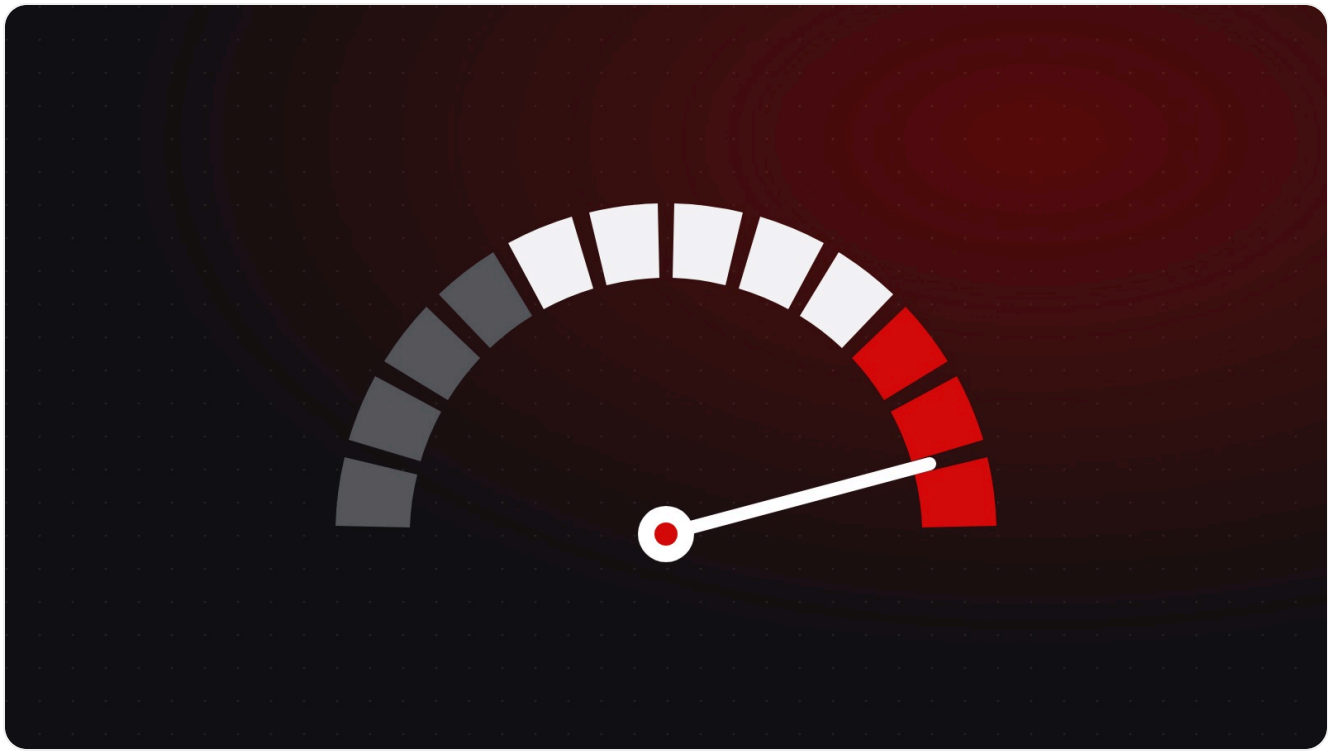
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Why Good Leaders Get Branded as Problems.



By Tommy Lee



When your greatest strength becomes the thing that holds you back.

Here's a scenario. A leader is really good at what they do. He or she is so good that this very skill made them successful for years. And then one day, that same strength is the thing that gets them branded as a problem. It happens a lot, and it usually catches people by surprise.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. I have a friend who has led an organization for more than twenty years. He is one of the hardest working people I know. He pulls people together. He rallies the volunteers and gets things done. And he never asks you to do

something he would not do himself. He is the first to jump in and say, hey, what are you working on, can I help? He works very hard, he is sacrificial, and it's never about him. For twenty years, that worked. People loved him for it.

But now, twenty something years later, that same hard work is being called toxic. The staff feels overworked. The very thing that built the organization is now the thing people complain about. He is criticized for "taking advantage of people." What happened? He did not change. The organization and the culture changed around him. The people changed. What worked for one generation or group of people does not land the same way with the next. He failed to adapt to how people work and to a change in personalities. I see this a lot.

A leader who never stops working was normal for a long time. Gen X learned to deal with it. But Gen Z and the generation after them are not going to deal with it the same way. In Deloitte's 2025 survey, Gen Z workers said good work life balance was the top reason they chose their employer, even ahead of pay. They watched older people burn out and still get laid off, and they decided they do not want that life. So the same leadership that once looked like dedication now looks like a problem to a younger team.

