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Sherri Fella: Your 'shadow' sets the tone for your team

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IN THE WORKPLACE

A coaching client of mine has been on an expedition like no other: She's been digging internally to get to the root of her behavior.

This kind of digging is only for the brave. The learner. The leader. The warrior. Expeditions like these take time and support. Coaches, counselors, friends, colleagues and family all can offer unique perspective and guidance, but only she can do the digging for herself. Layer after layer of each life chapter has to be taken off, examined and understood from so many angles: How did I get here? What drives my behavior? That story in my head? My assumptions? My choices? And

what do I want to be different?

Leaders don't go on expeditions like this often enough. Too often, they stop at the surface or barely go inside the cave where the light is still shining when deeper exploration into the darkness is required for their sake and the sake of their teams, organizations and families. To understand the kind of leadership shadow you cast, you have to get underneath all the layers of it.

The phenomenon of a leadership shadow has been around for centuries as described in ancient myths, and it is still an area of investigation today for good reason. The shadow we cast as a leader sets the tone, tempo and temperature for everyone around us wherever we are—home, work, school, church, community. Wherever we go, we go as a whole person. We don't just cast the "light" parts at church and the "dark" parts at work. We take all of our shadow everywhere.

Have you considered lately what kind of shadow you are casting? Is it light or dark? Broad or narrow? Consistent or erratic? Inclusive or exclusive? Perhaps you don't even know. If that is the case, please ask those around you for their reflections. In fact, ask them even if you think you know; they will have a more accurate view than you do of how you are showing up. Certainly, you know your intentions, but others can speak to your actions—to how they experience you and how it feels to be around you versus how you want them to experience you.

The shadow question is what began the expedition for my client. She became aware that how she was showing up was not how she intended and that she was getting in the way of her team's growth. So she began digging. She didn't debate the feedback that she was wearing people out and driving them out of the

organization; she thanked people for being brave enough to tell her. She didn't defend or try to explain away their experiences that they said made her difficult to relate to. She took in the data and explored it until she understood it.

Sadly, there are many examples of leadership shadows that cast a narrow darkness. Too many leaders get "good" results that leave people suffering in their shadow. Too often, the darkness is excused for a few flecks of light—a big bonus, a sales deal, a booming economy. If you feel stuck in the shadow of someone else's narrowness, I hope you have the courage to break free and explore how to be in the shadow of consistent light and inclusion.

Shadows of leaders who perform at high levels and who create sustainable growth consistently cast light and create lift for those around them. They light the way for all to find opportunities to join in and contribute.

After 15 months, this is the shadow my client is now casting more consistently. She no longer justifies the dark shadow of her past by holding up positive key-performance indicators and double-digit growth. She knew she was erratic and exclusive and she was rewarded for it. Everyone above her enabled her behavior because it got them the results they wanted, and the results she wanted.

She wants different results now: She wants a lighter, broader, inclusive shadow that grows her team and her family, and she's getting that. And guess what? Her numbers are off the charts, and her team is not only staying—they are thriving. All because she was brave enough to explore her own shadow. •

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