

Ali Schultz:

There's two questions I have. One of them came up in conversation with a client. It's kinda been ongoing and it's a struggle of how do I trust the team enough to back away and to not be included in all of these meetings? He keeps saying "I keep trying to change my calendar around but I find myself in all of these meetings."

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Ali Schultz:

I know this isn't unique. It's not the only client that I've had this conversation with, so, I think there's a lot around that move, what does it mean to actually kind of step away and let other people step up and lead?

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Ali Schultz:

When things become more formal. I have a feeling we'll be talking a little about building the machine that builds the machine.

Jerry Colonna:

I think that your first instinct is right, that this is a universal problem. In fact, the good thing is that anybody who relates to this should be celebrated because what this is, it's emblematic of success and if you remember, remember my pyramid, so I'm gonna sort of visualize the pyramid right. So, we have an upside, a right side up pyramid and when companies get founded and led by the founder, they naturally gravitate to the right side up pyramid with the CEO or the founder, or the particular leader at the apex of that pyramid.

Jerry Colonna:

And, it's the naturally occurring hierarchy. It's the thing that occurs to people. It's like 'Hey I have an idea. Let's get together and let's do something.' The problem is that it doesn't scale and there are two indicators that I see that a company is still stuck in that spot. The first is when the CEO says 'Gosh darn it, why can't everybody make decisions without me?' And the second is 'Darn it, I don't want them making decisions without me.' (laughs) So, both reactions are indicators that what we have is we've outgrown that initial stance right, and, and what's really important about understanding that is the impulse to stay in that spot...first of all when the person who has power or the person who has leadership responsibilities holds on to that and this, your client I hear that going on. "I can't trust when..." When we hear that phrase, one way to process it is, "I am afraid to let go."

Jerry Colonna:

Right. Now, the person might say 'Why if I trusted them then I wouldn't be afraid.' Except it actually goes the other way.

Ali Schultz:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry Colonna:

I have to be able to deal with my fear of letting go of the decision making process even at the risk of "Oh my God they're gonna make the wrong decision." So that the people you're leading can then experience the consequences of making their own decisions without El Hefe as I like to refer to it. The boss making all the decisions. There's a corollary to that but I wanna pause and sort of see does that make any sense to you?

Ali Schultz:

That makes a ton of sense. I think another thing that often comes up is realizing too, the team who was created in that first stage of the company may not be the exact team that grows with you in the next stage. I'm thinking of another client who will often say 'I can't trust these people to lead or these people haven't led before.'

Jerry Colonna:

Right. Can I build on the team piece of this, because this, because that actually touches the corollary. So, you brought up an issue around the team where this shows up and there's a corollary to that, that I'll bring into so what I just heard you speak to is the fact that the team often times lacks the experience to be able to take things, right, and so let's take a classic example. There's a product oriented founder who has always loved the product and, and had the initial idea for launching a company, then builds a team and it starts to become successful. Okay.

Jerry Colonna:

And they can't get themselves out of product management. Now, the first people that they hire tend to be people who lack the experience and gravitas or qualifications to go work for a much larger company. Why are they taking this job? They're taking this job because they want the experience. Right, they'll take a lower salary, they'll take a higher risk so that they get the experience of being responsible.

Jerry Colonna:

Now you've got this sort of interesting little dialectical challenge because you've got on the one hand a fearful CEO who doesn't wanna let go married to a bunch of folks who are first-timers and they're dying to make the mistakes but they're also scared of making mistakes. So this is like a prescription for real setup for a real problem.

Jerry Colonna:

So we enter into the corollary. And the corollary that I'm speaking to is when teams are unconsciously complicit in their own infantilization. So let's go back to that pyramid, that right side up pyramid for a moment. El Hefe is sitting at the top, making all the decisions, complaining about making all the decisions or complaining about being involved in everything and right below them are all these first-time directors and vice presidents who are basically saying 'God dammit get out of our hair, stop micromanaging us.'

Jerry Colonna:

'Oh by the way, I'm really scared of making this first-time decision so you'd better not go too far.' And the way we know that that started to show up is that mid-level starts to make decisions and they quickly went back. And they hand off the decision making back to the El Hefe. Back to the top of the pyramid. "Here, you make the decision." And there's this like push me, pull you that goes on between the two levels within the organization. Well, who's gonna make the decision? "I'm not gonna make the decision what if I get fired?" Ooh. And there's the fear. Or worse, 'What happens if I don't get fired, what happens if I get over topped by somebody who has more experience?' Which is again a naturally occurring phenomena. So, the question is actually a really complex question and the reason we can both smile and nod as much as we are smiling and nodding about this is that we see the implications of this every day in our clients.

Jerry Colonna:

This is very, very common. And I said at the start of this, it's an indicator of success. Right. Because, if the product failed abysmally you would not be facing this problem. If there was zero product market fit, you would not be facing this problem. So this problem exists because the machine is starting to work. Right. And what this all speaks to in my view is the continuous process of adaptation and adjustment that everybody in leadership has to make, aka growth.

Jerry Colonna:

And, I'm gonna re-emphasize that first word. Continuous process. First phrase. Because one of the other experiences is I just got this whole system working and it's changing again. You're nodding, you recognize this.

Ali Schultz:

Yes. I have a beloved client who relates it to cleaning up the yard. He's like 'I just get the front, it's like I just get the front yard organized and all situated and then I go in the backyard and I'm like well, time to do the backyard and then you go around to the front yard and you're like I just did this and I need to do this again.'

Jerry Colonna:

Right. Right. So the metaphor I always use is painting the bridge. The minute you finish painting the bridge you have to go all over and start painting the bridge again because it takes so long to paint the bridge that weather wears it down. The mistake that people make, the misunderstanding that they have when they make that assertion, is that they think that their job is to do something other than that. Your job, I would say to your client, is to always be cleaning up the yard.

Ali Schultz:

That is the job.

Jerry Colonna:

Right. It's not like 'I clean up the job, the yard, and then I get to go to my work.'

Ali Schultz:

And I think that's the shift. That's the shift in perspective.

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Ali Schultz:

Because it's exhausting to be continually cleaning up the yard.

Jerry Colonna:

Right. So let's close by referencing back to trust because there's also an implicit question in the first piece of that, which is how can I trust?

Ali Schultz:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Jerry Colonna:

Right. And the simplest way to trust is to let go of perfection. If you can allow the team to make mistakes then it's a lot easier to trust. Now there's a couple of things that have to be in place for that to happen. And both require exquisite communications. The first is 'I'm gonna trust that you can make mistakes but I'm gonna put these guard rails in place so if you're driving down the road, you're not gonna take the car off, off the edge of the cliff. You might smack into the guard rails but you're not going to trash the car.' Okay. So the leader has to set the guard rails. Has to set the equivalent of it.

Jerry Colonna:

The corollary to that is what happens on the team side is they get their hands on the wheels of the car and they just want to drive. They don't wanna stop and check in and say how it's going. They don't because they don't want to open up the possibility that somebody's gonna micro-manage. Well, you have to check in as your part of the bargain of building a trusting relationship, you have to say, "This is what's going on." And equally important you have to share it when you're struggling because if not, you're not gonna get the keys to the car again. So, it's a two-way exchange of communication. These are the guard rails. These are the limits and the contractual commitment back is, I will tell you when things are going to rise so there are no surprises. Guard rails, no surprises. Within that structure, let them rip, let them loose. You can always fix it afterwards as long as you've set the proper guard rails.