

Tough at the Top

Resource #11

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Getting the right people on the bus.

Chapter 11: Send in the Clowns

Do you ever feel like someone who's supposed to be your colleague is actually working against you? That no matter what you do, you can't win? In this chapter, Adam has a problem and that problem is in the shape of Scary Doctor Whiteface. Nothing Adam does satisfies him...



“I’ve tried everything I can think of. I thought he liked structure, so I had formal meetings with proper agendas. I thought he liked to feel in control, so I let him set the agenda items. I thought his whole objective was to get that salary increase, so I’ve framed everything I’ve showed in terms of how it benefits his team and gets us closer to achieving that. I’ve tried being nice. I’ve tried being firm. I’ve tried being confrontational. I’ve tried being spontaneous. I’ve tried sharing my ideas. I’ve tried asking him for his ideas. I’ve gone to him with problems, I’ve gone to him with solutions. And none of it’s good enough for him. None of it makes him happy. He just derails everything I do...I am officially out of ideas.”



Doctor Whiteface is a classic example of the damage that a deeply disengaged employee can do; in fact, he's a Happiness Saboteur. He highlights problems that he himself instigates. He works to the letter of his contract but is so determinedly disengaged that he goes out of his way to do this in as awkward a way as possible. He places doubt in the mind of his team-mates, and he undermines Adam's best efforts to engage people and create a happy team.

Adam reaches several important realisations. He comes to understand that there is nothing further he can do: Scary Doctor Whiteface will never be happy at the Starlight in its new form. He realises that if Scary Doctor Whiteface is going to go quietly and with minimum damage, he has to go happy. And that means facing up to the one thing they have in common, i.e. that neither Adam nor Scary Doctor Whiteface enjoy having Doctor Whiteface at the Starlight.



In his book Good to Great, Jim Collins describes how leaders who get the biggest transformation in their organisation, begin by getting the right people on the bus.

“They first got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figured out where to drive it...If we get the right people on the bus, right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great.” Jim Collins, Good to Great, 2001



His concept suggests that our success in achieving any vision or goals we set for ourselves lies in the hands of our people; if we have the wrong people in the team, nothing we do will deliver success. But when we focus our efforts on getting the team right, movement towards what we want becomes much easier and success far more likely. (Here's a thought: if we're confident we have the right people, why not let them set the vision and objectives for the organisation?)

Take a moment to consider these questions:

Are all the people on your bus the right people? Or do you have a Scary Doctor Whiteface on the team?

If you have a potential Doctor Whiteface, how happy are they? Do they like working for you and the organisation? Are they happy with the direction you're all moving in, or do they disagree? How do you know that - have you asked them?

If they genuinely aren't happy, and you find yourself in a similar position to Adam - what is the best outcome for you both?

If it's clear to both of you that they aren't right for the bus, what are the conditions for them getting off happy, and ready to find the right bus for them? (Remember that Adam had Helen to help him. Could HR be your supportive fortune teller?)

And one final thought to end on. Just because someone isn't right for your organisation, that doesn't mean they won't absolutely shine somewhere else. We can only do our best work and be our best selves when we really believe in the value of what we do. If you have an employee who's actively unhappy with the direction your organisation is headed, getting them off the bus (and ready to board another one) is often the very best decision for both of you.