

Legacy traps¹

Dr Leandro Herrero

The best legacy is always a beyond-me leadership. A great period led by a leader followed by the absence of new leaders tells you a lot about the leader's view of himself. Succession is as important as tenure. Great tenures followed by bad successions always make me very suspicious of the greatness of the tenure.

For many years, Max De Pree was the CEO of Herman Miller, a pioneering furniture company that, at times, went through difficult periods. During those, De Pree led firmly with a mixture of deeply rooted Christian values, extraordinary personal commitment and closeness to every employee, and a professed 'servant ethos'. It paid off. Loyalty was very high, both in bad times and better times.

I am told that he was deeply involved in the finding of his successor. You would have thought that whoever went to sit on De Pree's chair (and the company creators of the Aeron chair know a thing or two about sitting!) would have exhibited similar values and behaviours. The reality was that the first post-De Pree CEO was fired by the Herman Miller family and the second in command resigned. Although I don't claim to know the whole story, there was something there about an incredible legacy-fiasco that makes you think about the mechanisms that some leaders use to establish their own succession. I always draw people's attention to a De Pree syndrome!

¹ Initially posted on www.theleaderwith7faces.com, March 2008

There is also a form of prostituted legacy that is very toxic. It happens when the leader projects himself above the judgement of the current organisation (followers), dismissing that judgement as less relevant than the one that 'history' will provide. The 'history-will-judge-me' type of leader exhibits a great deal of arrogance by assuming that his greatness can only be understood by people in the distance. This assumption of man-or-woman-of-history, a history-maker, de facto closes the doors to a rational scrutiny today. Many political leaders see themselves in that way; some clearly articulate it, like British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. At least this has the benefit of honesty with the consequent transparency of the dimensions of the ego.

You can read more about this dimension (Legacy) in the article [Leadership Legacy](#).

You can also read more about the other two dimensions by choosing from this list:

1. [Time and Space](#)
2. [Homes](#)

If you want to read more about leadership or want to continue reading from the above, you can read it all in my book [*The Leader with Seven Faces: finding your own ways to practice leadership in today's organization.*](#)