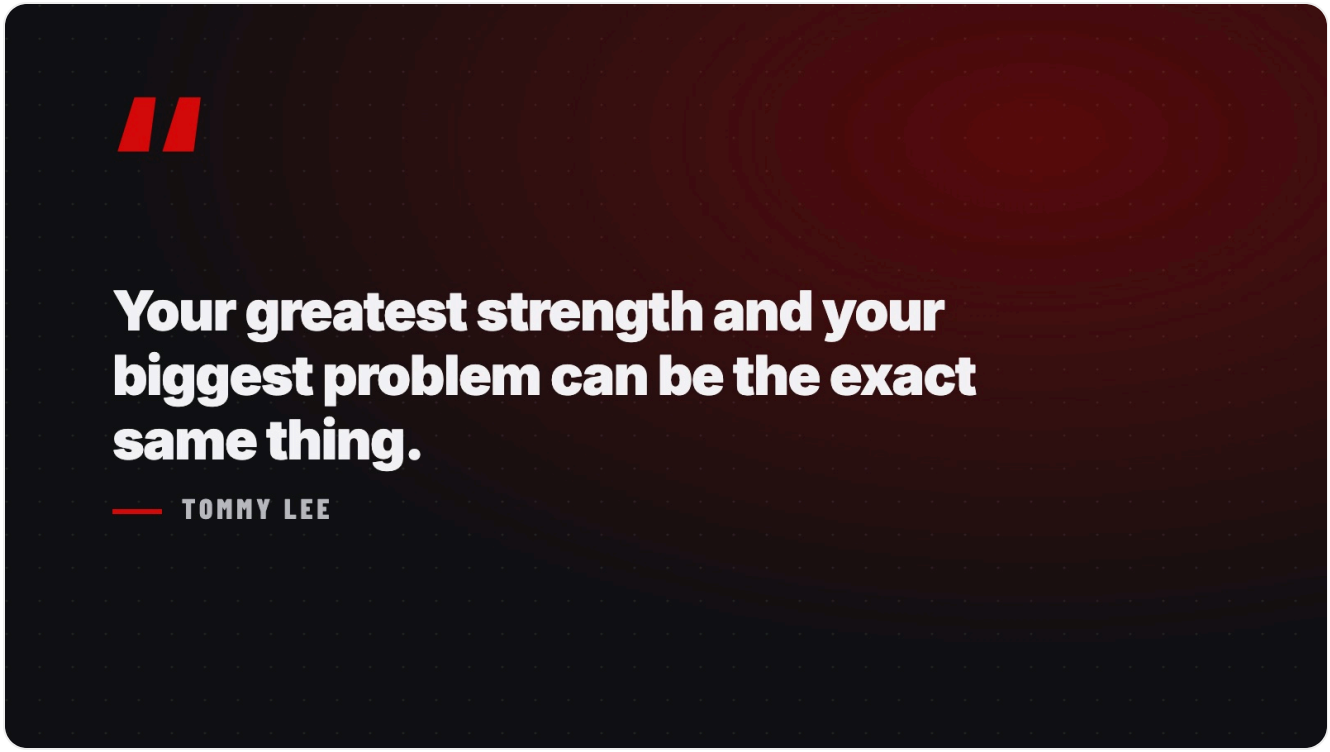
So why does this happen to good leaders? Let me walk through a few reasons.

First, a strength gets overused. This is the big one. There is actually good research on it. Two leadership researchers, Robert Kaplan and Robert Kaiser, have studied leaders for years. What they found is that most leaders become lopsided. They lean so hard on one strength that they neglect the opposite side, and that overuse slowly works against them. The detail person who has a great eye gets promoted for it, and then that same eye for detail turns into control and drives everyone crazy. The hardworking person who never stops expects everyone else to work at their pace. The strength does not go away. It just gets pushed too far. There's nothing wrong with leaning into your strengths, but it is also key for you to be aware of your weaknesses and figure out a way to improve on your weaknesses or find people to help compensate for that. Sometimes your greatest strength can turn into a weakness. So be aware of that. Does your skill set work well with the culture you are in right now? If there's tension, will it clear up over time? Will there need to be a period of adjustment or will there always be tension? Will the personalities get along?

Second, your reputation follows you. The more successful you are, the more your reputation goes ahead of you. People have stories about you before you even walk in the room. And once that story is set, everything you do or do not do feeds right into it. It is hard to break out of a reputation once people have decided who you are. This can be good or bad.

Third, the organization changed or even outgrew the role of the current leader. Sometimes what the organization needed at the start is not what it needs now. Think about a big bank like JP Morgan. They are not looking for some wild entrepreneur to come shake everything up. That is not who they are. So the question is not always, is this person good? The question is, what does the organization need right now, and where is it going? A great leader can still be the wrong fit for where the organization is today.

There is an old saying that fits all of this. What got you here will not get you there. The behaviors that made you successful can be the same ones holding you back at the next level. That is a hard thing to hear when those behaviors are the reason you succeeded in the first place.



So what do you do about it? This is where a lot of organizations get it wrong. They put the person on a performance plan and basically say, change everything about how you lead. That almost never works. You cannot ask someone to flip their whole identity overnight.

What works better is small steps. You affirm the person's strengths first. Then you help them see the blind spot they cannot see on their own. Or if they can see it, help them figure out ways to address it. Then you give them small, doable changes, not a giant overhaul. If someone is so entrepreneurial that they never slow down, do not just tell them to be more detailed. Give them one small habit. Write down what you did today and share it with the team. If someone does not connect with their people, do not just say engage more. Tell them, find three people each week

and get to know them on something other than work. Small steps like that build new habits without asking you to become a different person. Now there are some who are just unwilling to change. The organization then needs to ask: can we deal with it, and does their strength overcompensate for their weaknesses?

And through all of it, you have to be self aware. You have to be willing to look at yourself and ask, what changed, and why am I suddenly being seen this way?

The thing I keep coming back to is this. Your greatest strength and your biggest problem can be the exact same thing. You do not have to get rid of the strength. You just have to know when you are pushing it too far, stay honest with yourself, and keep adjusting as your team and your organization change around you.

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