Want to be "The Fall Guy?" Here's How

by Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO

Once upon a time, I associated AIG with the comforting voice of the narrator and the clean white lines and blue shading in its advertisements. The name elicited nothing more in me than does any other large American financial and insurance institution—a delicate balance of protection and profit. That was until recently, when the AIG story took a turn for the dramatic. I was in an airport when the news broke, and the disgust was visible on the faces around me as we watched CNN lambaste the executives at the company for demanding the exorbitant bonuses they'd been promised, despite the fact that AIG was being bailed out with taxpayer money.

A recent article [1] in Business Week highlighted what the writer referred to as "the AIG lesson." At the core of the problem, says Business Week, is the company's leadership, and its inherent flaws: "More dangerous to the health of the organization are leaders with flawed values who become the benchmark for the talent recruited into the company. This, in essence, becomes an open invitation for a terminal malignancy to spread throughout the organization."

To me, the idea of "flawed values" is at the base of *corruption*—what used to be a dirty word that embodied broad, unscrupulous activity. I equate this term with ones like "the media"—everyone loves to hate it, but 95 percent of us don't work for *OK!* magazine.

Perhaps the one positive element to the recent scandals involving the three Bs—bonuses, bail-outs, and buy-outs—is that corruption has taken a more definitive shape. It's seen in the executive's face as he is leaning into a microphone in front of a deposition, and in his feet as he walks up the steps to a private plane being funded by stockholders and tax payers.

I'm not, by any means, a proponent of The Fall Guy. Just remember that sometimes The Fall Guy is bearing the weight of criticism for a reason—because they are in a position of leadership and they don't take the proper steps to remedy the situation.

The problem is that we've got all kinds of "fall guys" now. Not a day goes by that someone (myself included) doesn't begin a sentence with "what with the economy…" To be sure, our consciousness has been singed with this phenomenon, but is it something we use to explain, or, conversely, something to *justify*? Is corruption a word we use because we mean it—or because it's a great way of excusing a company's downfall?

Most business leaders are not rotten and soulless to the core. Still, the AIG example might give us misguided impressions about the qualities of a "bad" leader.

For example, is it worse to watch your company swirl swiftly down the toilet whilst still demanding your promised compensation? Probably. But what about another type of leader—the one with good intentions that is afraid to take risks? What about the type that is smart but indifferent; one that feels more comfortable hiding in an office than confronting the needs of their vulnerable employees?

The thesis of the Business Week article is a good one—company culture starts with the top, and at the risk of "terminal malignancy," executives and managers need to make sure the example they're setting is a unifying one. Picture the leaders at AIG at the head of a manufacturing firm—if your company's morale is a house of cards, it might take only one hasty movement to make it topple. Whether this comes in the form of greed and corruption, or something just as sinister—like avoidance, incompetence, or indifference—it has the same effect in the long-term. Let's not forget that your every action is being scrutinized—often by associates who are simply looking for a strong leadership presence to improve their daily outlook in troublesome times. Unfortunately, there are multitudes of potential ways to let them down. The important thing is that you don't.

What's your take? Email anna.wells@advantagemedia.com [2]

Click here to read David Mantley's take on management techniques [3]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2014 - 9:50pm*):
http://www.impomag.com/blogs/2009/04/want-be-fall-guy-heres-how?qt-recent_content=0

Links:
[1] http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/apr2009/ca2009043_853577.htm?chan=careers_managing+index+page_top+stories
[2] mailto:anna.wells@advantagemedia.com
[3] http://www.impomag.com/scripts/ShowPR~RID~10771.asp