

Transcription: Case Study - Losing A Vital Member of Your Team

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today, we're going to look at a kind of a case study. So we might put it in the category of case study. We're looking at what to do when you lose a vital member of your team. Fulyana is going to set the scene for us.

I have a mentee who is in a leadership position and she just lost, when I say lost, a key member who is extremely popular, decided to leave. Now, I'm going to take you through her story. I've got permission to share the story about what happened, how it felt, how it was handled. Before I do that, I want to explain that this person was extremely effective. Excellent at what they do, very popular, as I said. And they refer to them as the glue and the culture carrier. Glue is the person that brings everyone together and makes things fit. Culture carrier is the person that's deeply involved in the culture of the organisation, lives and breathes and influences others to do so. What this leader said to me is, I was devastated when the person came in and said, "Look, as you know, I love it here. I love everything about this organisation. I did very well out of it myself, but now the time has come. I've got an opportunity somewhere else. I'm going." I don't want to go into why she left, because of the different topic, but this was all positive, it wasn't about anything negative about where she is.

Anyway, this leader said to me, I was devastated and as you remember, Fulyana, I rang you and said, "Can we have an urgent meeting?" And we did. On her way to the meeting, she said to me, "I can't believe how selfish I was. The first thing that I said was, "I am devastated. I didn't even say, "I'm so happy, she's so good and now she's got this opportunity." She said, "Thank God, though, I've said that to her. I said to her, "Oh, I can't imagine this place without you is my immediate reaction, but I'm happy for you."

I'm so glad I did that. The reason she came for the urgent meeting, she needed to process her, "I am devastated." And to do that, she just wanted to talk it out and to talk how she thinks she can handle the rest of it, which we did at that meeting. She had thought it through and it was all good.

But I'm now going to tell you what she actually did. The first thing she did was talk to the person leaving and say, "How do you want to handle the announcement? It is your news, but I'd like to play a part in it". And the person said, "Yes, I really think that we should do it together." And that was a good answer, for both. It could have been otherwise. And then they called that, and of course, the first thing she said, "I've got some news that is going to maybe upset a lot of you, but please hang in there. I'll look at it as time for our whole group to work this through." So she went through, and then in the nutshell, she let them process, we're devastated, we can't possibly do that, what have you done about keeping her? And all those three million questions that the leader was prepared for, she prepared herself for, and she allowed the other person to speak. So between them, they talked about everything we're saying is about us, our team, and our organization.

And I'm going to stop and talk about the person leaving, why they're leaving, and what's their future. In doing that, the focus became about the person, and then this leader took them through celebrating all the contributions this person did. And then I said, "I'm sure there's hundreds of you that can think of things too." So then everybody just threw in, "Oh, oh, I really

appreciated when you did that." And that was great, and all the rest of it. So I went through all of that. So there was a celebration, congratulations to the person leaving, and stop feeling sorry for ourselves.

And then one person in the group says, "Well, I talk very loudly, and I agree with that, but what's going to happen after she goes?" Which is on everybody's mind, and they kind of, they got to the point where, she said to me, if she had not prepared herself, and had the meeting to speak about how she was feeling, she might have gotten done at that point, because then we departed back into a whole maze. Instead, she said, "I was absolutely prepared then to talk about that, and how we talked about that, and I opened it to the team. Of course, we're going to go through the normal recruitment process and reply, which is going to be very hard, but we can't, we won't do that lightly." In the meantime, who wants to pick up a task for what? And everyone then said, "Well, when it comes to being on such and such committee and all those extra things that this person did to be the culture carrier and the glue, people should start doing that." And at which point, the person who's leaving, then said, "Can I interrupt you just now? You're all looking at how you're going to do it when I'm gone. I think you all forgot that it wasn't me who was doing it. It was all you. It was all of us."

The fact is that you've just already talked about that. So that was really powerful. It was powerful in saying, "Yes, you might look at me as maybe that person, but it wasn't just me. If we go to all the examples you've thanked me for, this is what happened. Because the glue needs to surface is to bond. So this person can probably be the glue that's got to have that stuck to it, and it wasn't glue just since there is a blob. So it is all of them".

