

EIGHT WITNESSES · ONE CASE

The Frozen Leader

Eight perspectives on one standstill

PÉTER KLEIN

At a product company, the best designer was promoted to team lead six months ago. Now they sometimes freeze at the simplest decision. They tense up in meetings. The team grumbles around them.

*Eight witnesses tell the same six months. All eight tell the truth.
The full picture is made of all eight.*

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ABOUT THE IMAGES

AI-generated illustrations, in black and white.

Integrated operating models

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My good designer became a mediocre leader.

- I put them in the chair. My best person. Whoever delivered the most should lead the team too. It seemed like a good decision.
- I know what would be honest. Looking at what I got wrong. It's easier to say they're weak. Then my decision was right.
- The truth is, I find it hard to let go too. Until now, what I thought up, I did myself. Now I have to watch someone else do it, more slowly, and stay quiet.
- I confused two things. They designed well, so I assumed they'd lead well too. They were skilled at one. They're learning the other now, in front of their team.
- I gave them a new profession. I just never said so.

Tonight, quietly, for yourself: write down what you expect from your newly appointed leader, and beside it, which decisions they can make alone. This gets settled at home, well before the next meeting.



I sit on the other side now.
Yesterday among them,
today across from them.

- I open the old file in the evenings. There, my hand remembers.
There, I know who I am.
- By day it's different. Too many thank-yous, too many pleases.
But the team needs security. Kindness is only the surface.
- Someone who sat at your level yesterday tells you your fault
more boldly. And to them it's hardest to admit I'm stuck.
So instead I take it home and redraw their work at night.
I call it quality.
- By morning my shoulders are stone. My eyes are lead-
heavy, I'd rather keep them shut for a day. I used
to be sharp. Today I'm blunt.

*If your leader flees into their old craft, that's fear talking. Ask them privately:
who is hardest to win acceptance from right now. Often it's yesterday's equals.*



They act as if they were my boss. But yesterday we were still drawing side by side.

- I applauded the day they were promoted. I was glad someone would shield us from above.
- They ask for everything back. They hand it out, then redraw it. In the end their hand is on it, only my name. Micromanagement, I tell the others in the kitchen. They nod.
- I leave something out of the story. It's easier for me to criticise them than a proper boss. I know their weak points, we came from the same level. My courage has grown. My knowledge hasn't.
- At half past two we head out for our second coffee. They stay inside. Alone. They used to be the one who called us out.

Grumbling is rarely about one person. It's about who answers for what being unclear. At the next complaint, ask: whose decision is this to make. The boundary is yours to state.



When they take on someone else's burden too, my neck and shoulders ache.

- On the day of the promotion, my breath came easily.
My shoulders were straight.
- Now, before a meeting, my stomach knots. At the decision I block them, because to me uncertainty is danger. I wake them at three in the morning.
- The head shouts me down for a long time. Just stress, I'll pull myself together. So I signal louder. My eyelids turn to lead: they'd keep them shut for a day.
- The same number leaves the others cold. I overwhelm them.
- They hold up through meetings all day. During the event, they're still fine. It hits afterwards: they sit in the car like a rag doll, and barely remember the next conversation.
- My shoulders, the sleep, my stomach. This is my dashboard. Six months, all red. I signal exactly.

The body signals before the mouth can say it. Before your next one-to-one, ask your leader how they're sleeping. Then ask yourself the same.



You assigned people to tasks.
You should have assigned
them to responsibility.

- On the day of the promotion, I was redrawn. One box higher, with a new title. The title changed. The lines stayed.
- On paper, they decide who takes leave when. In practice, the colleague turns to someone else. The authority is theirs, the team still takes the question elsewhere.
- They do the work of two people for one head's pay. They dial into the call from the boss's office, half here, half there.
- Senior leadership, middle management. A gap between them. You seated them in the gap, and from there you ask for a decision.

Take out the org chart tonight. Beside your leader's name, write the responsibility; under it, the authority they actually received. Where the two diverge, that's the gap.



Your most expensive person is doing the cheapest work.

- On the day of the promotion, their hourly rate went up. That's fair, the higher chair costs more.
- Look at what that costlier hour goes on. In the morning they redraw a junior's work. In the evening they salvage their old work. Their rate went up, their tasks stayed down.
- A week has forty working hours, out of a hundred and sixty-eight. The child has to fit in there too, and sleep. Every yes is a no somewhere else.
- You pay for it twice, and you book the pricier one under the wrong line.
- There's a line item you rarely see. The decision that didn't happen. The meeting that stalled because they were sitting in the details. This is called opportunity cost. It stays unbilled.

Work it out once, on paper. What your leader's hour costs, and how many hours they spend on work a junior could do. The difference is on your bill.



You look at a moment. I look at an arc.

- The day of the promotion: hope, plans, a straight line upward. Today: six months in, freezing up, grumbling. The line has broken, and the moment whispers that it's over.
- Seen from five years on, today is the third month of a long arc. It takes about this long for a craftsperson to become a leader. The promotion was only the start.
- The top level thinks in quarters. Middle management in months. The craftsperson in days. The transition rewrites this clock inside them, and that hurts.
- In the evening they drive home past the cemetery, and think of who's finally fulfilling their calling in there. At dawn they race down the motorway like a hunted animal.
- 'Still early' easily sounds like 'a mistake' when you're standing in the present. Yet years lie between the two.

Check when you promoted them. If it's under six months, judge the curve, not the point. Give it a date by which the curve should still be steep, and patience until then.



All eight are watching their own film.

In Kurosawa's film, four witnesses tell one story, and all four tell it differently. The question is the viewpoint itself.

The CEO defended their decision. The new team lead, their old self. The team member, their freedom. The body signalled. The role showed a missing line. The money showed the bill. Time showed the arc. All true. And each only a slice.

The frozen leader is a good person in the wrong role. Carrying a boundary that belongs to someone else. A body running at its limit. An hour burned on cheap work. An arc in its third month.

You assigned people to tasks. You should have assigned them to responsibility. The opposite of a bad leader is rarely a better leader. The solution is not the opposite of the problem. The solution sits in another layer: the role, which needs redrawing.

These eight perspectives are a tool. If you have a frozen leader too, read all eight layers. Who carries the symptom and where the problem lives are two separate questions.

A standstill rarely shows in only one place.

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