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# Are the Tough Guys in Charge Now?

By Barbara Wright-Avlitis




## Are the Tough Guys in Charge Now?

**Survival of the fittest?** The financial crisis has done more than just hit organizations with increased financial stress. It has changed the very nature of leadership at the top. If we turn to the concept of natural selection, we can begin to see patterns in the boardroom and in the senior ranks of most organizations that follow that theory. It's all about survival of the fittest at the top. The question is, in this post-financial crisis era, who are the 'fittest' that survived? When the crisis first struck, most leaders were either focused on keeping their corporate ship from sinking or protecting their own jobs. Some were heavily involved in both. The lower ranks of the organization were suffering from lack of support and lack of leadership since their leaders were otherwise occupied. They received vague messages from 'above' but, in most cases, were not really involved in the decision-making during that frantic period. The leaders had their focus elsewhere and it wasn't on the engagement of their teams. Employees were expected to do what they were told or face being relieved of their jobs. Most kept their heads down and their noses to the grindstone.

The gap widened between the leaders and the followers during this difficult time. As the smoke begins to clear, many leaders are now looking behind them to see what shape their employees are in. Many of those employees feel disengaged. Many are suffering from the effects of burnout since they were expected to do 'more with less' as their co-workers were being made redundant and budgets were slashed. Some are missing from the organization. They were the victims of redundancies or re-organizations. Some were also the casualties of burnout or stress-related illness.

**So, who survived?** During the peak of the financial crisis, it certainly didn't pay off for a leader to be emotional about anything. If they were emotional about what was happening to others in their organization, they usually suffered the consequences of disillusionment, disengagement and/or burnout themselves. In my own experience, I saw many excellent leaders make the decision to leave the company because it had become one they simply didn't recognize any longer. Many of these leaders were the innovative ones who found that their creativity was no longer appreciated when the organization was only in survival mode. Many were the sensitive 'people managers' who truly cared about engaging their teams. Others were those who worked in order to live rather than living to only work. They moved on to other organizations where their attributes were better appreciated or they even started their own businesses. Any leader who was a little 'different' had difficulty surviving in a tumultuous sea of financial distress because the 'tough guys' took charge to save the ship. They were ruthless when it came to people because keeping the ship from sinking was all that mattered at that time.

The leadership pool in the large organizations became less and less inclusive. As the crisis continued, leaders at the top started to resemble each other more and more. In desperate times, people look around to find other people who are much like themselves to rely on since there is less risk involved. Those who survived were the 'tough guys'. They were the ones with nerves of steel who could survive any setback. They were the ones who cared more about the bottom line than about how they got it. They were the 'numbers crunchers', the short-term thinkers and the people who could create emotional armor in order to avoid feelings or emotion from entering any business equation. They worked tirelessly to patch up the ship, make her sea worthy and to get her on the right course. Losing the long-term thinkers or the creative dreamers in the leadership ranks was merely considered collateral damage by these tough guys. They look at it from the point of view that the 'weak' had been weeded out. The tough guys saved the ship so, to them, it was rather irrelevant who was washed overboard.



Now, organizations are rebuilding and re-organizing themselves for the future in a changed business environment. The employees look to the leaders for guidance and vision. What do they see? Are these ‘tough guys’ the visionaries that organizations need in order to move their enterprise forward? Are they long-term thinkers who can stimulate innovation and create strong competitive advantage? Personally, I don’t think so.

These tough guys hold to a strong, almost military-type, hierarchy. They do what they are told and take the tough action that is necessary to solve an immediate issue. They expect their followers to also do what they are told, without question. It’s all about process and execution with these tough guys. They are not big on long-term planning. They expect their employees to follow the rules and do what they are told. That is crisis leadership, right? So, what does the top of the organization look like now? It has changed dramatically. We find crisis managers, short-term thinkers, ruthless businessmen who are focused on short-term rewards. Are these the leaders who can take the organization successfully forward? Personally, I don’t think so. To be innovative, you need inclusive leadership where different opinions are not only valued but also seriously considered. Tough guys don’t really care about the opinions of others because they know what needs to be done and they want the organization to execute it. The thing is that the tough guys are now securely positioned in the organization and are not about to give up their seats without a fight. They will continue to evaluate the new leaders on their own standards of what a leader really is. Rest assured that it would not include the softer side of leadership. These tough guys will promote more tough guys into the leadership ranks of the organization. Natural selection will take place and those who rise to the top will also be tough guys.

If this continues, inclusive leadership will become some vague idea from the past. Tough guy leaders aren’t very engaging for their employees, unless of course they only hire tough guys. If following the rules is the way employees gain recognition, the creative ones among their ranks will not find satisfaction in the organization. They will simply leave or be fired for not fitting in. Then what will we have?

If you look at the top of your organization today, what kinds of leaders are left standing? Are they the tough guys? As you look around for collateral damage, which leaders have left your organization? Were they a little different? Did they bring a different perspective to leadership in your organization? Perhaps you can also see survival of the fittest at work in your organization. Yes, they were the ‘fittest’ during a time of crisis but will they be the ‘fittest’ for creating new visions and strategies? Will they be the ones who can lead people out of the ruins of the financial crisis?

If these tough guys are allowed to hang on to their seats and populate the leadership ranks with only more tough guys, the corporate world is in for some even more serious troubles than we have seen so far.