



Taming the Corporate Shrew

Transforming a modern business archetype through executive coaching

The profile

Last week, one of Carla's staff came to her with an idea for improving a core process in the department. Carla barked her response. "If you were LISTENING in yesterday's staff meeting, you'd know that that won't work! Do I have to come up with ALL the improvement strategies myself?!" "Witch," the employee muttered under his breath as he cowered away. "See if I ever make another suggestion again around here..."

Carla is an example of an archetype in business today: the corporate shrew. She is the woman who rules with an iron fist and a sharp tongue. In her continual quest for higher performance, she bears down harder and harder on her staff: demanding more overtime, imposing tighter deadlines, and coming down hard on people for their mistakes. She lives for her work and, whether she says so or not, she expects her staff to do the same.

The corporate shrew presents a real dilemma for organizations. On one hand, she possesses many qualities that most organizations deem invaluable: intelligence, knowledge, drive, and dedication to the mission. On the other hand, her take-no-prisoners leadership style also makes her a very real liability to employee morale, productivity and retention. Many organizations make the difficult choice to retain her for her knowledge and hard work, while investing countless resources to clean up the damage she leaves behind.



How did this happen?

Carla, now in her late 40's, entered the workforce when women had to be twice as competent and tough as men to survive. She is part of a generation of female workers who proved their mettle in a man's world through exceptional drive, guts, smarts and results-orientation. These traits won Carla respect and promotions. But as Carla rose into the management ranks, her relentless drive and perfectionism, once the keys to her success, became the very causes of her demise.

Research confirms what most of us know through direct experience: that the best leaders – male and female alike - are the ones who combine a tough results-orientation with the ability to collaborate, empathize, and ignite positive emotion in others. In other words, many of the more relational traits that Carla had to banish from her repertoire to get into management are the very ones that she needs now in order to succeed there.

What's the path forward?

When Carla first got the feedback that her once-winning style was now a liability, she rejected it. Yet she could not deny that her department's morale and productivity had collapsed during her time as its leader. She came to me for coaching. Our work together lasted about a year, and went through three distinct phases.

Phase I: Exploration

Carla's first task was to take an uncompromising look at how she conducted herself at work and what that was costing her. She discovered that she almost always felt stressed and impatient. For the first time, she heard the irritation in her voice when staff came to her with questions. She noticed her tendency to berate employees who made mistakes.

Carla then examined the cost of this behavior. Over the past year, her most seasoned and talented staff had left. The remaining members of her staff were starting to cover up problems to escape her wrath. Because of these cover-ups, Carla was often blind-sided by issues in management team meetings; her peer managers often complained of problems in her department that she had been completely unaware of. Over time, Carla came to see that her quest for perfection actually *detracted* from her group's productivity.

One other thing that Carla noticed was that she was completely exhausted. In anguish, she said to me, "I'm so tired of striving! But

I'm afraid I'll fail or fall apart if I stop."

Carla realized that she had invested in her job at the expense of her family, her happiness and her health - and, ironically, at the expense of her effectiveness on the job itself.

Phase II: Building new muscles

Contrary to her behavior at work, Carla was not a difficult person by nature. When she was relaxed, she was funny, energetic and caring. She did not need to become a new person to succeed at work; she needed to develop some new "muscles" in service of a more versatile approach. Our coaching focused on helping her build the following new competencies:

- focusing less on what was wrong and more on what was right, both in herself and in others
- finding ways of giving performance feedback that engaged and inspired others, rather than deflated them
- becoming a trusted and trusting partner to her staff
- regaining her perspective on what really matters in life
- reestablishing her balance and energy, so that she could invest in her life outside of work
- relaxing, both physically and mentally.

Carla's development took time and effort, and her progress was anything but a straight line forward. Ironically, learning to ease up was hard work.

Phase III: Integration

Even after Carla developed her new "muscles," she spent a good deal of time in practice, so that her new skills became consistent habits. Over time, she found herself spontaneously praising people. It became easier to remain calm and positive in the face of others' mistakes. As Carla



Over time, Carla came to see that her quest for perfection actually detracted from her group's productivity.

LeaderShift
CONSULTING

304-876-6934
info@leadershift.net
www.leadershift.net
Copyright © 2006

integrated what she learned, her new skills and perspectives produced unanticipated positive behavior and results, both at work and in her personal life.

Where is she today?

Two years ago, Carla was on the verge of losing her job. Today, she is an effective – and respected – senior executive at a large technology company. Through a leadership style which now balances toughness with a concern for people, Carla is widely credited with turning around the performance and morale of a once-floundering organization.

In coaching Carla and women like her, I have learned that corporate shrews are not the one-dimensional ogres that they are reputed to be. Instead, I have found them to be hearty, funny, and generous people who are enormously committed to their organizations' success. With organizational support and personal commitment, these hard-driving women executives are successfully evolving into the kind of leaders that people *want and choose* to follow.



These hard-driving women leaders are evolving into leaders that people want and choose to follow.

LeaderShift
CONSULTING

304-876-6934
info@leadershift.net
www.leadershift.net
Copyright © 2006