What I'm interested in, in the process, is the exit interview. Obviously, there's an opportunity for an extended interview to be done. (Yeah.) In this instance, is there value in sharing what comes out of the exit interview with the team?

Yes, I know. I always think, if you can share, of course you've got to get the persons permission, but you also have to be able to say all of it not selectively. This method worked in this case. I'm not suggesting this will work in every case because it probably won't. It depends on the team, the size, the nature, etc. I think that was very fortunate to be, and fortunate is not the right word, but it'll do for now. It was imperative that it would be a safe environment for them to have their whole exercise. I felt that they could do it. So that reflects back on the leadership of the group that they know that it's a safe environment. We talked about fostering safe environments and being leaders to be able to do that.

I think that's an excellent example of the value of having a safe environment. Everyone knows that it's a safe environment. That's a safe conversation. I've seen very well-designed exit interviews and genuine commitment on that organization to do it. It's very individual because some people who are leaving can use it to advantage or, you know, misadventure or whatever, or to be genuine.

So again, and each case on its merits, there is another thing of this exercise that happened. To me, it's such a fantastic story and probably we won't hope to get more of it, but it doesn't happen very often. This leader sits on the executive team and this person who is left is popular, not just in their own team, but across the organization. As is often as the case with people like that and known to everyone, she's the go-to person when something would happen or not happen, she would have, you know, something good to add. When the leader

took it to the executive, so I'll just let you know because obviously, as I was also involved, they went through the same emotions, devastation, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so when she talked about what happened and the team and how it went there, they said, oh, that's really good. The CEO said, "oh, I really would like you to present this at the town hall meeting with the permission of the person and the team, how we value people coming in and leaving, how we respect them, how we celebrate them, and how we celebrate the extended team. And now I want to make the organization know that this is how we like things to be around here."

I think out of all of it, the point that we need to emphasize is that there's always going to be change. You can't expect to be in a team environment and have nothing change because you send out a different message altogether about what you're doing and that's not a good message, if there's not dynamic happening and not a little bit of change happening. I was always of the opinion that people were going to leave and I didn't worry about that. I just thought, what's going to happen? What my responsibility is, well, I've got this time together to give them as much results and as much development as I possibly can so that they are attractive to other organizations because in the long run that reflects back on me. And so that's a good thing for everybody and that when they go, I celebrate the fact that they go because they know that if the opportunity arises again, they will come back and work with me, because it's good to work with me.

So that's important in terms of leadership but always our first reaction to change is going to be what's going to happen to me? What about me? I'm the most important person in this equation. And if we know that that's the case and we start to prepare ourselves for technology but that the other person has also gone through a whole lot emotionally where they come to tell you because they've had to go through hell to say it and they're already second guessing what your reaction is going to be. So you need to acknowledge that all of that's already happened and don't surprise them with a different reaction than what they've expected. But then move through the process of grief, it's a grief process, anger and denial, acceptance and bargaining. They're not set phases and they don't overlap, they can mix and match and go at any time and last a long time or last a little time. So being aware of all of those things and thinking about those situations, don't be the person who has to reach their limit and say, we need a little bit of a meeting because I don't know what to say next.

I understand that that's a good resource if you haven't thought of that before but you've listened to this podcast so now you can think about what your reaction would be, how could you control that better, how would you move beyond the immediate reaction and just think about how that would work for you and your audience and your skills. And maybe there are things that you need to be willing to make, a measured response activity that you need to go through, maybe you need to do some roleplays or think about some case studies or think about other ways that you could react in those situations and think about the process in terms of your team and what would work for your team in carrying through the whole of the exercise and that whole communication that is happening because regardless of how careful everyone is, word we'll get out. And often it will come from outside the organisation rather than inside the organisation. You need to be aware of all of those things and you need to be measured in your responses to all of those things.

She's waving her hands, she's got nothing more to say so on that point we better finish really

quickly. (I'm not that bossy.) You know, bossy is not the word that came to mind, I'm sure you're all agree with me. I'm going to finish now for I get into more trouble. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.