
Leadership “Harem” Style



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When there’s no specific goal or role for its members, and constructive discussion makes way for fawning power plays, executive teams become little more than harems for dysfunctional leaders.

Edward had been so flattered when asked to join Serail Corporation’s executive team as VP Finance that he hadn’t done his homework. Now he was trying to manage his disappointment at discovering his portfolio was almost identical to one of his close colleague’s.

When he discussed the matter with the CEO, he was told that, while there might be some overlap, their areas of responsibility were different. The situation didn’t sit well with Edward and he had discovered - having taken a closer look at the roles of other members of the executive team - that he was not the only one in this predicament. There were other colleagues also without a clear mandate as to their exact role in the organisation. It made him wonder what he was up against.

From the beginning, Edward was struck by the number of people reporting to the CEO. In his experience, when the number of direct reports hit double-

digits, teams became cumbersome, not really productive. And this assumption seemed to be all too true.

Having attended a few of Serail Corporation's executive team meetings, Edward felt the word "meeting" didn't really give credit to what was going on. At best these get-togethers turned into information disseminating gatherings, usually, little or no real discussions of substantial issues would take place. His impression was that while the "team" was ostensibly a decision making body, in reality it was a highly constipated, underperforming and floundering entity. Too many of his colleagues were busy with social rituals and not mentally present. The real give-and-take that characterised proper meetings was completely absent. In fact most of his colleagues were silent, with the CEO doing almost all of the talking, thus very little got done.

What makes a team?

What Edward couldn't understand was why it had to be this way? The CEO had seemed to be such a strong believer in the value of teamwork. However, the real communications in the Serail Corporation took place bilaterally, and most of the important discussions with the CEO were conducted face-to-face.

What was really lacking was trust among his colleagues. From his previous management experience, Edward had learned that people needed to feel safe to have the courage to speak up when they had an idea, or when they felt that something wasn't right. But during meetings at the Serail Corporation everyone was always tiptoeing around the CEO. Most of the members of the team seemed to avoid dealing with the real issues, preferring veiled and guarded, often sniping, comments. And always hovering about was the issue of resource allocation. Who was going to get what? It made for too much silo behavior. It also explained the highly politicised atmosphere; the competition for the CEO's attention; and the far too frequent obsequious behavior. That most of the decisions made were sub-optimal didn't come as a surprise. As things were, most of the CEO team meetings were really a total waste of time and the situation was contributing to increasing feelings of alienation and disengagement among its members.

Another thing that amazed Edward was that in spite of the team's obvious dysfunctionality, nobody (and he was no exception) was leaving. He wondered why this was the case? Was it because they were all paid so well? Could they not afford to leave?

Harem management

As a history buff, the situation reminded Edward of a harem, where Ottoman sultans would keep members in a golden cage, creating a situation of not very subtle bondage. Movements of harem members were restricted, but even if they could leave, many members felt that life was really too comfortable to abandon. At the same time, because of the constraints put on their behavior, they would feel increasingly dead inside - a feeling Edward could identify with.

Harem management was a type of leadership that fostered a strong undercurrent of political influence. It is synonymous with the politicisation of some organisations, where various shadow individuals or groups compete fiercely for power. Harems were often directed behind the scenes by a sultan's female relatives, particularly the all-powerful mother, known as the Valide Sultan. And then there were the eunuchs. They could be lowly servants, or rise to become third in command after the Sultan and the Grand Vizier; and often had the trust, and the ear, of the sultan.

Reflecting on his own predicament, Edward could see how his CEO obtained some benefits from this harem-oriented way of running Serail Corporation. Why should he get rid of a person if he or she had still some use? Why annoy them by taking them off the executive committee?

While the CEO paid lip service to the advantages of teamwork, he clearly preferred working with members bilaterally. They all liked to have a direct reporting relationship with their boss. By keeping the roles of the people reporting to him ambiguous, he was assured that the information he needed would flow up. In addition, by keeping his "harem" he had reserves at hand in case one of the harem members became fed up with the situation. In the meantime, everyone in the company would be at his beck and call, vying for his attention.

Dysfunctional leadership

Throughout history, harems have always been beneficial social structures for alpha males, in return offering female members a high degree of comfort and a modicum of protection. Harems also created a cooperative defense of territory and allowed for a degree of constructive socialisation. However, as we saw in the Serail Corporation, harems are no Shangri-La's. Harem leaders need to be always on guard against others who would like to usurp their

power. And, as Edward noticed, there can be fierce intra-harem competition for resources, contributing to a great waste of energy and laborious decision-making. Implementation of desired actions can also be rather unpredictable and slow. To add to the negatives, harem-like structures are very expensive to maintain. It raises the question of why CEOs would set up such a structure in the first place?

From my experience, business leaders who prefer harem-like management systems are often prone to narcissistic dysfunctionality. They may come across as quite charming, but they know how to manipulate and exploit others for their own benefit.

While running their “harem”, these narcissistic leaders require blind, unquestioned obedience from all that work for them and a great deal of admiration. Harem leaders also have a strong sense of entitlement. They can be arrogant and haughty in their attitude, treating others with contempt and arrogance. It goes without saying that they will be the dominant force in any conversation, believing that they have the answers to most problems.

These kinds of leaders have also a rather suspicious outlook to life. They are hypersensitive of how they are perceived by others. Anyone who dares to criticise or question their behaviour will quickly be labeled as the “enemy,” and viewed as inferior, incapable, or not worthy.

The way things were progressing (or regressing) at the Serail Corporation, made Edward wonder whether his membership in the harem was really worth it. It had its privileges, but at what price? While at times, the CEO would throw him crumbs of attention, flattering him in making him believe that he was special - even suggesting that he had a great future at the corporation - Edward felt that his boss was messing with his head. He also wondered if there were other shadowy figures behind the CEO’s throne. Who had the CEO’s ear?

When team-making become a gesture

In light of Edward’s experience, it is clear that there are leaders who don’t really feel comfortable in team situations and prefer running their organisations in a bilateral way. A warning sign that this may be the case is when we encounter teams with double-digit numbers - and ambiguous role assignments.

In these instances, we should ask ourselves is it merely a gesture or is the leader serious in creating a real team?

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