

# THE IMPACT OF REALITY-EDITING LEADERS

## REALITY-EDITING LEADERS

We hope you have been following along in our series of The Impact of Reality-Editing Leaders. If you have not had a chance to read Part I, do so now, prior to reading this conclusion.

## STRATEGIES OF REALITY-EDITING LEADERS

### 1ST

The first strategy is the generation of a “reality distortion field.” Among his many talents, Steve Jobs possessed a world-class ability to spin the truth and create, in the words of biographer Walter Isaacson, “a reality distortion field, ...a confounding mélange of a charismatic rhetorical style, indomitable will, and eagerness to bend any fact to fit the purposes at hand.” As one colleague put it,

"He reminded me of Rasputin...He laser-beamed in on you and you didn't blink. It didn't matter if he was serving purple Kool-Aid. You drank it."

Jobs regularly used this strategy to motivate colleagues, and, as necessary, bend others to his will.

### 2ND

The second strategy is more explicit and aggressive.

Afflicted leaders often use reality editing as an offensive weapon to silence opposition, and coerce and manipulate individuals, or even the entire organization to “stay true to the party line.”

It typically plays out like this. The spun narrative (our leader is trustworthy and powerfully effective and thus all is well, etc.) is called into question, as facts to the contrary become publicly known. Of course, the reality-editing leader never goes down without a fight, and those loyal to the narrative (omegas and others with a vested interest in perpetuating the leader's narrative) join in the reality editing work. The inconvenient facts are denied, disputed, or discredited, and those who persist in believing them are given the same treatment.

The reality editor's view of things must be the only view, the one right view.

Accordingly, they work feverishly—and often quite adeptly—to convince the organization they are right and the facts are wrong. If that doesn't work, they banish dissent, even loyal dissent, from the camp.

I got a first hand report of how this narrative-protection process took shape in a conversation with members of an organization that was unraveling due to the unethical and immature behavior of its top leader. The undisputed public facts were these: the leader had misappropriated the organization's money and displayed a pattern of blatant arrogance, treating other leaders and members with contempt and disregard. These accusations prompted a burst of narrative spinning reminiscent of a nasty political campaign.

The top leader, so the newly re-framed narrative went, had been under extreme pressure to help the organization succeed.

Due to his selfless service to the organization he was, of course getting tired and frustrated, especially in light of the incompetence and foot-dragging of his subordinates. He should be applauded for his sacrificial work. While he was indeed “aggressive” his actions were simply a reflection of his “leadership style,” and should not be misunderstood as a character flaw. The leader took great pains to remind his critics that “he had broken no law” in his financial dealings and everything had been done in service of the organization.

His inner circle of supporters came to his defense, touting the line that “average members just didn’t appreciate the leader’s genius.”

## **THEN THE REALITY EDITING TURNED ON THE OFFENSIVE**

and a slur campaign was launched against those who continued to verbalize their concerns. Some were said to be “critical people lacking in maturity” Other members were said to have “personal issues,” were not “team players,” or had “problems with authority.” Many critics were made an example, as they were named by name and systematically marginalized. Not surprisingly, many departed as support of the party line continued to substitute for honest inquiry and candid discussion.

## **SUMMARY AND IMPACT**

Reality editing has disastrous consequences for top leaders and the organization unfortunate enough to have them in charge. When leaders don’t learn from experience, they undermine the learning capacity of the entire organization.

“Isolated from candid feedback, the organization will be slow to embrace the realities of the external operating environment, especially if those realities don’t support the prevailing narrative that our leader is wonderful and things are going well. Reality—the real version—comes soon.

It always prevails and has zero regard for the leader and his or her narrative fiction.

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