUVs. She loved Enron's oval-shaped tower of mirrored glass, with its twin tower rising across the street; the purposeful people from all over the world scurrying across the lobby's glossy granite floor to get to their desks faster; the brightly colored ceiling banners heralding employees' commitment to Enron's "Vision and Values": Respect! Integrity! Communication! Excellence! The lobby's twelve-foot, multiscreen television reported perpetual NYSE, NYMEX, and Enron Online updates, as did the miniscreens in the elevators. The company café featured spring rolls and gourmet wraps. The coffee bar featured custom lattes and mochas; mini-massages were available in the company gym. It was almost, but not quite, too much: If you deserved all this, you knew you were very, very important." Mimi Swartz with Sherron Watkins Power Failure p. 5.

Of course, very, very important people couldn't be wrong, could they? Their vision couldn't be a fantasy, could it? Their values couldn't be flawed, could they? Of course they were. But, who could see it, certainly not their leader because they were the best and the brightest.

RED FLAG #4: THE LEADER REFUSES TO ADMIT THAT HIS VISION IS WRONG OR NO LONGER WORKING

Leaders make significant psychological investments in their visions, particularly when their names and reputations become publicly and prominently associated with the vision like Reagan's Economy or Bush's War. It is little wonder they resist admitting that their vision may be suspect, or worse, an outright failure. Rather than admit defeat, the leader will push even harder to force the flawed vision to success.

In her book *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Jean Lipman-Blumen describes what can happen then:

"To shore up a flawed vision gone awry, an initially nontoxic leader may begin to exaggerate and then downright dissemble. In the process, the leader may become increasingly authoritarian and controlling.

When essentially nontoxic leaders pursue a much-vaunted plan without the initial hoped-for success, they commonly begin to build more and more infrastructure—special services, intelligence (spies), enforcers—to make it happen, to oblige compliance. Such leaders take increasingly strict measures to prevent anyone from criticizing or standing in the way. They tune up the PR department.

Caught in this frantic squeeze, the leader can become mono-maniacal and suspicious, even paranoid, about anyone who tries to amend the dream. In this mode, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the leader to entertain important course corrections." Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders* p. 145.

These are all red flags that the leader is losing touch with his followers, and in some cases, reality itself and that his vision has become seriously flawed.

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