



Waikiki From Above (Ilvia Yudkin)

Releasing the Martyrs

by Cyndi Gave

Why people with whom you start your company are not typically the same people who help you grow the company.

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REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE in the early days of your company? Perhaps you started in your garage or basement with just a few friends, or maybe you were fortunate to have enough capital to share, own, or rent a small facility that was large enough to accommodate the work at hand.

Your staff was probably hand-picked from people you knew. They risked their careers and family income on you – not just your business concept, but *you*. They believed in your personal capacity to be successful, and they supported your dream.

They often worked twelve-hour days and six-day weeks, but the long hours did not feel difficult. You all shared the same dream, you thrived in each others' company, and you felt a contagious energy working side by side.

In rare moments of respite, you would all share thoughts about what it would be like when this business really got off the ground. Everyone

knew it would all be worth it someday, and whether you said it or not, you knew that you would reward these dedicated people who made it happen – the ones who made the personal and professional sacrifices. The martyrs.

Fast forward a few years.

You've added additional people and have the business operating at a reliable level. As the money comes in, you show your appreciation by paying everyone a little over market demand to make up for the years you could not pay what they were worth. The martyrs feel appreciated; they know their blood, sweat, and tears are being well compensated, and they know you understand their sacrifice.

Business is good. Life is good.

So business keeps growing, and staff keeps increasing. You're ready to work some "normal" hours, and you want to give those martyrs – those who sacrificed so much for you – a "normal" life again, too.

You have two choices: reassign some existing staff to work for those original few, or ask the original few to hire new staff, enabling them to delegate work and return to normal hours and stress levels.

In your mind, either of these is a great idea. You and your buddies can enjoy a "normal" life, and you may even be able to spend some social time together. At work, you can work closest with those you most enjoy since you no longer have everyone reporting to you. Furthermore, you can reward the martyrs even more because they are now supervising others. Finally, and most importantly, the company runs more efficiently.

To your surprise, however, your buddies don't like this idea. They don't want to supervise employees. That will require training (which they think "wastes" time), and they don't trust new employees to do things the way they should be done.

The reality is that you are trying to make them something they're not. They're the martyrs. They *love* the absurd hours tackling work that no one else wants. They have sacrificed their personal lives – maybe even their families and health – to get this company rolling, and now you're asking them to empower others to continue *their* work?

No way.

TOUGH DECISIONS

Two issues are at play here. First, you have always rewarded them for their individual contributions and personal sacrifice, so that's what they expect to do. Second, they enjoy following your lead. They believe in the cause, and they like digging in and making things happen. It doesn't feel like sacrifice. It's fulfilling.

These issues will arise each time your organization reaches another plateau. The skills that got your organization to this level are not necessarily the skills that will take you to the next one. It is rare to find an employee who has the skills and

characteristics to be excellent at each level of organizational growth. It's even rarer to find an employee who feels fulfilled at each level.

At some point, you will need to assemble an executive team to help you with strategic matters, and this team may not include the original martyrs; they may be exceptionally good at the tactical activities, but they may not find fulfillment in strategic matters. If they're forced into that role, their dissatisfaction will be reflected in their work, behavior, and surrounding employees.

In forming an executive team, the pressure you feel is not from the employees who have served you so well for so long; it's from the obligation you feel to reward them for their service. By not promoting them to executive-level, you feel as though you are betraying or discrediting

them, and this keeps you from doing what you need to do for the organization. Some of the thoughts going through your head include:

- I can't ask my key individuals to report to a new hire; that will appear as a demotion or a devaluing of their efforts.
- I can't replace these people with someone else. I need to take care of them after all they have done for me.
- Maybe they will eventually realize that I need them to lead and become strategic players. They've always helped me before, and they'll do it again.
- These guys are smart. They will rise to the challenge if I just ask them.
- We're doing just fine, so maybe we don't need to make these changes.
- Then again, "good is the enemy of great."

Actually, there are a variety of ways to recognize your best contributors for what they have done in the past without sacrificing the future performance of your organization. Yes, you may need to part ways, but this is not necessarily the only solution. If it is the best solution, you and your treasured employees can still find a positive outcome.

SOLUTIONS

First of all, you must come to terms with your own paradigms. In your heart, you want to do what is best for your employee, and you may believe that means you need to keep him employed. In reality, however, that employee might be more successful, more fulfilled, and happier when employed by someone else.

Most people really want to be successful and feel like they do great work. In all my years of facilitating learning sessions, no one has raised a hand when I ask, "Who got up this morning thinking, 'How can I be a loser today?'" So before deciding

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what to do next, you must first accept the fact that your employees could actually be better off elsewhere.

The next step will feel incredibly uncomfortable at first, but it will be a tremendous relief as soon as you start. You need to have a conversation with the employees of concern. Start with the following points:

- I want to talk about our future and how we can both be very happy.
- You have been an incredible contributor to this organization and my personal success, and I want only the best for you.
- Now that I'm in a much better place than when we first started, I want to explore what *you* want for your future. I realize it may not include me or this organization, but I want to help you achieve your personal goals.

The meat of the conversation is all about your treasured employee:

- If money were not a concern, what type of work would you do?
- What types of work have you enjoyed the most in the past?
- Tell me about the most satisfying situations or instances with which you've been involved in the last ten years.
- Is there anything you clearly do *not* want to do?
- Describe the type of people with whom you most enjoy working.

Remember, these are people who enjoy taking care of you, so the first part of the conversation should remind them that you are fine and it is your turn to take care of them. At the very least, you no longer need these employees to take care of you.

The second part of the conversation should explore what the employee finds fulfilling. If you feel ill-prepared to help in this matter, you might recommend a coach or employment specialist who could administer assessments and explore what careers would be best for your friend.

After the initial conversation, it's easy. You can help develop a plan to prepare the individual for his next role, whether it is inside or outside the organization. You might provide financial support, moral support, or just time to pursue these activities.

If both of you agree the employee is best suited as an individual contributor within your organization, it's time to discuss positioning him as a special internal consultant. It's even

possible that your friend may, after the career exploration, be very content reporting to someone else and helping make that person very successful in supporting you.

Most importantly, you must determine at what this person excels and in what environment. The compensation part may require some creativity, but if you were prepared to pay him more to keep him in a position that was not ideal, why not do the same to put him in a better position for himself and the company?

These decisions are growing pains. They may hurt in the moment, but they hold promise of great things to come.



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