

CASE STUDY

After 10 years of spectacular growth this software company hit a downturn in performance requiring redundancy of 10% of staff. The CEO and founder was unable to understand how this had happened and was incapable of defining a strategy or path forward. The shame of the personal responsibility he felt for this "failure" clouded his judgement and ability to lead.



CEO - Software company

Addressing emotional barriers to successful leadership

This CEO had founded this software company in the proverbial garage at home and had steered its growth over the previous ten years to the point where it was dominant in its home market and had expanded successfully into markets in Asia and UK.

Such spectacular growth, without relent, over that ten year timeframe, made the downturn experienced in the previous 18 months so much more difficult to accept. It came as a shock to all in the business, especially when the company announced that it would, for the first time, make staff redundant - approximately 10% of the total working in Australia.

Morale plummeted as a result. A consequent restructure to realign management responsibilities further added to uncertainty about the immediate future.

In order to aid the management team to refocus and sharpen the strategic direction the CEO asked me to facilitate a strategy workshop with the executive leadership team, including those located in the overseas offices.

The breakthrough came when, having asked all team members how they felt at this moment, there was a terrific outpouring of emotion from each and every manager.

The most emotional response came from the CEO expressing his shame at being unable to avoid sacking staff.

The CEO was the centre of all decision making in the firm. Ironically this directly contradicted the culture the CEO had been trying to build in his executive team and across the company.

I spent the next 6 months working directly with the CEO to:

1. Help him to appropriately manage his frustrations by exploring his emotional relationship to his company and job as CEO
2. Develop a clearer and more easily implementable strategy for the firm.
3. Develop his communication skills to allow him to compellingly engage staff in a new direction for the company

The key to this CEO's future development into an effective leader was his emotional relationships with his job. It was impossible for him to separate himself from his company. The intervention with this CEO progressed through 3 phases as foreshadowed above but the most important came in phase 1. As long as he was seen and acted as the sole keeper of the company strategy and secrets then he would continue to carry the managerial and emotional burden for company success.

Over a period of 6 months I counselled this CEO in redefining his life priorities. I helped him to locate his role as CEO within his entire life rather than it being his sole role. I

helped him to then break the nexus between him and the company so that the two were no longer one and the same emotionally or operationally.

One process was to deeply examine his personal history and that of the company. What were his original goals for founding the business, how well was he achieving these goals and had they changed over time?

This deep examination exposed an ambition that was central to his entrepreneurship but which had got out of control as the company had grown beyond the small enterprise he initially envisaged for it and himself.

He had lost control of his personal as well as his corporate vision by being seduced by the prospect of continuing success.

The downturn was a necessary reminder to him that he needed to maintain control of his life rather than the business running his life. This allowed him to loosen his hold on and relationship with the company which then allowed him to relax his emotional grip on his subordinates. This liberated them to develop the autonomy and leadership skills the CEO had always craved for them.

Followup work focussed on the development of the new strategy and the CEO's communication of it, all of which was quite straightforward once emotional issues had been resolved.